

UNCOMMON GOOD

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Our Students Step Into History



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Marco Salinas, Uncommon Good student and class representative in the DACA case before the U.S. Supreme Court.

The young man and his sweetheart were from a small Mexican village of subsistence agave farmers and cattle ranchers. The only water available to the town came when it rained. There was no medical care and no education beyond elementary school. The young man herded cattle in the mountains, but he was hungry because the work didn't pay enough to feed even one person adequately. Yet like young people everywhere, he and his beloved

ached to be together and to have a family. They married, but when their son Marco was born, they experienced an overwhelming desire to secure a future for their child. So when Marco was only three-years-old, they made the journey to the United States. Here the father was able to support the family by working in a restaurant.

Now in high school and working with Uncommon Good to apply to college, Marco is excelling in math. He would like to become a mechanical engineer, but he also has an interest in history, particular the WWII era. He is fascinated with how the world rose up to stop the tyranny of fascism and save the Jewish people. However, in 2017 a pall fell over his dreams. The federal government reversed course and did everything in its power to end the DACA program that had allowed students like Marco, who were brought to this country as young children, to go to school and to work free from the fear of deportation. The program stopped taking new applicants just as Marco turned 15 and became eligible to apply for its protection.

Ozzy is another of our students who was brought to this country at the age of five by his parents, for reasons similar to those of Marco's family. Prior to coming here his mother and father, an ice cream truck driver, had never been to a doctor or dentist. After the family came to the U.S., little Ozzy was the translator for family members at their doctor and dentist appointments. He even remembers once as a child, when he was waiting for a bus, he saw a car crash in front of him that injured a lady with a baby. When the paramedics arrived, he was called upon to translate for the injured woman. These early experiences instilled in Ozzy the desire to be a doctor, one who could communicate with his Spanish speaking community.

In high school, Ozzy excelled in his studies while simultaneously helping his family pay the bills by working at fast food establishments. Upon graduation, he was the recipient of a scholarship established by Uncommon Good's Education Programs Director, Carlos Carrillo. We also helped him apply and qualify for the DACA program. *[continued on page 6]*

Son of Africa Serves U.S. Poor

It is always such a treat to read the applications of the inspiring young doctors who apply to our MED program. (The MED program helps young physicians who wish to serve low-income communities, by helping them to repay their sky high school loans so that they can afford to work for the poor. It is funded by the LA Care Healthplan, the Rose Hills Foundation, the California Community Foundation, The California Wellness Foundation and QueensCare.)

But the application of Dr. Yohannes Assefa stood out for more than the usual reasons. Though born on the other side of the world in Ethiopia, his life path intersected with mine at four crucial points. He went to college in Fullerton, where I attended high school. He went to medical school in Pomona,

which is the community I now serve. He did his medical residency in Downey, where I lived for most of my childhood, and he now works in Lynwood, where one of my sisters was born.

After sharing a laugh about our overlapping life paths, I asked Yohannes to tell me about his native Ethiopia, a country about which I know very little.

"It's very culturally rich," he responded. "There are over 80 different languages and almost the same number of tribes, each with its own culture. It's one of the world's oldest nations. It is the first country where Christianity took root in Africa, and Ethiopians say that the Ark of the Covenant is there. It was never conquered during the colonization era and so *[continued on page 7]*

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Dr. Yohannes Assefa.

Photo by Family of Yohannes Assefa

What is Uncommon Good?

Uncommon Good is a 21-year-old nonprofit organization that breaks the intergenerational cycle of poverty through educational, health, nutrition and environmental programming. Its programs include:

1. Connect to College/CAUSA (CCC): Over 1,000 low-income students and their parents are served through CCC. Starting in the 4th grade, students are given one-to-one mentoring, tutoring, educational enrichment, leadership training, community service opportunities, and extensive help preparing for and applying to college. Parents are provided with social services, educational opportunities, and leadership training. 100% of Uncommon Good students go to college, even as 41.5% of their socio-economic peers are dropping out of high school. The CAUSA component of the program is an urban farm enterprise that produces organically grown fruits and vegetables for CCC families and the community at large. Since the closure of the schools, Uncommon Good has helped its students adjust to online learning and has created an array of online educational enrichment programming for them and their parents.

2. Medicine for the Economically Disadvantaged (MED): This program helps 100 (and counting) idealistic doctors, dentists, pharmacists, psychiatrists and optometrists repay their sky-high educational loans, some over \$800,000, so they can accept the lowest paying jobs in the medical profession, those serving the poor in community clinics throughout the southland. This year these courageous

doctors have been on the front lines of the fight against COVID, working at great risk to themselves to keep their practices open. Our MED program also has a health career pipeline through which Uncommon Good students are introduced to careers in medicine and helped to prepare for medical school. At present, only 4% of doctors in this country are Latinx and only 2.8% are Black.

3. Pandemic response: Since the pandemic, an emergency fund has been created to help families who lose their jobs and don't qualify for unemployment because they worked in the cash economy. Thanks to your generosity, we have made over 500 emergency grants to families in need. In addition, our farm program has expanded to become a regional food pantry for the hungry, giving away tons of fresh organic produce and nonperishable food.

4. Whole Earth Building (WEB): This is Uncommon Good's office, a beautiful first-of-its-kind green building that was constructed by hand, using little more than on-site earth, by Uncommon Good staff, children, parents, and hundreds of community members. It continues to receive visitors from every continent (except Antarctica!) who come to learn how to create buildings that keep people safe from natural disasters and do not harm the earth. Uncommon Good partnered with the local Native American tribe, the Tongva, to tell the story of the Tongva people through the building's art, since the structure is located on the tribe's ancestral land.



Uncommon Good graduation celebration.



Uncommon Good's Whole Earth Building interior.



Dr. Adaeze Howard, an Uncommon Good MED recipient.



"Moonica the Scare Cow", award winning scarecrow created by Uncommon Good's Francesca Twohy-Haines for the Claremont holiday scarecrow contest.

Photo by Nancy Mintie

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An Orchard Inspired Halfway Round the World

Uncommon Good's fruitful (literally!) relationship with the international organization GreenFriends, has continued despite the pandemic. This fall GreenFriends donated 118 fruit trees to be given to Uncommon Good families. In addition, in a partnership with the Claremont Rotary Club, Interact Club and Damien High School students, GreenFriends donated trees to create an orchard at San Antonio High School, a local public school. The orchard will be tended by Uncommon Good farmers and the fruit it produces will be given to low-income families.



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Members of the Claremont Rotary and its Interact Club, and Damien High School students, plant an orchard with Uncommon Good at San Antonio High School.

“I’m excited for the trees that Uncommon Good is planting at the school. The trees long for this. Their growth explodes once they escape from their little pots and can merge with the earth.”

One of the people most responsible for our partnership with GreenFriends is the multi-talented teacher-environmentalist-healer-musician-artist-entrepreneur Mary Beth Fletcher. After teaching in the Pomona public schools for 17 years, Mary Beth founded an arts enrichment company, created another company dedicated to art and meditation retreats, and launched an energy healing practice. She also was the co-founder of Claremont Food Not Lawns, which not only helped people replace their lawns with edible gardens, but also got the city charter amended to make it legal for people to install vegetable plots in their front yards even if change-averse neighbors got their knickers in a knot about it.

The roots (literally!) of her interest in growing food were planted in her childhood in central Washington, where her family of twelve had what she recalls as “an epic vegetable garden” each summer. The family’s chores were sex segregated, which meant that only the boys in the family were required to work in the garden. As a result, her brothers to this day want nothing to do with gardening, while she and her sisters love it!

When Food Not Lawns was absorbed into Sustainable Claremont a few years ago, Mary Beth decided to give herself a much-needed break. Or so she thought. A friend invited her to an event with Mata Amritanandamayi, an Indian spiritual leader, commonly known as “Amma, the hugging saint” because of her practice of dispensing loving hugs to crowds of people for hours, or even days, at a time.

“As a body worker myself,” explained Mary Beth, “I was curious about how Amma could hug so many people hour after hour. I watched her carefully and saw that she was completely connected, completely present, with each person, no matter how many there were. I started to do some research

about her and I learned that at an event celebrating her 60th birthday, which is documented on YouTube, she hugged 150,000 people. That’s 30,000 a day for five days straight. I watched an interview with her by a Stanford University professor, and I learned that even as a woman with no education, she not only has created many programs for the poor, but one of her charitable works was the founding of a university which now ranks as the third best in India. She is dedicated to philanthropy for the world’s most destitute people, but also is an outspoken proponent of science and environmentalism, which is really unusual for a global spiritual leader.

“I saw Amma again at another event about six months after the first one. I walked by a booth devoted to GreenFriends, which is the environmental arm of her organization. I meant to keep walking because I was burned out from my Food Not Lawns work. But despite what I was thinking, my feet turned around, seemingly of their own accord, and walked me over to the booth. There I learned that Amma was promoting the propagating and planting of 5,000 fruit trees in Southern California to feed the hungry and fight global warming. I got involved, in spite of myself. My first event was the one we did last year with Uncommon Good, giving fruit trees to the families it serves and teaching them how to care for them.

“I’ve really enjoyed giving these baby trees a start in life. It’s not like vegetable gardening where you see the whole life cycle of the plants in one season. Here you help the trees to be born, but then they go on to outlive you. It forces you to slow down and take a longer view of life. It’s really satisfying to know that I’m growing fruit trees that will feed future generations long after I’m gone.

“I’m excited for the trees that Uncommon Good is planting at the school. The trees long for this. Their growth explodes once they escape from their little pots and can merge with the earth. For me, I’m enjoying being part of this big global effort but in a very hands on, intimate way.”



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Green Friends member Mary Beth Fletcher and her dog, Om, tending the baby trees that are being donated to Uncommon Good families and used to plant the high school orchard.

The closure of our schools was a huge shock not just to students and teachers, but to the families of the children as well. Almost overnight education was expected to be transferred magically online. Though the schools eventually did provide laptops to our students, in many cases their family's wifi connection was poor to non-existent. Some parents had to choose between paying rent and paying for internet access. Those who live in apartment buildings found the wifi glacially slow because everyone in the complex was using it for everything. This left students relying on their phones to attend their Zoom classes.

Parents were expected to teach their children how to use Zoom and an online education platform called Google Classroom. Carlos Carrillo, our Education Programs Director, was tearing his hair out because most of our Uncommon Good parents are computer illiterate. "They don't even know what a mouse is!" he told me in frustration. "And no matter how many times I explain email to them, they still email me with the entire text of their email in the subject line!"

Because parents could not help their children access their classes, and couldn't supervise their work, our students were missing classes and falling further and further behind in their schoolwork.

Just when all seemed lost, the gallant young men of Hermanos Unidos (Brothers United), a first generation Latino student organization at Cal Poly Pomona, galloped in to the rescue. They organized a computer and online education class for 80 of our parents, teaching them computer basics, and how to use Gmail, Google Classroom and Zoom, the indispensable tools of online learning.

Obviously things are not ideal. Our kids' classrooms have shrunk to the size of their phone screens. Yet at least they and their parents now have a thin but workable lifeline connecting them to their education.

The kind young men of Hermanos Unidos have stepped up in other ways as well. Prior to COVID they were mentoring our students. Now they are conducting "How to Prepare for College" webinars for our high school students. If we are successful in obtaining some training computers for parents, they will teach more classes covering subjects such as how to check children's homework, how to download assignments, and how to communicate with teachers.

I've been so inspired to see these young men, all of whom are dealing with COVID and income challenges of their own, reach out to our parents and students to help them get through this toughest of tough years.

EEK! What's a Mouse?



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Hermanos Unidos members teach Uncommon Good parents via Zoom how to help their children with online schooling

Nevertheless, She Persisted



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Uncommon Good graduate Natalie Martinez.

It's not what she'd planned, but then, nothing in 2020 was. Natalie Martinez is spending her senior year in college trying to do her homework in the middle of the noise and chaos of her mother's daycare business that she runs out of the family's house. She's competing for computers, wifi access and quiet space with all of the children whose schools have gone online, and with her own sister and cousin who also are trying to do their schoolwork. Outside has been either too hot or too cold to be comfortable.

"I feel like a prisoner in my bedroom," Natalie told me ruefully, "but even then my sister wants to come in and use my room, too."

But a little thing like a pandemic is not stopping this remarkable young woman, who comes from a family of survivors. Natalie's mother, Angela, was born into a family of thirteen to a sickly mother in Mexico. Everyone in the family was miserable. They lived in extreme poverty and Angela's older sisters were trapped in unhappy marriages. To give you an idea of how awful it was, when one of Angela's older brothers offered to bring her to the U.S. to do stoop labor in the fields of central California, that sounded like a great deal to her. So she came here at the tender age of eighteen and became a farm laborer, a job so back breaking that virtually no U.S. born individuals are willing to do it. Eventually she had the opportunity to move up in the world through a job at a 99 cent store. There she fell in love with one of the other employees, and they married and started a family. Hence, Natalie.

"Regrettably, her time in Spain was cut short in March due to COVID, and her physical world shrunk to the size of her bedroom."

When Natalie was in 4th grade, her mother found Uncommon Good and signed her up for our education program. Over her years with us, she was assigned four mentors, all intelligent and kind young women attending the Claremont Colleges. They each gave Natalie tantalizing glimpses into what the experience of a small private college had to offer. One went to Geneva on a fellowship and sent Natalie letters and postcards from her travels which she still treasures. Another worked in Washington, D.C. and sparked Natalie's interest in political life, motivating her while she was still in high school to work on the campaign of a successful candidate for the California Senate. Another mentor, who is still in touch, took her to world class art museums.

"They were super amazing, smart, talented, and very caring," Natalie told me. "I wanted to strive to be like them."

And ultimately, she did. Among all of her college offers, Natalie chose Occidental, a small elite private college in Los Angeles. She plunged into college life and became the station manager for the campus radio station. She took part in the school's "campaign semester" in which she went to work for a candidate in a very competitive House of Representatives race in New Jersey. Her candidate, a young woman attorney, beat her opponent who was an entrenched incumbent who'd been in office over twenty years. She chose to major in political science, with a focus on urban and environmental policy. She interned with the East Los Angeles Community Corporation, a behemoth low-income housing developer. She left this past January for a semester abroad in Madrid where, as a budding urban planner, she marveled at the quality of life available to ordinary people there. She found she didn't need a car because the public transportation was so good. And being a health conscious vegetarian, she appreciated the fact that there were grocery stores with healthy produce within a five minute walking radius from nearly every location.

Regrettably, her time in Spain was cut short in March due to COVID, and her physical world shrunk to the size of her bedroom. But making the best of things, she is proceeding with work on her senior thesis, on the subject of whether women's concerns are being addressed adequately in community planning.

"I've seen that I can really improve the quality of people's lives through urban planning," she enthused. "Lots of problems are made worse through bad planning. I want to listen to the communities that are affected by development, whose voices often get lost because money speaks so loudly. For example, the 710 freeway is a smog corridor that was built intentionally through low-income communities but was stopped when it hit the wealthy City of Pasadena. I want to make people's lives better, with things like ensuring the safety of women and the mobility of the elderly."

When I listen to young people like Natalie, I can't help but feel that the sun is coming up in this country. Good day, everyone!

Our Students Step Into History

(con't. from page 1)

Unfortunately, while at the University of California at Irvine, even though he was doing well academically, Ozzy's dream of becoming a doctor began to die once the federal government attacked the DACA program. As a result of the government's withdrawal of support for the program, medical schools became reluctant to accept DACA students, for fear that the DACA program would be ended and that the undocumented students would not be able to work in the required medical residency programs that are a necessary part of the medical education process. As a result, Ozzy began to sink into depression.

Then in June of this year, Marco's and Ozzy's fortunes appeared to change. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the DACA program was legal and should be allowed to continue. We rejoiced and quickly turned in an application for Marco, and planned to help Ozzy renew his DACA status.

However, the day after we submitted Marco's application, the Department of Homeland Security, which oversees the DACA program, said that it would defy the court and refuse to accept new applications to the program. In addition, it said that current DACA students could only renew their status for one year, not the two years that had been allowed previously. Not only was this a blow to the dreams of DACA eligible young people, but it also was a constitutional crisis, as the Executive Branch of government defied a ruling of

the highest court of the Judicial Branch. While routine in dictatorships, this should not have been happening in a democracy.

"It's unfair that the government is stopping and starting the program and playing with people's emotions, especially during COVID," Marco fumed. "Our parents aren't to blame. They just did what any parents would do to help their kids. They had to escape extreme poverty and violence. It's not their fault they didn't have the money and information to do it legally."

In response to the government's intransigence, the legal team that brought the original case was planning to return to the Supreme Court to ask it to enforce its ruling. The team told us that it was seeking named plaintiffs for the case to stand in as the representatives for all of the DACA eligible young people in this country. I asked Marco and two of our other students if they would consider being the named plaintiffs in this historic litigation. They and their families all said yes, despite the potential danger that taking a public stand would bring down government retribution upon them.

However, in another twist of fate, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died in September and was replaced by a new justice with anti-immigrant views, thus shifting the votes on the Supreme Court enough to make a legal victory questionable for the DACA attorneys.

Just when things seemed most hopeless for DACA students, Joe Biden, who had promised to reinstate the DACA program, won the popular vote for the presidency. However, President Trump's challenge to the legitimacy of the election has, as of this writing, thrown not just the DACA question, but the entire country into a state of confusion.

Regardless of the outcome of the political maneuvering, and despite the temporary relief that the DACA program could provide to some of our students, the DACA program is really only a temporary fix for some of the students brought to this country as children. It does not provide a path to citizenship, and it excludes any child brought to this country after 2007. As a result, the younger students in Uncommon Good's program who were brought to this country after 2007 would not be helped even by a newly shored up DACA program. Truly this country needs to have a reckoning and come to a conclusion about what a just solution would be for young people who were brought to this country without having a say in the decision, and who have worked so hard to succeed and contribute here. Currently, undocumented students make up an estimated 2% of all those enrolled in U.S. higher education, about 454,000 college students. They await this country's decision.

"It's unfair that the government is stopping and starting the program and playing with people's emotions, especially during COVID."



Photo by Family of Ozzy Ruiz

Ozzy Ruiz, DACA pre-med student.

Son of Africa Serves U.S. Poor

(con't. from page 1)

there was never a slave trade. Italy tried to conquer it twice, but failed.”

But despite its cultural wealth, economically Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries in Africa and its health care and education systems are limited.

“At a young age, I became personally aware of how scarce health care services were when my cousin needlessly died of an HIV related infection,” he told me. “HIV patients in Ethiopia are sometimes excluded from proper care, either due to the lack of available treatment and/or for social and cultural reasons that make any discussion about the disease a taboo.”

Yohannes’ parents, though they had good jobs (his mother was an accountant and his father a business administrator) decided to leave their homeland and start over from scratch in the U.S. so that their only child could go to college here. Yohannes was already nineteen when they came, and though he could read and write English, he could not speak the language. His father found work as a security guard, and his mother as a shop clerk. The family struggled to obtain health care here, even though they were legal immigrants.

As for Yohannes, his remarkable abilities quickly became apparent. He enrolled in English as a Second Language classes and college simultaneously. Even though he was in the midst of trying to figure out a new language, culture, and educational system for himself, he decided to create a nonprofit organization to help other Ethiopian immigrants with their struggles. Together with a few friends, he helped fellow immigrants to find jobs, go to school, obtain green cards, and even let them stay in his apartment until they found housing. Incredibly, despite learning to speak English and taking on the daunting task of founding and running a charity, Yohannes graduated from Cal State Fullerton in just four and a half years.

He then was accepted to medical school at the Western University of Health Sciences in Pomona, where he continued to over-achieve. He mentored underrepresented minority high school students who were interested in medicine, and tutored new medical students from low-income backgrounds. Then, during his residency at a Downey hospital, he was given the honor of being appointed Chief Resident. During these years he continued to serve as the president of his nonprofit assisting immigrants.

Yohannes’ career choice continues the theme of service to immigrants and others most in need. The clinic where he works in Lynwood serves a low-income population that is 70% Latinx, 15% Black, and almost all low-income. Sometimes he talks to his former classmates from medical school who are working in well-to-do neighborhoods and he realizes how much more challenging his practice is. His patients lack education, often don’t speak English, and have more health complications. He told me about one patient who had been diagnosed a year ago with diabetes and had been started on medication. But then her insurance ran out and she could no longer afford the drugs. She began to suffer severe abdominal pain and went to an urgent care center where all they did was to give her antibiotics for the pain. When she came to see Yohannes, he



Dr. Assefa with his parents at his medical school graduation.

Photo by Family of Johannes Assefa

“At a young age, I became personally aware of how scarce health care services were when my cousin needlessly died of an HIV related infection”

diagnosed that her pain was due to her extremely high sugar levels from her untreated diabetes. He helped to get her back on insulin, thus saving her life.

Yohannes confided that even though the work is hard, he prefers to be where he can help the most. Yet he would have difficulty doing so without the help of our MED program, for he owes hundreds of thousands of dollars in educational debt from college and medical school. And that isn’t the only debt owed by his family. Believing in his wife, who also is an Ethiopian immigrant, he encouraged her to go to law school, so her school loans now must be paid as well. Lastly, the couple is expecting a baby in a few months’ time.

“My dream is to continue serving as a primary care doctor for the underserved for many years,” Yohannes told us. “I look forward to achieving this goal with Uncommon Good and LA Care Health Plan’s help.”

For us, it is an honor to assist this compassionate physician and lovely human being.



Dr. Assefa with his wife.

Photo by Family of Johannes Assefa

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