



UFM

UNIVERSIDAD FRANCISCO MARROQUÍN

ita

Impulso al Talento Académico

P R O F I L E

# Dalila's Story

## *Would You Have the Courage to Defy Your Father?*



At the age of ten, Dalila and her family found themselves on a long bus ride headed from her small town to what seemed like the middle of nowhere. It was 1993 in Guatemala, a time of lawlessness and instability, especially for residents of remote, rural areas. Dalila's father was a farmer who owned small parcels of land—enough to make his family a target of kidnapping threats and extortion, but not enough to pay the extraordinary sums of money the thugs demanded.

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*“My parents had three days to come up with \$12,000, which they didn't have. So they decided to pack up and leave everything we knew behind.”*

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The family made a brief attempt to live in the capital, but Dalila's father, who had only worked as a farmer, was unable to find a job. A few months later, they headed for a tiny ranching community in the mountains of Alta Verapaz. Unfortunately, there were no schools there and no buses that travelled to the nearby town. The only way in was to hitch a ride.

At an early age, Dalila had announced her intention to attend a university; she was devastated when she found out that she would not be able to go to school.

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*“I don't know where I got the idea that I wanted to go to college. Neither of my parents completed elementary school and I only had one cousin in the United States who attended a university.”*

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From the moment they arrived in their new home, Dalila pestered her father to allow her to move in with her aunt, so she could attend the local elementary school in a larger neighboring town. After several months, Dalila's father finally relented. A year later, her parents also moved there so that Dalila's brother and sister could have the same opportunity.

Though the move solved the problem of elementary school, the children's options for middle and high school were few. There was only one tiny public school that offered middle school classes at night and a high school program for students who wanted to become teachers. Dalila begged her parents to let her return to the town they had been forced to leave years before, to attend a public high school with a good reputation. It was the best option for Dalila

because she qualified for a stipend from the government, of about \$13 per month, to cover living expenses away from home. In order to receive the stipend, though, she had to enroll in a public school.

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*“I had to fight hard. My father didn’t understand the value of education for women and he wanted me to stay close to my family.”*

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The young Dalila, however, was unwavering in her commitment to her education and she wore away at her father’s resistance. Once again, she moved away to attend school, living alone in one room of a house that her uncle rented to a local family. There, Dalila cooked her meals on a small stove in her room.

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*“During the first month, I cried every time I cooked myself a meal and sat down to eat alone.”*

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Dalila found support in some of her teachers, who always encouraged her to look for scholarships so she could go on to college. One of these teachers was the mother of a UFM student and ITA scholarship recipient. His scholarship and success at UFM became a touchstone for Dalila; throughout high school she was single-mindedly determined to earn a scholarship to a private university.

### **Applying for the ITA Scholarship**

Knowing that her father would not approve of her plans to study in Guatemala City, Dalila began the process of applying for the ITA scholarship without her family’s knowledge. Her teachers helped her to study for the admissions exam, lent her money for the application fee, and planned to accompany her when she took the tests because she did not know her way around the city. But when her teacher fell ill, Dalila had to get on the bus to Guatemala City alone.

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*“My bus left at two o’clock in the morning and three hours later, when we arrived in Guatemala City, I had no idea how to get to the university. I walked to a gas station to ask for directions and luckily a cab driver helped me find it.”*

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After her high school graduation, Dalila returned home wondering how she would break the news of her university application. Having already paid the application fees, passed the admissions exams, and completed the first round of interviews, Dalila convinced her father to let her return to Guatemala City for the final round of interviews. In 2002, Dalila was one of five students awarded an ITA scholarship.

### **Studying at UFM**

Dalila found the transition to UFM to be her toughest hurdle yet.

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*“I was absolutely lost in my math classes. I burst into tears when I got my first test back; it was the lowest score I had received in my life.”*

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She also had to try to decode lectures and readings in English, of which she didn't understand a word. And, on top of everything, she felt uncomfortable amid both the wealthy student body and the unfamiliar urban environment of the campus.

Dalila, however, was accustomed to fighting for what she wanted. She and her fellow ITAs teamed up; they sought extra tutorials in math and helped each other learn the material. Dalila and her wealthier classmates—many of whom had been educated in the country's best private schools—came from two different worlds. But despite the social challenges, she made lots of friends and they began to study together, helping each other prepare for exams. Gradually, Dalila became acclimated to life in the city.

By the time she reached her senior year, Dalila was ready to take on further challenges; that year, she was accepted to an exchange program through Universidad Complutense in Madrid. Lacking the necessary funds, but determined to take advantage of the opportunity to study abroad, Dalila reached out to UFM faculty and donors. She successfully raised the money she needed to study in Spain. Her travels gave her a valuable perspective and helped lay the groundwork for future studies abroad.



### Postgraduation Career

Though Dalila completed her coursework in 2006, a year later, she had yet to pass the TOEFL, the English proficiency exam required of every UFM graduate. In 2008, Dalila tackled her language deficiency through immersion. She moved in with a relative in the United States, worked during the day to earn money to send to her family, and took English classes at night.

After four months in the States, Dalila knew her progress was limited by the fact that her friends and family there communicated primarily in Spanish. She realized she needed to find an American family to live with. When her English teacher offered to open her home to Dalila, she didn't hesitate. Dalila spent a month and a half in total immersion with her new host family. She returned home to Guatemala, passed the TOEFL, and officially graduated from UFM.

Dalila worked for several years at a local bank before she decided to pursue a graduate degree. In 2011, she applied for a loan and scholarship so she could continue her studies. Dalila and nineteen other students were awarded Guatefuturo scholarships from a private educational foundation that provides funding for students to earn graduate degrees abroad.

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*“Taking out the loans to study was a difficult decision, but I decided that a graduate education is an investment in my future.”*

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Dalila recently earned an MBA from a well-regarded program in Barcelona, and today works in the trusts department of a large local bank. Eventually, she dreams of working for a local or multinational corporation.

Dalila’s professional life is still somewhat alien to her parents, who wonder when she will start a family of her own. Undeniably, Dalila has made an impact on her family: since she graduated, two of her cousins and both her siblings have gone on to study at universities with Dalila’s financial and moral support.

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*“My scholarship helped me show others how important education is to improving your life and my job has allowed me to help fund my family’s education.”*

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