



UFM

UNIVERSIDAD FRANCISCO MARROQUÍN

ita

Impulso al Talento Académico

P R O F I L E

## Fernando's Story

# *How Far Would You Travel to Get Where You Need to Go?*



Fernando grew up in a small Guatemalan village, nineteen miles of dirt road away from the nearest town. Fernando describes his village as a collection of six or seven family homes and a few small farms.

Since there were no roads nearby, and the family had only horses for transportation, Fernando and his six siblings were all born in the house where they were raised. Fernando spent his early years studying in a community school about a mile from his house.

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*"I was one of about twenty students that travelled to the school. We all shared one classroom and one teacher, who split her time between students of every age."*

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Although the school was fairly close to his home, Fernando and his siblings had to ford a river on horseback to reach it. This was manageable when the weather was good, but during Guatemala's rainy season—May through October—this became a more arduous task.

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*"In the rainy season, the river would rise by as much as fifteen feet. During one very wet year, my sister, my cousin, and I missed months of classes because it was impossible to cross the river to get to school."*

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Fernando's family grew corn, beans, watermelon, tobacco, and coffee on their small farm; they also raised cows. Fernando and his siblings would wake up at five o'clock in the morning to milk the cows before school; they returned at noon to train horses or deliver coffee harvests to a nearby village, before doing their homework.

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*"Because we had no electricity, my mother insisted that we finish our homework during the daylight hours, so that we would not hurt our eyes reading in the dark."*

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Attending secondary school was even more of a challenge. The closest public high school was thirteen miles away, but there were no paved roads in that direction. The next nearest option was a private school in a large town nineteen miles away. Although neither of Fernando's

parents finished elementary school, they valued education and used what little money they had to help send their children to private high schools.

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*“In order to attend the private school, I lived alone in a family home from the age of fourteen until I turned eighteen.”*

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

Fernando graduated from high school with academic distinctions; certificates for his awards arrived with basic information on universities and scholarships. However, no one in his town had any reference points for universities in Guatemala City.

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*“No one in my village had ever heard of UFM, so I did not apply for the ITA scholarship. I applied for scholarships in the United States, but I didn’t get one, so I went back to work with my father, planting and harvesting chili peppers.”*

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After a year of working with his father, Fernando’s sister came across the information he received at his graduation, and urged him to apply for an ITA scholarship. Fernando estimates that the year he won the ITA scholarship, 250 students competed for only seven spaces.

### **Studying at UFM**

Like many ITA students, Fernando experienced profound culture shock when he arrived at UFM and found himself surrounded by highly educated students from the wealthiest Guatemalan families. The biggest challenge he experienced was presented by his rudimentary English skills, in comparison with that of his classmates.

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*“Some of our textbooks were not available in Spanish. At one point, I found a translation of a textbook in Portuguese and used it to read the class material.”*

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But Fernando also found that he was able to collaborate and exchange information with his classmates. He would help them with their mathematics and finance questions in exchange for their help in English.

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*“Although each person is different, ITA students are often more willing to reach out to other students, to initiate relationships with them, to offer help and to ask for it.”*

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Fernando found UFM’s approach to teaching to be unique. He appreciates the university’s focus on the value of the individual and his responsibility in society, and the respect that the teachers afford the students.



### Postgraduation Career

After graduating from UFM, Fernando worked in the private sector for five years before accepting a job with a Guatemalan government program that aims to increase the competitiveness of local businesses. He notes that when he started, he inherited a nearly bankrupt program that had spent a great deal of money and had little to show for it.

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*“Eight years ago the Guatemalan government implemented a program to help small dairy farmers develop their business. They distributed money, but did not offer information or a business plan. Today, there is no evidence of this investment.”*

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Today, Fernando's efforts are directed not at distributing money, but at information exchange. He identifies opportunities for growth and helps connect local businesspeople with sources of private investment.

Fernando still keeps in touch with a number of other ITA students. Together they are collaborating on a program to provide scholarships to students who perform excellently in elementary school, but who cannot access private high schools because of financial or geographic constraints.

He considers fostering the education of children from his village to be a personal responsibility. Recently, three students received scholarships that would cover their tuition at a school in a distant town, but they had no way to pay for living expenses, so Fernando covered these costs.

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*“My main goal is to show these students that they have more options in life.”*

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