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# UNCOMMON GOOD

FOSTERING IDEALISM in EDUCATION, MEDICINE and the ENVIRONMENT

SUMMER 2013 ■ VOLUME 10 ■ NUMBER 1

## Girl's Idea Leads to First-of-its-kind Whole Earth Building

(A version of this article was published previously in *Natural Life*, May-June 2013.)

“Green building stories are boring!” the seasoned Los Angeles Times environmental reporter informed me. “Not this one,” I thought to myself. “We have kids, Iranians, artists, oil companies, mad genius teenagers and a Native American tribe. In fact, it’s been a little too interesting around here for some time.”

[continued on page 4]



Photo by Linda Lewis

Legendary Dolores Huerta, co-founder with Cesar Chavez of the United Farm Workers, gives the keynote address at the Grand Opening of Uncommon Good's Whole Earth Building.

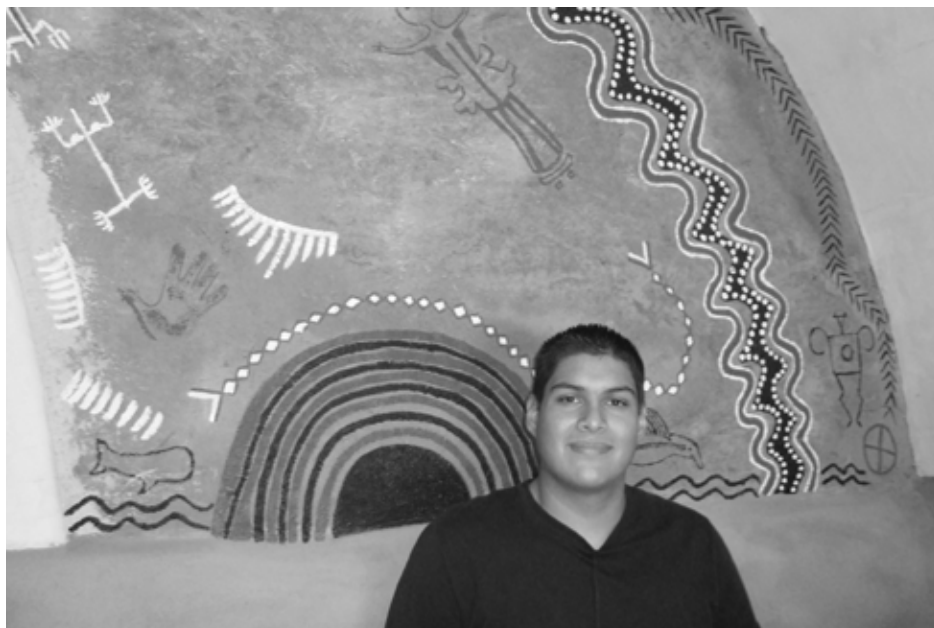


Photo by Nancy Mintie

Uncommon Good scholarship student Rafael Guzman in front of reproductions of prehistoric cave paintings in the Whole Earth Building.

## Students Earn Full Scholarships to UCLA

With his 6' 2" football frame and power wattage smile, the confident seventeen-year-old Rafael Guzman seemed to fill up all the space in my tiny office. But it hadn't always been this way. Six years ago, as a chubby 5' 2" middle school student, Rafa, as he is known to his friends, was the subject of bullying in his tough neighborhood school. And being raised by a single migrant mother who worked long hours as a housekeeper, he was pretty much on his own for dealing with his problems. But even then, he showed the kind of initiative that has launched him from the barrio to a full UCLA scholarship.

When Uncommon Good's Carlos Carrillo came to his middle school to give a presentation about our Connect to College program, Rafa chased him down afterwards in the parking lot, asking how he could get into the program. When Carlos set up an interview for Rafa and his mother, she was unsure. Who were these strangers and what did they want with her son? But the resourceful boy argued persuasively that it would be good for him to have an "older brother" (Uncommon Good mentor) to hang out with. He also told us in his application, "I think I should like a mentor because I get to share my feelings with someone. I also want a mentor to have someone to play sports with, help the community, help me with homework and help me find a good college." His mother was won over by her son's reasoning and Rafa joined our program. He was matched with a mentor from Claremont McKenna College, Daniel Martinez.

"One of my greatest inspirations was my mentor," Rafa told me. "He taught me what college is, what it is all about, and the whole process. One of the things Uncommon Good does really well is matching kids with mentors. My mentor, Danny, had a lot in common with me. He's Latino, was raised by a single mom and didn't live in a great neighborhood. My mom loved him. She was always cooking dinner for him when he came over. He took me on my first camping trip. We went to Yosemite and he taught me how to fish, put up a tent and build a fire. Even though he graduated and got a job, we're still [continued on page 7]

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# Fiddleneck Family Farms



Madeline Santizo, Ana Kelly Bonilla and Monica Santizo plant vegetables at a Fiddleneck Family Farm site.

Photo by Carlos Carrillo

“I’m not surprised,” said my colleague, Carlos Carrillo. “It’s the poor who’re always the most generous.” Carlos’ comment was made after a meeting of our Urban Farmers Association (UFA). The UFA is a group of parents whose children are in our education program and who have an interest in farming or providing healthy food for their families. We had been discussing how to get additional land to start a new urban farming project. In our quest for farm plots, we’d been turned down or viewed with suspicion by cities, schools, public agencies and retirement communities which had unused property. “Why don’t you use our backyards?” suggested UFA member Maria Rodriguez and her husband, Gerardo. This suggestion was received with enthusiasm by the other UFA members. And so the Fiddleneck Family Farms project was born.

Uncommon Good has named its urban farm projects after a local flower shaped like the neck of a fiddle. The first European settlers in this region noticed that if their cattle ate too much of it they got sick. So they concluded that it was a poisonous weed. However, the indigenous people of this area understood how to use the plant for both food and medicine. And so the lowly fiddleneck was chosen as a symbol for us of how to work harmoniously with nature with our farms, growing produce organically and conserving soil and water.

Fiddleneck Family Farms was launched on a recent warm spring Saturday in Pomona. UFA members, youth from our Teen Green program, and staff from Uncommon Good held a work party at Maria and Gerardo Rodriguez’s home to tear out the lawn and plant vegetables and fruit. This is the first in what will be a network of backyard urban farm plots throughout Pomona and surrounding cities. In addition to the UFA families who have volunteered their yards, two retired ministers have offered theirs, and a local church is considering joining the movement.

The Fiddleneck Family Farms concept is this: Uncommon Good hires displaced immigrant farmers from the UFA who have experience with dry land, organic farming in their home countries. These farmers work the backyard plots for the families, who are welcome to join in and to learn if they so desire. Half of the food produced is sold to fund the farmer’s jobs and expenses, and the other half is distributed to the UFA families and other families served by Uncommon Good who otherwise could not afford fresh organic produce for their meals. It is a splendid win - win- win proposition which creates jobs, fresh fruits and vegetables for the hungry, and a healthier environment. 🌱



Uncommon Good’s Urban Farmers Association members gather to prepare a backyard for a Fiddleneck Family Farm site.

Photo by Carlos Carrillo



*Grants from the Robert C. Fraser Fund of the California Community Foundation and from The California Wellness Foundation Support the Work of Inspirational Doctors Who Serve the Poor.*

# Dr. Joy

Dr. Joy Jackson's parents were on to something when they named their daughter Joy. The little girl did indeed live up to her name. Despite the hardships of her childhood, she grew up to embody an infectious (in a good sense!) joy, warmth and positivity.

But life was rough at first. Joy's parents separated when she was two-years-old. She and her brother were raised by her mother, who was too ill to work. The little family moved from one tough neighborhood in South Los Angeles to another, relying on welfare and MediCal for their subsistence.

When she was in the 6th grade, Joy did a school report on the famous African-American physician, surgeon and scientist Charles Drew, whose research in the field of blood transfusions allowed medics to save thousands of lives during World War II. Joy, who also is African-American, was so inspired by his life that she decided that she, too, would become a doctor.

At the age of twelve, she went to live with her father, who encouraged her education. She told me that she attended Immaculate Heart High School in Los Angeles alongside future supermodel Tyra Banks. "She was a diva even then!" Joy laughed. From there she went to Xavier University in New Orleans for college and Tulane University in New Orleans for her Masters in Public Health. She was there when Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005. She relates:

"All at once water poured into my apartment. The TV fell into the water and I could feel the shocks. I got up on the bed, but the water continued to rise. I ran upstairs and looked out the window and could only see the top one inch of my car. Then the water rose to the second floor and within minutes was up to my knees before it stopped!"

As Joy began her medical schooling, she was exposed to escalating degrees of poverty. She attended medical school in Mexico where she learned Spanish, and began to understand the background of her paternal grandmother, who was a Mexican immigrant. She remembers:

"It gave me perspective on what poor really is. Skid Row here would look very nice to a person living in a pueblo with no running water or electricity. It gave me a perspective on the Latino plight and what it means for them to be here in America."

From there she did a pre-residency program in Yonkers, just outside of the Bronx in New York. Even though Yonkers is only twenty minutes from the wealth of Manhattan, she found the conditions there worse in some ways than they had been in Mexico. There was more violence, crime and open drug use and addiction. "I saw EVERYTHING there!" she exclaims.

Joy did her medical residency through the USC Keck School of Medicine at California Hospital in downtown Los Angeles. "I had instant rapport with the patients because I recognized that I was one of them," she told me. This experience cemented her desire to work in underserved areas and upon her graduation she accepted a job with the Mission City Community Clinic which provides health care to the poor of the San Fernando Valley. There she runs a black infant health program, a black women's health program, and a school clinic.

"Infant mortality rates are highest amongst African-Americans," she told me. "There is a mistrust in the African-American community of the medical profession because of scandals like the Tuskegee medical experiments. The Latinas are poorer but they come readily to the doctor. But I know how to talk to the African-American moms to gain their trust. They insist on seeing me now when they come into the clinic, because we have that trust. I see my child self, my brother and my mom in many of their faces. I feel so connected to the community I work in because I came from a similar one, and if not for a little luck, good genes and supportive parents, I could have been on the other side of my stethoscope,



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Dr. Joy Jackson of the Mission City Community Clinic with two of her patients.

wanting and hoping for a better life, compassion and understanding. I do not take this for granted, ever. I feel humbled and honored that I am in the position to give back and help where it is so desperately needed."

Yet even with such a commitment to her work, Joy could not be a community clinic doctor if it were not for the assistance that she receives through Uncommon Good's Medical Education Debt Relief program (MED Relief). This program is funded at present primarily through generous grants from The California Wellness Foundation and the Robert C. Fraser Fund of the California Community Foundation. Joy still owes \$270,000 in educational debt from college, her Masters in Public Health program, and medical school. Her husband, with whom she has two beautiful little daughters, recently lost his job and is struggling to create a new business.

Our MED Relief program helps doctors who serve the poor, such as Joy, repay their student loans so that they can afford to work at the lowest paying jobs in their profession, those in community clinics serving as the only doctors to whom the poor have access. Joy tells us:

"If not for Uncommon Good I would have an extremely difficult time making it in community medicine. The pay scale for primary care providers in low-income clinics is extremely low. We definitely are not in this for the money. Seriously, without the Uncommon Good funding I would be forced to take a job at a large medical corporation."

Uncommon Good and the doctors who depend upon its MED Relief program know that even after the Affordable Care Act takes effect in January of 2014, there are an estimated 4 million people in California who will remain uninsured and dependent upon community clinics such as Joy's for their care. Sixty-two percent of these patients will be in Los Angeles County and its surrounds. Because of a system wide shortage of physicians, there will be an intensive effort by the "large medical corporations" to which Joy refers to recruit doctors away from community clinics. Larger salaries and loan repayment assistance will be dangled in front of them. For those such as Joy, who have huge loan burdens and struggling families, the continued existence of our MED Relief program will be crucial in allowing her to continue the work she loves: serving those who have no other options for medical care.

Let's give the last word to a patient of Joy's, one of many who have written to her to express their thanks. The woman writes:

"My dear Dr. Jackson,

This is just a small note of thanks for all your tender care and support during our last visit together. My vocabulary is not big enough to convey just how much that visit still means to me. You truly are a gift from God." Amen. ☑



## Girl's Idea (cont) [continued from page 1]



Photo by Carlos Carrillo

The Great Gathering Room of the Whole Earth Building

It all started 7,000 years ago. That's when the first human beings stepped foot onto the patch of land that is the subject of our tale. Things went very well for the first 6.75 thousand years or so. People took what they needed from the land, leaving enough behind for the wildlife and successive generations. For instance, they observed that during the late summer, the mesquite plant made up three quarters of the diet of the coyote population. So even though they used the plant for many of their own needs, these thoughtful folks made sure to leave enough untouched to ensure Brother Coyote's survival.

After thousands of years of peaceful living, everyone knows what happened next. Culture clash. Genocide. The San Gabriel Band of Mission Indians, or "Tongva" in their own language, nearly died out, with the few remaining survivors being driven underground to escape discrimination and persecution.

Fast forward to the twenty-first century. The surviving Tongva are emerging from obscurity and promoting a revival of their culture, language and traditional knowledge. Nearby, our nonprofit organization, Uncommon Good, is attempting to create sustainable communities where everyone's basic needs can be met in a healthy environment. And we are working on these big "save the world" projects on a shoestring budget, as these things generally are done, out of donated space in a 100-year-old convent. We are educating the children of the poor, supporting young doctors who provide the only medical care available to many poor people, and starting urban farm projects, all with an environmental focus. For we had noticed during Hurricane Katrina, that it wasn't the bodies of the rich floating down the streets of New Orleans. It had become gruesomely obvious that in a deteriorating environment, the poor are hurt first and worst. And it had become equally obvious that we wouldn't be able to have a healthy environment if we had starving poor who would do anything necessary to feed their children, even if it meant cutting down the last tree on the planet. We realized that eliminating poverty and saving the earth had become inextricably intertwined activities.

But on our way to saving the world, we hit a bump in the road. The old



Photo by Linda Lewis

Uncommon Good Executive Director Nancy Mintie, Dolores Huerta and Uncommon Good Board Member Margaret Levy at the Grand Opening of the Whole Earth Building.

convent was declared unsafe. We were losing our workplace. We bemoaned the fact that we'd now have to come up with rent money for a depressing storefront somewhere. The convent, dingy and cramped as it was, had a certain retro flair and the ghosts of the former nuns to give it at least a little bit of mystique. But it was then that a student in our youth environmental program, Teen Green, had an idea. The girl, Jennifer Lee, had learned about an Iranian architect in one of her classes at school who was promoting the building of radically sustainable handmade buildings using little more than on-site earth. "Could we build one?" she asked.

Immediately, ecstatically, we grasped what this could mean. If we could create a building that did not harm the earth in any way, out of the simplest of materials, we could model, in the words of the first American born saint, Elizabeth Seton, how "to live simply so that others may simply live." We could walk the walk, not just talk the talk. And if we could build an earthen building by hand here in Los Angeles County, which has the strictest building codes in the world, we could show that it could be done anywhere by anyone on the planet wanting to build a home for his or her family or enterprise.



Photo by Linda Lewis

Gabrieleno-Tongva dancers at the Whole Earth Building Grand Opening.





Photo by Linda Lewis

Official ribbon cutters for the Whole Earth Building: Teen Green leader Jonathan Alvarado, California Assembly Representative Chris Holden, Claremont Mayor Opanyi Nasiali, U.S. Senator Barbara Boxer representative Yvette Martinez, Tongva Chief Anthony Redblood Morales, United Farm Workers co-founder Dolores Huerta, Congresswoman Judy Chu representative Enrique Robles, Connect to College parent leader Maria Rodriguez, Uncommon Good Executive Director Nancy Mintie, Whole Earth Building architect Erik Peterson, Claremont United Methodist Church lead pastor Rev. Sharon Rhodes-Wickett and Teen Green leader Kira Perez.

Okay. Great idea. But no land. And no money. Uncommon Good didn't have the funds to buy property in Southern California, home of sky high land prices. So the idea nearly died in its infancy until a local congregation, the Claremont United Methodist Church, stepped up and offered to share a piece of its campus for the building. Later, the church was joined by the neighboring Claremont School of Theology which also allowed part of its land to be used for the project.

Okay. Great idea. Got land. But still no money. We went to every known foundation that funded capital campaigns and were hurriedly shown the door at each one, even those with an environmental focus. Building a dirt building by hand was either too radical, or too humble, or too untried, or too visionary, or too something for them all.

Then Union Oil Company and Unocal got sued, and we got lucky. The oil companies decided to settle the litigation in part by creating a pot of money that could be used for clean air projects in California. Most of the applicants for the money were in the field of transportation. But we argued that buildings use 40% of the energy in this country and 75% of the electricity, and that producing all of that power caused air pollution. So if we could demonstrate a way to create and operate a building that used nothing but human power and solar energy, and that, in addition, actually functioned as a carbon sink, absorbing more carbon emissions than it created, we could make a great contribution to air quality and climate change mitigation.

It worked. We got the money. So the project was funded by a grant from the litigation pot of money known as the Reformulated Gasoline Settlement Fund, with additional funding provided later by the Ralph & Shirley Shapiro Family Foundation and the California Community Foundation. But before we began construction, there was one thing more to be done. It turns out that the land offered to us by the church and the school of theology was precisely where those first humans that we mentioned in the beginning of this story had settled eons ago. For thousands of years the ancestors of the Tongva people had lived, played, worked and prayed on this site. So it only seemed right to ask the permission of the Tongva to build there. We sought out a tribal elder who consulted with the Tongva leadership. The tribal members not only gave us their blessing, but partnered with us to help the project promote a return to their traditional value of living in harmony with nature, or in other words, sanity.

The result is the world's first Whole Earth Building, or WEB, as in "web of life" because we took the entire ecosystem into account in its construction and operation, including the soil, water, air, energy, plants, wildlife, people and community. We combined the best of ancient earth building techniques with the best of modern green technology. This beautiful, sophisticated building was built entirely by hand, using only on-site earth for 85% of its building materials, and according to

If we could create a building that did not harm the earth in any way, out of the simplest of materials, we could model, in the words of the first American born saint, Elizabeth Seton, how "to live simply so that others may simply live."



Photo by Linda Lewis

Claremont United Methodist Church lead pastor, Rev. Sharon Rhodes-Wickett, offers a blessing and explains to the crowd how the church partnered with Uncommon Good to construct the Whole Earth Building on the church property.



## Girl's Idea (cont') *[continued from page 5]*

our architect, Erik Peterson, is expected to stand for at least 500 years.

Hundreds of community volunteers participated in the WEB's creation, including Tongva tribal members, children, seniors, scientists, artists and low-income families. Young golden-brained geniuses from the renowned engineering school, Harvey Mudd College, created a unique earth air tunnel system that provides additional cooling to the building on those few days when the thick walls alone do not provide sufficient insulation. Along with students from Pomona College, they designed energy modeling systems for the building. Tongva ethnobotanists helped us select native plants for the landscape and for the first-of-its-kind green roof that are of most importance to the tribe's culture. An internationally renowned artist, Sheila Pinkel, made photo tiles of Tongva artifacts, plants and animals to adorn the building, as well as a magnificent photo mural illustrating Tongva symbols and cosmology. Local teacher and artist Denyse Hart designed a beautiful monument sign. Tongva tribal member Mary Martinez created a beautiful hand beaded Native American walking stick to symbolize the journey that we are taking together towards a more sustainable world. Another artist copied prehistoric pictographs from the region's caves onto some of the walls. Solstice and equinox markers were created by archeo-astronomer Bryan Penprase of Pomona College to help the staff track when to extend or retract the windows' light shelves to take advantage of the changing angles of the sun as the year progresses. A seasonal stream bed returns storm water runoff to the ground water.

The building's Ground Breaking made press on every continent except Antarctica. Al Gore's Climate Reality Project (then Alliance for Climate Protection) endorsed the project. The building was visited by recently retired Dr. James Hansen, head of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, the world's foremost climatologist.

A joyful Grand Opening was held to coincide with Earth Day in April of this year. Six hundred community people who contributed their labor and talents to the project attended along with local dignitaries such as Assemblyman Chris Holden, Mayor Nasiali and the full City Council. Blessings were offered by Claremont United Methodist Church Senior Pastor Sharon Rhodes-Wickett and Chief Anthony Redblood Morales and others from the Tongva tribe. The keynote speaker was living legend Dolores Huerta, co-founder with Cesar Chavez of the United Farm Workers. Dolores shared with the crowd Cesar's interest in earthen buildings and in growing organic food, just as Uncommon Good does in its urban agriculture program. A Youtube clip of parts of the ceremony can be viewed at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7q-4Rcwe6U>

As of this writing, Uncommon Good is finishing the final details for its Temporary Occupancy Permit, which will allow us to move into our beloved Whole Earth Building to humbly and happily resume our mission of serving the poor and the planet. 📌



Dolores Huerta with Uncommon Good Board of Directors Chair Timothy Dillon at the Whole Earth Building Grand Opening.

Photo by Linda Lewis



Children from Uncommon Good's Connect to College program in front of the Whole Earth Building.

Photo by Carlos Carrillo



## Students Earn (cont) *[continued from page 1]*

in touch. I really appreciate Uncommon Good's one on one approach. I've been in other programs where the numbers of kids are much higher, but they don't really know you."

Encouraged by his mentor and Uncommon Good, Rafa took on an ambitious load in high school. His school is infamous for being the worst one in a troubled district. It has more than its share of violence, gang influence and poor test scores. It has no computer lab even though many of its students don't have computers in their home. Yet Rafa isn't critical of his school. In fact, he seems constitutionally unable to say anything bad about anyone or anything. He even made excuses to me for a player on an opposing football team who hammered him with a particularly egregious illegal tackle.

"I had wanted to go to a better school," he told me. "But my mom wanted me to stay in the neighborhood. So I found a good crowd to hang out with." Rafa got into student government at his high school and served in various positions for three years. While doing so, he demonstrated a talent for fundraising. He was in charge of raising the money for the school prom and was so successful that there was a \$6,000 surplus that was able to fund other activities for the senior class. He also played sports all four years, worked at a pizza joint and doing yard work, babysat his little brother, took Advanced Placement classes and kept his grades up.

"School stops at 3pm," he explained to me. "Then I had tennis practice until 5pm. Then I'd rush to my job, changing my clothes in the parking lot so I could get there by 5:30pm. After work I'd go home and have dinner. I'd start my homework at 11pm and finish about 4am. Then I'd get up for school at 7am. But after a while I got really sick. I realized that I needed to cut back. So I worked a few less hours and would skip one practice day a week."

Rafa wants to be an orthopedic surgeon and came up with this career goal through an interesting chain of events. He explained:

"My mom cleans houses for Koreans and they all seem to be doctors and they encouraged me to be a doctor, too. She's been cleaning the house of the Hah family since I was born. The parents and kids are all doctors. The dad is a veterinarian and when I was eleven he let me watch him do surgery on animals. The son, Raymond, became an orthopedic surgeon when he was only twenty-seven. He's going to let me shadow him at his work. After I become a doctor I want to work a few years and get a house and a car. But I've known a lot of people who weren't able to get medical care they needed. I worry about my mom. She has diabetes and no insurance. So I want to find a couple of those people each year and give them free care, paying for all their medical expenses myself."

Rafa is not only the first person in his family to go to college, but also the first to graduate from high school. He was accepted at a number of colleges and I asked him why he chose UCLA. I expected him to say that it was because he got a scholarship and that it was the best school academically. But he didn't. He did say that academics were important, but that his final decision had come down to an issue that indeed would be close to the heart of a boy who had grown 7 inches from middle school to his freshman year in high school. He explained:

"My final choice was between UCLA and UC Davis. I interviewed kids at both schools and UCLA ranked #1 in food. So UCLA won! I also went on the UCLA website and saw that they had a Food Club. I plan to join that, because I love food, except for pizza, which I can't stand any more because of all the hours I worked at Little Caesars."

Rafa has been given a full Regents Award Scholarship to UCLA. But this momentous news has taken a little while to sink in. He called us not long ago and said, "I just wanted to let you guys know that I am going to be able to go to UCLA. I took enough landscaping jobs to get the \$200 for my deposit and so now I'll be able to go."

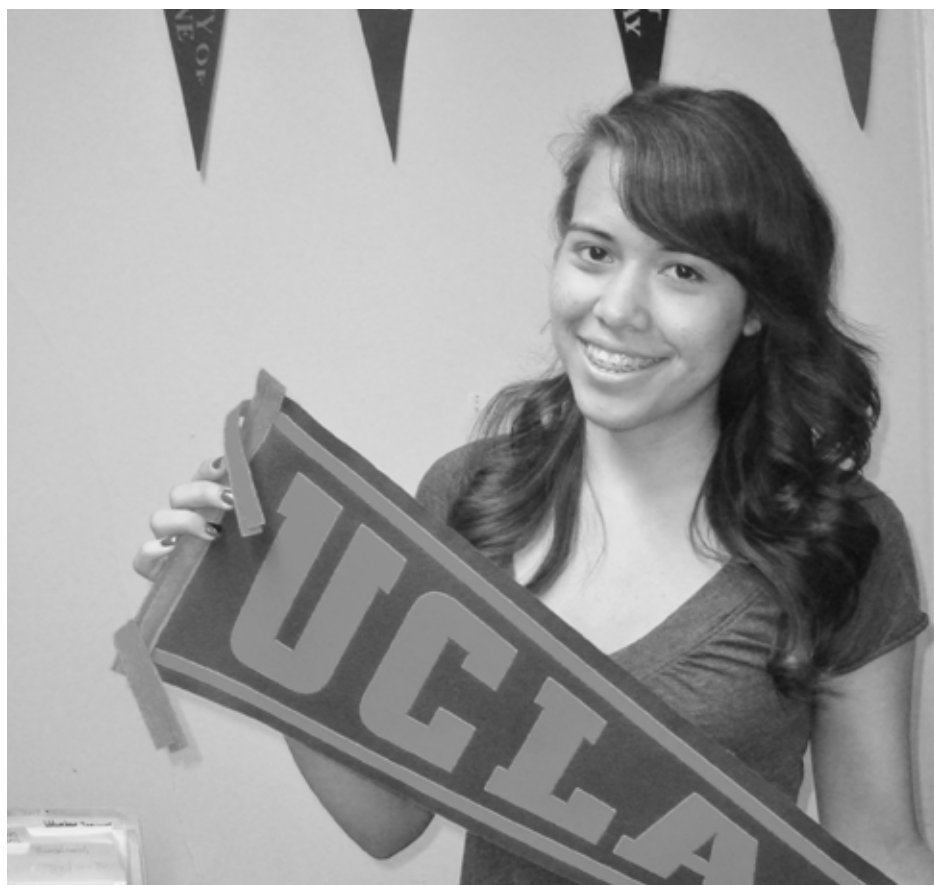
Rafa will be joined at UCLA by another Uncommon Good student, Leslie Quinones. As large as Rafa is, Leslie is petite. But though she may be physically fragile, she is a young woman of remarkable inner strength. Like Rafa, she was born to a poor single migrant mother. As an infant, she was found to be suffering from a severe kidney malfunction and underwent surgery at the age of one. During her childhood she had weekly painful infections, constant tests, and many trips to the Children's Hospital. Her illness subsided when she was nine-years-old, only to reoccur when she was fifteen. A stint was inserted in her side during sophomore year. During her junior year in high school she had another surgery during finals week. After her surgery she struggled to make up her finals, even though her pain continued. This past March she had yet another surgery and another stint put into place. Yet another surgery followed to remove the stint after six weeks. In the future, she may be faced with the need for a kidney transplant.

Despite her pain, fatigue and many missed weeks of school, Leslie helped care for her younger siblings, participated in our Teen Green youth environmental leadership group, served as a youth leader on the Teen Value Council in Pomona, and earned a 4.6 grade point average. She was encouraged along the way by her two Uncommon Good mentors, Sandra Saca who attended Scripps College and UCLA, and Jaanhvi Vaidya who attended Harvey Mudd College and Pomona College.

Leslie was accepted to nine colleges. She is grateful to Uncommon Good for our help, and especially to Mark Lewis, an Uncommon Good volunteer and college admissions consultant who gave her extensive help preparing her personal statements for her college applications. She chose UCLA after being offered a full Regents Award Scholarship.

Leslie's suffering has given her an old soul aura. She is compassionate, persevering and mature beyond her years. She is contemplating becoming a psychologist. She explains, "My friends always seem to come to me with their troubles. They seem to think I'll understand."

Godspeed to our Rafa and Leslie, future healers of the body and the soul. 🙏



Uncommon Good scholarship student Leslie Quinones.

Photo by Nancy Mintie



Rafael Guzman at the Whole Earth Building.

Photo by Nancy Mintie