



UFM

UNIVERSIDAD FRANCISCO MARROQUÍN

ita

Impulso al Talento Académico

P R O F I L E

# Jhony's Story

## *How Do You Fight a Culture of Ignorance?*



Jhony describes his hometown as a collection of twenty-five houses inhabited by small farmers and their families. His village has been slow to modernize—Jhony's home did not have electricity until 1995—and the cultural norms in Jhony's town reflect its isolation.

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*"My neighbors thought middle school and high school were useless. They asked, 'What's the point of going to school? Do you want to become a teacher or a bookkeeper and make less money than you would as a farmer?'"*

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Jhony, however, did not dream of getting a technical high school certificate in accounting or teaching. From an early age, he aspired to earn a law degree from a university.

The odds were stacked against Jhony's dream. His father was killed when he was still an infant, and Jhony's six older siblings dropped out of school to help their mother work on their small subsistence farm. Jhony was determined, though. In order to travel the five miles of dirt road to the middle school, he sold his only possession, a pig that his sister had given him years before, so he could buy a bicycle.

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*"I rode the bike to school every day, even when the rainy season made the dirt roads almost impossible to travel. I was masterful on a bike by the time I finished middle school!"*

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At the beginning of seventh grade, Jhony was one of four students from his village who rode their bikes to school. But the arduous daily journey took its toll and by the next year, Jhony was making the trek alone.

Jhony had to admit that even the closest high school was too far to get to by bike. His mother sold what few possessions they had and they relocated to nearby Chimaltenango, where he enrolled in a high school that provided training for jobs in the tourism and travel industry. In Chimaltenango, Jhony's family's financial situation began to improve. His mother opened a small store that sold soft drinks, chips, and candy; when the store began to turn a profit, Jhony was able to work less and study more.

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## Applying for the ITA Scholarship

Jhony's high school traditionally sent its two best students to an agricultural training program in the United States, and he devoted himself to winning one of the scholarships. Jhony graduated at the top of his class, but when the American organization decided not to award his school any scholarships, he realized he didn't have a plan B. After his graduation ceremony, he opened the envelope with his academic awards; he was surprised to find information inside about the ITA scholarship at UFM.

Jhony had never heard of UFM, as most of the high school graduates he knew either enrolled in a public university or began working right after school. With no idea what to expect, he got on a bus the next day and went to the university, where he discovered that the registration deadline for admissions exams was just a day away.

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*“The admissions exams cost \$55, which was more than half of what I earned a month at my job. I had to ask my boss for an advance on my salary to pay for it.”*

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After several trips back to Guatemala City for the exams and subsequent interviews, a member of the selection committee informed Jhony that he would not be awarded the scholarship that year, but if he was willing to wait, they could guarantee him a spot the following year. While he was thrilled that he had been selected, the thought of taking a year off was disappointing, and he was daunted by the prospect of committing to a school he knew little about.

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*“When I officially accepted the scholarship, I signed an agreement that said I would repay the tuition if I dropped out of school. It was an enormous amount of money and my hand was shaking. I know now that I absolutely made the right decision.”*

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In the year between high school and his enrollment at UFM, Jhony remained in Chimaltenango helping his mother in the family store; in his spare time, he took the bus into the city to audit classes at the university.

## Studying at UFM

Jhony found the transition to life at UFM somewhat easier than many ITA scholars do. His previous visits had given him a chance to adjust to many novel aspects of life on campus; he had been practicing his English and he was prepared for the challenge of integrating with students from completely different socioeconomic backgrounds. Nevertheless, he admits that it was a radical change for him and he had moments of doubt.

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*“I remember talking to another ITA student during our first semester. We both wondered aloud whether we should have just attended a public university, where we would have been with students from similar backgrounds.”*

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During his time at UFM, Jhony seized every chance to travel. He won a scholarship for five weeks of courses at Universidad Complutense in Madrid and he flew to Pennsylvania to attend a week-long seminar on law and liberty. In both instances, UFM covered some of the costs of these opportunities.



### Postgraduation Career

Since graduating cum laude in 2011, Jhony has worked for a well-respected local law firm that represents clients in civil, corporate, and constitutional disputes. He loves his job and his boss, who he singles out as an honest man in a profession riddled with corruption. Jhony believes honest lawyers are desperately needed to improve Guatemala's failing judicial system.

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*"Unfortunately, justice doesn't always prevail in Guatemala. It's difficult to work within a system where powerful interest groups regularly bribe judges to decide cases in their favor."*

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Giving back has always been a priority for Jhony. While at UFM, he worked with a number of other ITA law students on community service projects; the team built a library in Jhony's hometown and paid for two students from Guatemala City to attend a public elementary school. Recently, another ITA association has coalesced. This group of ITA alumni is creating a foundation that will provide merit-based scholarships to high school students.

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*"All ITA students have something in common. Because we come from poor families, we are driven to move forward and do something to make Guatemala a better country. We are fighters."*

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