



UFM

UNIVERSIDAD FRANCISCO MARROQUÍN

ita

Impulso al Talento Académico

P R O F I L E

Marielos's Story

What If You Couldn't Afford to Fail?



Marielos grew up in an industrial suburb of Guatemala City. Her parents moved to the capital from a rural village in search of a better life, but their limited education made it hard for them to find work.

“My mother never attended school at all and she doesn't know how to read or write. My father didn't make it past elementary school.”

When Marielos was born, her parents were unemployed and running out of money. In a stroke of luck, just a few months later, her father found work in a shoe factory and the family relocated to be closer to his job. To supplement their family income, Marielos's mother sold tamales as well as household items such as plastic containers and soap. Throughout her childhood, the family's economic situation remained precarious. Without any collateral, her parents were unable to finance the purchase of a house. They were forced to rent whatever homes they could afford and when they moved, would often go months without running water or electricity.

Marielos attended public schools for most of her life.

“In elementary school, there were more than fifty of us in a classroom. The teachers tried very hard, but most of them didn't have the training they needed. They hadn't attended good schools and they didn't speak much English.”

Though her parents couldn't help her with her school work, she consistently made the honor roll. When she was fifteen years old, she applied for a scholarship to the American School in Guatemala City, a competitive and expensive private school with a reputation for superior academics. She was one of only twenty-five students in the country to receive a scholarship.

Academically, Marielos found the disparity between the standards at the public and private school to be painfully wide. She had to decipher science and math textbooks written in English, with little previous exposure to the language, and her classes required her to understand and use a number of computer programs. This was totally foreign; in the past, she had done her homework on a typewriter. When plummeting grades endangered her scholarship, she

enrolled in after-school courses in English and computer skills. Since the commute to school was long, Marielos was often away from home for eleven or twelve hours a day.

“I left for school at six in the morning and didn’t return home until after five o’clock in the evening. My father would meet me in the city after work, so I wouldn’t have to take the bus alone at night.”

Applying for the ITA Scholarship

Marielos was fortunate to know that two previous graduates of the American School had gone on to become ITA scholars at UFM and she felt hopeful that she might follow in their footsteps. However, she couldn’t afford the fees for the admissions exams and had to request donations from the trustees at the American School to get the money. After passing the exams, she spent a full day in interviews with the admissions committee, UFM faculty, and former ITA students.

“During the course of the day, two of my friends from the American School were eliminated as candidates.”

After another round of interviews and three weeks of anxiously awaiting the committee’s decision, Marielos received the news that she was one of six students who had been awarded an ITA scholarship.

Studying at UFM

Marielos says that the academic demands at UFM were challenging, but that she found the classes in economics, math, and statistics to be the most enjoyable work that she had encountered in her academic career. Marielos emphasizes that her exposure to English at the American School made a big difference in her performance at UFM; a number of her ITA classmates struggled with the many lectures given in English.

“The difference between ITA students and the rest of the students at UFM is that we can’t afford to fail. Every opportunity comes only once for us, so we fight for it.”

Marielos’s excellent grades qualified her for a number of unique opportunities at UFM. During her junior year, she was one of ten top students selected to attend a series of lectures in New York and visit the stock exchange. Marielos could not afford an airline ticket, but she was determined to find a way to go. She started a small business selling sundry items like Tupperware and cell phone cases and she even held a raffle to raise money. Finally, and with a little help from UFM donors, she was able to embark on her first airplane trip. The following summer, she earned one of six scholarships offered by the US embassy in Guatemala to study English at University of Notre Dame.

During her time at UFM, Marielos participated in a number of community service efforts, including a program that brought together university students and women from Guatemala’s provincial regions. Marielos and her fellow volunteers taught the women practical skills in math, finance, accounting, and nutrition.

“One woman was interested in expanding her small business that made traditional Guatemalan candy. We gave her advice on how to export her product.”



Postgraduation Career

After graduating cum laude in 2012, Marielos got a job with a large Guatemalan collections agency. Marielos remains actively involved in her community where she serves as a youth leader at the church she has attended since she was twelve years old. Perhaps most importantly, she is a living success story and role model for her neighbors and family.

“My cousin, who grew up without a father and in very difficult economic circumstances, is only a year away from graduating high school with really good grades. If people know there are opportunities out there for them, they have something to work for.”
