

Fast Forward (con't) *[continued from page 6]*

break out of the cycle of poverty. Uncommon Good matched the children with individual mentors and gave them many educational enrichment opportunities. Eustacio, since graduating from the program, is a student at Occidental College and is interested in engineering. Normita, a gifted writer who has won awards for her essays, participates in the Weekly Writing Workshop that Pomona College students conduct for Uncommon Good students. Though a seventh grader at El Roble middle school, she is taking 10th grade level math classes. Both children are gifted musicians, playing the guitar, bass, drums and cello.

The entire Rodriguez family also has been involved in a number of environmental initiatives. They all pitched in and helped to build Uncommon Good's Whole Earth Building, a first-of-its-kind-in-the-world green building constructed entirely by hand. Norma and her husband also were founding members of Uncommon Good's Urban Farmers Association, which helped to create its urban farming program. Their front yard is planted in vegetables as part of the program's Fiddleneck Family Farms network. When a neighbor complained, the family's farm plot became the reason that the City of Montclair reinterpreted its city codes to allow vegetable cultivation in home yards. In 2009, Norma was honored, along with several other Uncommon Good parent leaders, by being invited to be one of the Spanish language representatives for the southwestern United States to give citizen feedback on climate change for the December United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen.

Now that the children are older, Norma goes to daily mass and works cleaning houses and as a school aide. She also volunteers at two churches and continues as one of Uncommon Good's parent leaders, helping to design programs to benefit other parents. Norma is very happy that her children are doing so well in school, but is even happier that they have turned out to be kind. She described an act of kindness that her son had performed recently for someone who had done something hurtful to him. "This means much more to me than an A grade. An A is just up here," she said, pointing to her head, "but these other things are from the heart." 📧



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Normita and Norma in the vegetable garden at their home.

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FOSTERING IDEALISM in EDUCATION, MEDICINE and the ENVIRONMENT

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Temple Beth Israel Joins Our Fiddleneck Family Farms



Photo by Temple Beth Israel

Ground breaking for the Uncommon Good-Temple Beth Israel farm.

I've never forgotten the words a young migrant mother spoke to me years ago. It was Thanksgiving time and ads for Thanksgiving feasts were everywhere. She confided that most of her family's meals consisted of little more than beans and added wistfully: "I go to the supermarket and just walk through the aisles looking at the food and dreaming of being able to afford to cook a nice meal for my family someday."

It is with the greatest joy that we are now able to put beautiful fresh vegetables and fruit into the hands of such mothers through our urban farming enterprise, Fiddleneck Family Farms. The farms were created by us together with the families in our education program as we searched together for ways to alleviate the poor diets and poor health that plagued the families. We farm in the yards of our families and the yards of others in the community who want to support the program, using no chemicals or pesticides whatsoever, not even the ones permitted by the government for organic farms. We employ the parents of the children in our education program to be the

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The Future Dr. Bonilla

"'Mom, the doctors are saying that you have to make a decision of keeping my grandma on life support or taking her off.' Those were the words that came out of my mouth when I had to translate for my mom. However they were in Spanish. It was very late, past visiting hours, and I had to tell my mother that her mother was dying and she had to choose whether to continue to keep her alive or end it. I was only ten-years-old at the time, but I remember the tears on my mom's face."

Even now, as an adult, tears came to Mauricio's eyes as he told me this story about how his beloved grandmother had died. Yet today our Mauricio Bonilla is taking this and other painful childhood experiences and is using them as his motivation to become the first student to graduate from our program to become a doctor, and not just any doctor, but one that serves low-income Latino families like his own. He will be filling a huge need. Even though Latinos are the majority group in many places now in this country, including Los Angeles County, only 4% of doctors in the United States are Latino.

Mauricio joined Uncommon Good's education program when he was a boy in the eighth grade. However, thanks to a date gone horribly wrong, he actually came within a phone call of never being born at all. His dad, Miguel Bonilla, was a welder who had farmed in his home country of El Salvador. His mother, Maria, was an immigrant from rural Mexico who worked long hours standing on a factory floor making ladies' purses for a living. When Miguel was first introduced to Maria he was quite smitten by her charm and decided to pull out all the stops to impress her. For their first date, even though he was a poor man, he took her to a pricey steak and seafood restaurant. But Maria, a poor

farm girl, had never eaten seafood and didn't know what to do with it. Nor did she touch the medium rare steak which looked suspiciously undercooked to her. Miguel thought she was too stuck up to eat the meal that had cost him so dearly and swore he would never ask her out again. But after a cooling off period he decided to try once more. The rest was history...and Mauricio and his little sister.

Though the family had always been poor, they fell upon even harder times in the Great Recession of 2008. Miguel lost his job and was [continued on page 7]



Photo by Nancy Mintie

The present and future doctors of Uncommon Good: Mauricio Bonilla (Uncommon Good graduate and medical school applicant), Dr. Cesar Barba (Uncommon Good MED Relief recipient and Medical Director of the UMMA Community Clinic), and Luis Torres, Aaron Rodriguez and Adrian Garcia (Uncommon Good graduates who will begin pre-med studies in the fall on scholarship at Occidental College, Whitman College, and Tulane University).

Photo by Rodriguez family



Norma as a child on her grandparents' farm in Mexico (front row, second from left)



Norma's first communion in Mexico (front row, second from left)

Photo by Rodriguez family

Fast Forward a Century or Two

Photo by Nancy Mintie



Uncommon Good parent leader,
Norma Rodriguez

“My grandma, who raised me, had 24 children of her own, eighteen who lived,” explained Norma Rodriguez. “She had her first when she was fifteen and her last at forty-seven. When I only had two, she used to tease me and call me a scaredy cat. But can you imagine me trying to send 26 children to college?!!”

Norma's question succinctly describes the transformative journey that so many of the families in our education program have traveled. Norma, one of our Uncommon Good parent leaders, is a petite, soft spoken, gentle woman, possessed of a great yet quiet strength. She was born 47 years ago in a tiny rural Mexican town a four hour bus trip from Guadalajara. Life there essentially had been unchanged for hundreds of years. Her father, whose own father had been an alcoholic, was also an abusive drunk who once threw a hot iron at her mother's face. When Norma was still in the womb, her father was killed. Her mother left baby Norma and her older brother with their grandparents and their grandparents' eighteen surviving children on a little farm in Jalisco and went north looking for work. Norma remembers her grandmother as a very loving woman who could read and write, which was highly unusual for women of her time and place. Her grandfather, however, was a seriously mixed bag. Though a hard working farmer who provided for his large family, he also was an alcoholic who beat his wife and cheated on her. But in spite of her grandfather's vices and the hardships of life on a poor farm, Norma remembers her childhood as a generally happy one. She recalls:

“I was often hungry and shoeless, and didn't have enough clothes. Sometimes I would take scraps of food out of the dishwasher to eat. But I was happy playing with my 18 aunts and uncles, who were really like brothers and sisters to me, and we would use our imaginations and make things out of mud. On Christmas, we were so happy to see what Baby Jesus would bring us, even though it was just one tangerine and a few crackers in a bag for each of us children. Today I see kids having a lot and still being unhappy, and I don't understand it.”

Norma went to elementary school part time and had to discontinue her education after that because of her grandparents' poverty. And anyway, it was expected that girls simply would learn the homemaking *[continued on page 6]*



Norma's mother, Norma's grandmother who bore 24 children, Norma.

Photo by Rodriguez family



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Music Mentoring Program founder Gabriel Friedman with teachers and students at the 2015 recital.



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Karly Camacho performs a Beethoven composition.

Back to Bach

The music of Bach and Beethoven once again resounded through Lyman Hall at Pomona College as our Uncommon Good students performed their 4th annual Spring Music Recital on April 18th. The recital is the culmination each year of the Music Mentoring Program which is a project of the Draper Center for Community Partnerships at Pomona College. The program consists of student leaders who recruit their fellow students who play musical instruments. Each college student teaches a child from Uncommon Good, who is provided with an instrument on which to practice.

This year's recital had an honored guest, Gabriel Friedman, the Pomona College graduate and accomplished pianist who founded the music mentoring program when he was a student there four years ago. In addition to providing music instruction to our Uncommon Good children, he conducting a study to show how music instruction was improving their ability to perform academically in other areas as well. Now completing his second year at Harvard Medical School, he plans to specialize in neurosurgery. What a privilege it is to know such a young person, whose life is one unending gift to our world! 📧

Congratulations, Graduates!

Uncommon Good congratulates its graduating class of 28 high school seniors, all of whom are on their way to college. They have been offered a total of \$878,398 in scholarships to an array of private and public colleges and universities, including

UCLA, UC Berkeley, UC Santa Barbara, Tulane University, Boston College, Whitman College and Occidental College. Four of the students plan on a pre-med course of studies and one is interested in studying veterinary science. 📧



Photo by Carlos Carrillo

24 of the 28 members of Uncommon Good's 2015 graduating class.

Temple Beth Israel (cont) [continued from page 1]

farmers. Half of what we grow we give to our low-income families, and the other half we sell to the community six days a week from our Uncommon Good office to produce an income stream for the program.

This past year we welcomed Temple Beth Israel in Pomona as our new farming partner. The temple permitted us to put 10,000 square feet of its property into vegetable cultivation, expanding our capacity to feed the hungry and supply the community with locally grown fresh food. The groundbreaking was a gala affair, attended by our Congresswoman Judy Chu, Yvette Martinez who is the Senior Advisor to Senator Barbara Boxer, our state Senator Judy Liu, and the Claremont and Pomona City Councils. In the process of working with the temple, we've learned what the Jewish faith has to say about food justice. Long time temple member Al Schapiro explains:

“There’s a Hebrew concept called tikkun olam, which means repairing the world. We’re taught in the Torah that we should do acts of justice – including the environment and including other people- helping to repair the world. In other words, if you see someone hungry you should feed them.”

These beautiful concepts are reflected, like the many facets of a cut jewel, in all the major religious traditions of the world. In Christianity, there is basically only one question on the “final exam” that God gives each person at the Last Judgment. That question is, in essence, “Did you feed the hungry?” Vandana Shiva, the renowned food justice advocate from India, explains that the sacred scripture of Hinduism, the Upanishad, says that growing and giving good food in abundance is the highest dharma (good action). The Buddha is reported as saying “One should give even from a scanty store to him who asks.” Many Native American tribes’ spirituality includes and emphasizes feeding the hungry. For

instance, a Winnebago precept says, “See to it that whoever enters your house obtains something to eat, however little you may have. Such food will be a source of death to you if you withhold it.” However, the holy books of Islam top the list with more exhortations in the Qur’an and Hadith to feed the hungry and indigent than in any other faith’s scriptures.

But while there may be other worldly rewards for feeding our brothers and sisters, there are plenty of rewards in this life as well. My favorite story so far to come from our farms involves one of the families in our education program. One of the sons in the family was diagnosed with Amblyopia, a vision disorder which is popularly known as “lazy eye.” In this disease, one of the eyes cannot focus clearly. Gradually the affected individual completely loses the ability to see out of that eye, and loses all depth perception along with the vision loss. This child’s vision was 20/100 which is considered legally blind. His mother, Maria, was told by the doctor, in the presence of the child, that he was going to lose his vision in that eye completely in a year or two. She was told to force the child to wear a patch over the good eye for several hours a day to try to stimulate the “lazy” eye to begin to focus. However, the boy rebelled and would not wear the patch, which irritated his skin and made him feel freakish. When she realized that the pirate patch was a losing battle, the mother turned to nutrition. She began to feed her son vitamin supplements and the fresh, pure fruits and vegetables from our farms which are grown with no chemicals or pesticides. A little less than a year later, with no other intervention, Maria’s son’s vision now is testing 20/30.

Our hearts overflow with gratitude for Temple Beth Israel, for our other farm partners, and for you, dear and generous readers, for making our work and its healing miracles possible. ☑



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Joey helps out at the Uncommon Good-TBI farm on Mitzvah (Service) Day.



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Uncommon Good farmers Jose Garcia, Miguel Bonilla and Jesus Salazar at the groundbreaking for the Uncommon Good-TBI farm.



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Noah and Sam help out at the farm on Mitzvah Day.



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Mitzvah Day volunteers at the Uncommon Good-TBI farm.



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Mitzvah Day volunteer, Cameron, at the Uncommon Good-TBI farm.



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Joel helps out at the Uncommon Good-TBI farm.



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Gustavo hoes a row at the Uncommon Good-TBI farm.



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Uncommon Good farmer Jose Garcia shows off the first harvest from the Uncommon Good-TBI farm.



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Girls get their hands dirty planting seedlings at the Uncommon Good-TBI farm.



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Violetta plants zucchini and basil at the Uncommon Good-TBI farm.



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Uncommon Good staff and volunteers prepare a harvest to distribute to low-income families.

Fast Forward (cont') [continued from page 2]

arts in preparation for getting married, and that boys would learn to farm. But in reality, by the age of 16, most of the young people began to leave for the United States to get jobs that would allow them to send money home to help their families. They would send \$10 or \$20 at a time and this would cause great excitement in the village because this was a great deal of money for the families. Eventually with these remittances, Norma's grandfather was able to purchase his own farm.

When Norma was ten, her grandmother decided that it would be a good idea for her and her mother to get to know each other. So she sent Norma to her mother, who by then was working in the United States. However, Norma found that her mother was an angry woman, embittered by mistreatment and hardship, who did not want her and treated her like a servant. Norma was teased at school and called a "wetback." She missed her friends, her town, her food, her language and her grandma. At this point in her story, Norma began to cry. "My mother's husband did something terrible to me," she wept. "Something I've never told her."



Photo by Nancy Mirmie

A young Eustacio Rodriguez Jr. plants oak seedlings with his first Uncommon Good mentor, Andy Wadhwa, a medical student.

Norma understandably was overjoyed when her mother decided to send her back to Mexico and put her in a car with a family that was crossing the border. When she arrived back at the farm, her grandmother knew instantly that something had gone terribly wrong. For one thing, Norma did not have clothing of her own and her tiny frame was clothed in her mother's garments since her mother had never bothered to shop for her. Norma explains:

"In the United States I had felt like a bird in a cage. In Mexico I felt like a bird that was free. I was so grateful to my grandmother because she treated me like her own daughter, even though she had so many children of her own. I remember during the rainy season on the farm there was lots of thunder and it terrified me. Grandma would pray the rosary with me and it would comfort me. Even today, praying the rosary brings me peace. I was so touched when my grandmother died and her will was read. She had put my name down as one of her children and that made me feel like I really did belong to someone."

After her painful experience, Norma swore that she would never return to the United States. But when she was seventeen, her mother told her grandmother that she could help Norma get legal status in the U.S. Her grandmother believed her and sent Norma once again to her mother's house. Her mother's promise was a dubious one, however. Her real motivation may just have been to put Norma to work for her. Norma labored in a factory, and then a donut shop, turning her wages over to her mother. The citizenship paperwork never materialized.

Norma's life began to change for the better when she got work as a nanny for a family in Claremont, California. She lived with the family for eight years, caring for their two little boys, and was happier there than she had been with her unloving mother. Her new employer, Pamela, was kind, telling Norma that she was special and brave, and helping her to become a U.S. citizen.

Pamela gave Norma the chance to go to adult school to learn English. One evening, on a class break, Norma noticed a male student who was drinking a cup of tea. This intrigued her because every man she had ever known drank beer. So a few evenings later, when the man, Eustacio, offered to give Norma a ride home, she accepted. "But my employer's house was only a few doors away from the school," Norma laughs. "So as soon as Eustacio started to drive the truck, I told him to stop because we were at Pamela's house." But Eustacio got the message that Norma was interested and their lifelong love affair began, though initially Norma thought that Eustacio came from an awfully small family – only five children! They were married in Claremont's Our Lady of the Assumption Church in 1993 by Fr. Charles Ramirez, who is now the pastor. "Eustacio is a blessing," Norma says. "He treats me as a human being with a lot of respect."

Norma and Eustacio named their two children after each other: Eustacio Jr. and Normita. At first, the parents had the expectation that when their children turned eighteen they would work to help support the family. They never thought about college. But a teacher at Eustacio Jr.'s school, Vista del Valle elementary school in Claremont, noticed his intelligence and recommended that he be enrolled in Uncommon Good's education program. "When she first talked to me about it, I was afraid," Norma relates. "Because of what my stepfather did to me I was afraid to let my son be around strangers. But I really did trust this teacher and so she was able to change my mind and I brought Eustacio to Uncommon Good."

Through Uncommon Good, Norma learned that her children could go to college and gain the education and skills necessary to [continued on page 8]



Photo by Rodriguez family

The wedding of Norma and Eustacio Rodriguez at Our Lady of the Assumption Church in Claremont, presided over by Father Charles Ramirez.



Photo by Nancy Mirmie

Normita Rodriguez with Uncommon Good Board Member Masiela Lusha at a poetry workshop conducted by Masiela.

The Future Dr. Bonilla (cont) *[continued from page 1]*

unemployed for three years. He became depressed and ill. However, during this time the Bonillas also were one of the Uncommon Good families who helped us to design and launch our farming program. When we received funding for it in 2011 we hired Miguel to be our first farmer. A couple of months later Maria told us, “My husband is a new man! He’s happy, has lost weight and is getting his health back!”

Meanwhile Mauricio was growing up. His childhood experiences having to translate for his parents in traumatic medical situations, and seeing many other children having to do the same, planted a seed in him, the seed of a dream to become a doctor who could speak the language of his people and understand their culture. Yet even though the seed had been planted, some well-meaning teachers nearly uprooted it. They told him and other students how difficult becoming a physician was and that if they thought their high school science material was hard then they would never make it in medical school. But even though he had doubts about his ability, Mauricio loved science. One day he and a couple of friends were talking about their futures and it turned out that each of the three students had harbored a secret dream of studying medicine. One of his friends challenged him, saying, “Why not just give it a try?” and right then and there, Mauricio and his friends made a pact to do so and to help each other along the way.

That he had developed the confidence to make such a decision Mauricio attributes to his Uncommon Good mentor, a first generation Latino college student at Claremont McKenna College, Elias Rangel, who took pride in “working for the dream” as he put it. When the economy collapsed and Mauricio’s family was struggling, Elias told him not to worry, that things would get better.

“He helped me to come out of my shell,” Mauricio recalls. “He modeled taking chances. He was invited to perform in a college performance of ‘Zoot Suit.’ He was afraid to do it at first because he’d never acted before. I told him I’d be afraid, too. So he said, ‘Really? Then I’ll do it.’ He tried out and he ended up getting the lead role. As I was wondering whether I was smart enough to pursue my love of science and my dream of being a doctor, he encouraged me to do what I really wanted to do.”

Mauricio did very well in high school and was accepted at the University of California campuses at Berkeley, Irvine and Riverside. He chose UC Riverside since it had a strong program for first generation Latino students who were interested in medicine. While a student, he volunteered at a local community hospital and got his first taste of what a medical practice would be. He worked in the hospital emergency room, the radiology department, on the nursing floors and in the labor and delivery department. One day each of the twenty-four labor and delivery rooms were full with women giving birth. There was only one other attendant on the floor. “You take the twelve rooms on this side of the hall and I’ll take the twelve on the other side,” she ordered him. While such situations might rattle an ordinary college student, Mauricio thrived.

“I would find myself going into the hospital early in the day, and coming out late at night and being surprised that the sun had already set. My day would fly by, but being able to be part of a team that helped the patients was truly an amazing experience.”

Mauricio took the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT) this January. While he was awaiting the results of the test I asked him how much he wanted to be a doctor. He thought for a moment and then replied quietly, “I want to be a doctor as much as I want to breathe.” When his results came back he did so well that he is now in the process of applying to some of the finest medical schools in the country.

I will leave the last words to the future Dr. Bonilla, as he describes his motivation for studying medicine:

“I want to be a bridge between cultures, that voice which helps and comforts patients. I want to be a doctor who can help Latino families avoid going through the traumatic experiences my family and other Latino families have had to face in the medical system. Most importantly, I want to be a role model to other Latino kids and show them that we can overcome obstacles and be what we set out to be. In the words of working class Latinos and Dolores Huerta, ‘Si, se puede!’” (Yes, we can!) 📌



Miguel Bonilla, Mauricio’s dad and an Uncommon Good farmer, shows off his prize zucchini.

Photo by Nancy Mintie



Mauricio Bonilla gives a presentation to the Uncommon Good Board of Directors.

Photo by Nancy Mintie



The Bonilla Family at home.

Photo by Nancy Mintie