



UFM

UNIVERSIDAD FRANCISCO MARROQUÍN

ita

Impulso al Talento Académico

P R O F I L E

Luis's Story

Could You Do It All on Your Own?



Luis and his four sisters grew up in the verdant Baja Verapaz province of Guatemala. Luis's early life was not markedly different from that of his friends and neighbors. Though his family possessed limited economic means, Luis's father was able to support his wife and children working as a baker and janitor. Life took an unexpected turn when Luis was six and his mother made the decision to leave her family and move to the United States.

"My mom wrote to us from the U.S. for two years and then, we heard nothing. To this day, I don't know whether she is dead or alive."

Left alone, Luis's father continued the work of raising his five children until Luis was eleven. That year, his father was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer and only a few months later, he died. The orphaned children dispersed; two of his sisters moved to Guatemala City, the other two married and remained in town, and Luis was expected to care for himself.

"After my father died, I rented a room for \$6 a month. My sister gave me a bed and a dresser but, beyond that, I was on my own."

In order to pay for his rent, food, and clothing, he cobbled together money from every job he could find. Over the course of several years, Luis worked as a beekeeper, baker's assistant, construction worker, farmhand, fruit and spice merchant, store clerk, painter, and metalworker—all while attending school in the evenings. When he started high school, he found it increasingly difficult to balance work and academic demands.

"There were no high school classes at night, so I worked on the weekends and before and after school. On Tuesdays and Fridays, I woke up at three o'clock in the morning to work in the market, helping vendors carry their wares."

Luis admits that during this period his grades suffered under the weight of his financial burden. Finally, during his last two years of high school, Luis's sister invited him to move into her home. With his financial burden partially alleviated, Luis was able to redouble his efforts in school.

Applying for the ITA Scholarship

“I was motivated early on in high school by a teacher whose son had been an ITA scholar. She reminded us that with hard work, we could also achieve our dreams.”

For the remainder of his high school career, Luis’s dream of attending UFM on a scholarship drove him to succeed academically.

In order to apply for the ITA scholarship, Luis made two bus trips to the city, where he participated in successive rounds of admissions exams and interviews. When he found out he was one of five students selected to receive a full scholarship, he felt a profound joy; for the first time in seven years, he would not have to work while attending school.

Studying at UFM

With no family unit to speak of, Luis did not feel a sense of loss when he relocated to the university. He only remembers feeling a sense of excitement and possibility in the transition. However, the cultural challenge of integrating into the student body at UFM proved to be highly stressful.

“My self-esteem suffered when I compared myself to my classmates, who all seemed wealthier and more educated than I was. It took me more than two years to be able to communicate comfortably with them.”

Despite his self-consciousness, Luis took advantage of every opportunity that the university availed him. In particular, he was attracted to the exchange programs with universities abroad. Luis studied at Universidad Complutense in Madrid as well as Chile’s Pontificia Universidad Católica, where he took business and economic development classes.

“I underwent a real change that year. I decided that the best way for me to make a difference was to try to reform broken social systems in Guatemala.”



Postgraduation Career

Shortly after completing his coursework in 2007, Luis got a job with a privately funded educational initiative whose aim is to reform the Guatemalan education system through positive examples. Luis prepares documents on education policy, develops education indicators, collects statistics, and manages the project's website and social networks. Every year, the project conducts a nationwide search for teachers who have implemented innovative approaches in their classrooms, offering awards such as cash, computers, books, college scholarships, and other benefits. Since its inception, seventy teachers have been recognized.

“One teacher developed an entrepreneurial enterprise in his classroom. He taught his students everything there was to know about mushroom farming, from cultivation and harvesting, to setting prices and tracking inventory.”

The information he gave his students was in turn relayed to their parents, many of whom started small mushroom businesses of their own. Since receiving the award, this teacher has gone on to travel internationally, telling educators and policymakers abroad about his initiative.

Luis feels that his status as an ITA scholarship recipient has imbued him with a sense of responsibility toward his fellow Guatemalans. He carries this responsibility with him in his passion for educational reform, in his work as an assistant professor at UFM's School of Economic Sciences, and in personal relationships with people from his community.

Since Luis attended UFM, several of his cousins have gone on to complete high school and attend universities. In addition to his professional and academic activities, Luis is active at his church, where he leads music and youth groups. He remains grateful for all the support and opportunities he has had in his life.

“For me, the ITA scholarship was a real-life miracle. It not only changed my life, but the lives of everyone in my family and many of those around me.”
