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Uncommon Good
211 W, Foothill Boulevard
Claremont, California 91711
909 625-2248
Nancy Mintie, Director

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SPRING 2017 ■ VOLUME 14 ■ NUMBER 1

Where the Boys Are



Photo by Jesus Sanchez.

Some of the members of Uncommon Good’s new boys club, Compass.

When you are looking for boys these days in low-income communities, you usually don’t find them at the top of their class in school or volunteering in the community. Instead, many of them are getting into trouble and dropping out of high school. The socio-economic peers of our Uncommon Good students are quitting high school at the rate of 41.5%, and most of those dropouts are boys.

Uncommon Good counters these trends by giving its male students individual adult mentors who befriend them, encourage them to put in effort at school, and inspire them to aim for college. But we’ve got a problem. Men do not volunteer in the same numbers as women. A full 70% of our volunteers are women, which leaves many more boys on our wait list for mentors than girls. A critical time for these boys is the transition to high school and the first year of high school. If male students perform poorly in 9th grade they often give up and then it becomes very difficult, if not impossible, to get them back on track for graduation and college.

Last year Uncommon Good’s Youth and Volunteer Coordinator, Jesus Sanchez, came up with a solution to this problem. Jesus himself was raised with very strong mentors in his own family and implicitly understands the power of a good example. His parents were poor immigrants, but worked incredibly hard to give him and his two older brothers a chance in this country. His father bussed tables

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Super Woman Doctor

When the United Nations named the cartoon character Wonder Woman its honorary ambassador for the empowerment of women and girls in 2016, flesh and blood women the world over raised an outcry. “Couldn’t you find one real woman on the planet that deserved this honor?” they protested. Well, I could have helped the good folks at the United Nations by introducing them to Dr. Adaeze Howard, one of the doctors in our Medicine for the Economically Disadvantaged (MED) program. (Our MED program helps idealistic doctors and other health professionals to repay their heavy educational debts so that they can afford to work in the lowest paying jobs in the medical field, those serving the poor in nonprofit clinics. It is made possible by the generosity of The California Wellness Foundation and the Robert C. Fraser Fund of the California Community Foundation.)

But you might not, at first meeting, peg Adaeze as an extraordinary person. Her almost painfully modest community clinic sits on a busy if benighted street in South Los Angeles, across from A’s Collision & Auto Repair and the Family Dollar store. A homeless encampment fills the alley in the back. And all of this is not far from where she grew up.

Adaeze was born into a modest African-American family and spent most of her childhood years in the Athens area of South Los Angeles, where she still lives and works today. Her grandmother had been a domestic servant in the South. When she was taken to see the film “The Help” a few years ago, about the oppressed lives of women domestics in the South in the mid-twentieth century, Grandma’s comment was, “Actually, it was much worse than that.”

Her mother was a teacher and her father worked as a longshoreman and truck driver. Though not a wealthy man, her dad considered himself rich in spiritual life and culture and so when his daughter was born he named her Adaeze, which in the language of Nigeria mean’s “King’s Daughter.” The parents were devout Catholics and instilled in their six children the value of helping others. As a child, Adaeze had a love of science which was nurtured by the fact that the California Science Center was in her neighborhood and admission was free. At the tender age of six, Adaeze decided that the best way to live out both her faith and her fascination with science was to become a doctor.

In addition to science, Adaeze loves the arts, and it was this that led her to her husband, who is a poet from Missouri. She met him at a Poetry Slam and when he composed a poem about her entitled “My California Sunflower” he won her heart.

Adaeze’s parents were very influenced by the civil rights movement and wanted her to attend an historically black college. So she went to Alcorn State in

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Photo by Nancy Mintie

Uncommon Good’s MED grantee, Dr. Adaeze Howard, with a patient.

Where the Boys Are *(con't. from page 1)*

and washed dishes in restaurants and his mother worked as a seamstress in a garment factory. His elder brothers excelled in school, one becoming a recreational therapist with the mentally ill and imprisoned women, and the other working with youth and county social service programs.

Jesus called his idea “Compass” which in addition to its definition in English, also sounds like the Spanish language slang term for “buddy.” He decided to target our at-risk 8th grade boys and ask them if they would start a mentoring group for the younger lads in our program for whom we have not yet been able to find mentors. The idea was to challenge the students to inspire the little ones, and in the process, to model and be true to their own goals for academic excellence and college. Our 8th graders responded with enthusiasm to Jesus’ idea and Compass was born.

My mother always used to tell me that the way to a man’s heart was through his stomach, and apparently that vaguely sexist bromide holds true today. Each Compass meeting revolves around copious amounts of pizza, and also includes a physical activity such as going for a hike or playing basketball, and a lot of clowning around. Yet in addition, the boys also discuss topics such as transitioning to high school, setting personal goals, and planning service projects. Together, they create a supportive community for each other where they can be themselves and know that they have the support of Jesus and their Compass buddies. 🍷



Compass boys prepare to play flag football.

Photo by Jesus Sanchez

Uncommon Good’s
PROGRAMS

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. It also provides real world learning opportunities for CCC students and parents in the areas of ecology, health, and running a small business.

2

Medicine for the Economically Disadvantaged (MED): This program helps idealistic doctors, dentists, pharmacists and optometrists to repay their sky high educational loans so that they can accept the lowest paying jobs in the medical profession, those serving the poor in community clinics throughout the southland. MED also has a health career pipeline component through which Uncommon Good students are introduced to careers in medicine and helped to prepare for and to apply to medical school.

3

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 all over the world who want to learn how to create buildings that keep people safe from natural disasters and do not harm the earth



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Uncommon Good Graduate Wins Fulbright Scholarship

In dark times it is well to remember that the most exquisite blossoms begin their lives buried in darkness. And as with flowers, some of the most beautiful human beings come from the bleakest circumstances. A case in point is Madelene Santizo, one of Uncommon Good’s recent graduates.

Madelene’s family had its origins in severe hardship. Her mother, Monica, grew up in a family of 12 children in Guadalajara, Mexico. Monica’s father was a drinker and she spent her impoverished childhood trying to protect her mother and herself from his violence. In her mid-twenties she broke away from her dysfunctional family and came to live with a sister in La Puente, a city east of Los Angeles.

Madelene’s father, Erick, was the child of an indigenous Guatemalan woman whose parents were killed and who was raised by abusive aunts. She fled the abuse to work as a maid for a rich married man who impregnated her. Once she was found to be pregnant with Erick, the rich man kicked her to the curb and did not unacknowledged Erick as his child. Erick grew up in the worst part of Guatemala, a country that as a whole was riven by horrific violence. When he was 18 he attempted to flee the chaos by making his way to the United States, swimming across a river with his clothes on his head and stowing away on boxcars. He wept the entire trip, desolate at the thought that he would never see his family again.



Photo by Santizo family

Madelene Santizo with her family at her graduation from Bates College.

Life brightened for Erick and Monica when they met in an adult English class, fell in love and got married. Yet life was still a struggle. When Madelene was born they were living in a rat and cockroach infested, one bedroom, one bathroom apartment, with six other people. Erick worked as a carpenter and Monica was employed on a factory assembly line.

By the time Madelene was ready to start school the family had moved to Pomona in the far eastern end of Los Angeles County. Her classes were taught in English and Madelene’s English was very limited. When the first grade teacher announced that the class would be required to memorize and recite a new poem every month, Madelene was terrified. She asked her parents for help, but unbeknownst to her, they were giving her wrong information about how to pronounce the words. She recalls:

“Every night, I practiced in the middle of our tiny living room without knowing I was incorrectly rehearsing my poem. ‘Jak-o-Lanturn, Jak-o-Lanturn, all agloh...’ My parents recognized my frustration (and perhaps my constant repetition provoked them, too) so they asked the teacher to record a cassette of the class reciting every poem. I replayed those cassettes over and over again till the tapes unraveled. And slowly my accent began to fade away.”

But a year later, when the family took a trip to visit Monica’s relatives in Mexico, Madelene made another discovery. When she greeted her Mexican



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Madelene helps out with Uncommon Good’s CAUSA farm enterprise.

cousins, they burst out laughing and said, “You have an accent!” meaning that she spoke Spanish like an English speaker. She remembers:

“I was so embarrassed that I practiced every day in the mirror trying to perfect the motion of my rolling tongue. I would roll my r’s as fast as I could to try to convince my cousins that I was still the same me. But I was not.”

Naturally shy, Madelene struggled with what she calls her “intersectional identity” which left her feeling like an outsider wherever she went. Concerned about her timidity, her parents enrolled her with Uncommon Good when she was in the sixth grade. She blossomed here, under the friendship of her mentors, and all of the extra-curricular activities offered by our organization. A high point was the summer of 2008 when Madelene was part of an eco-science trip that Uncommon Good organized to Costa Rica. For part of the trip Madelene stayed with a host family of limited means. There was a lovely river running through the family’s backyard. She remembers thinking how amazing it was that the poor had access to such beauty. She and the other students then camped in the jungle, which seemed an oasis of peace compared to the dangerous neighborhood in which she lived at home. These experiences awakened in her an appreciation for nature and a desire to protect it.

When Uncommon Good was going through the process of attempting to build its first-of-its-kind-in-the-world green office, the Whole Earth Building, Madelene was one of the students who helped to promote the idea to public officials. It was the beginning of a political education for her.

“I went to City Hall and heard people speak and I was so surprised that they didn’t support our building because it made so much sense to me,” she recalls.

Eventually, of course, the green light was given for the building and Madelene and her family helped to construct it. She describes the experience, saying:

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Boy Philosopher

One of the most fun things we do here at Uncommon Good is to attend the launch party for the literary journals our 4th to 9th grade students publish at the end of each semester of their Weekly Writing Workshop. These creative writing workshop classes are taught by Pomona College students who give our kids permission to let their imaginations run wild and brush up their writing skills in the process.

At this year’s launch party I struck up a conversation with one of our young authors, an 8th grader named Andrew. What followed was so remarkable that I wanted to share it with you. I asked Andrew to tell me the story he had created, since I had yet to see the journals. Here is what he described to me:

The story is about a boy named UniOG who became trapped in the dream world. UniOG fell asleep and dreamed that a bull of bone and fire was charging at him. He tried to run but could not move. The raging bull struck him and he thought he was dying. But instead, he woke up on a beach. He did not recognize the place and soon realized that he was in another dream. He tried many times to wake himself but each time he could only awaken into another dream. In the final dream he was in a shadowy world. He saw his friends there, but they were walking around like mindless drones. He feared that he would be lost in an endless nightmare. At this point, he was approached by a large indistinct figure who told him that he had a choice. “You must choose between staying here with all of your friends or leaving them all forever and returning to the waking world alone,” the figure informed him. UniOG thought this over. Then he replied, “Ok. What I want to do is to give away my chance to escape this dream world to one of my friends,” thinking that he was sacrificing his freedom forever to save a friend. However, after saying this, UniOG awoke, at last, in the real world.

When Andrew finished telling me his story, I was stunned. Here is a boy, I realized, who at a very young age has already discovered the great secret of life – that love is the key to awakening from this world of suffering. What a joy it is to see these bright young light bearers in our midst, readying themselves to step out into the world to bring us their wisdom and compassion! 📖



Short story writer, Andrew, (bottom left) with some fellow Weekly Writing Workshop young authors.



2017 class of Uncommon Good’s Weekly Writing Workshop creative writers.

Super Woman Doctor *(con’t. from page 1)*

Mississippi. After college she was accepted to Morehouse School of Medicine in Georgia, but by that time she had had enough of the South. She also was accepted to medical schools in Arizona, Washington and Oregon. She ruled out Arizona as being too hot and Washington as being too far away. As a child she had read the stories of Paul Bunyan and his blue ox, Babe, which originated in Oregon, and had become intrigued by the state. So she decided to go there and to attend the Oregon Health Sciences University, one of the best medical schools in the country.

Just going to medical school is enough to keep most people fully challenged, but while in medical school Adaeze and her husband got married and she gave birth to two of their eight children!

After completing her medical residency at Keck School of Medicine at USC, Adaeze was advised by older residents to try out various kinds of practices and not to tie herself down right away with a long term commitment. So she worked for a while for a physician temporary agency and then in urgent care. But her real purpose for going to medical school had been to be in family practice, so she decided to contact the Community Clinic Association of Los Angeles County to see what jobs were available in the community clinic network. To her surprise, she found an opening in a clinic around the corner from her childhood home, applied for the job, and was hired at the South Bay Family Health Center in Inglewood. There she works full time, juggling her demanding job with her life with her husband and eight children, and all with a smile and an easy charm. Don’t ask me how she does it, but she does!

Living and working in the neighborhood of her youth, she runs into her patients in the community, and some of her patients are people with whom she grew up. She recounts how one new patient came to the clinic one day, recognized her from grammar school, started laughing and screaming, and pulled out her cell phone and started yelling into it to her husband, “Remember that Azy girl? Doctor!! She’s a doctor!!!!” This particular woman had been a bully in school, but Adaeze understands now that this was because she did not have a mother and was jealous of the girls who did. The two women are now friends. Adaeze teared up when she told me, “It is an honor when people have so much trust in me that they are willing to come to me as their doctor.”

I asked Adaeze to tell me about a story about one of her patients who was especially meaningful to her. She told me about Brandon, a Latino youth whom she met while working at a pop up clinic on a high school campus in Carson.

“Well, this isn’t a big boom pow story,” she told me. “But you know how sometimes you feel connected to someone and you don’t know why? That’s how it was with Brandon. He’s 19, an only child, loves himself, is very handsome and works at Starbucks. He had an inflammation of the chest wall triggered by a viral illness and so had to make regular visits to our clinic. I saw him so many times and we talked a lot. He started to open up and share. He asked for advice about relationships and his girlfriend. At one point I told him, ‘Brandon, you gonna be my little son!’ and he said, ‘Ok. You can be my mom!’ When I got transferred to a new clinic, Brandon made up an excuse so he could come and see me. He said he was coming in because he had a bump on his lip and couldn’t kiss! He brought me a Starbucks gift card that said, ‘for my mom.’ I said, ‘That’s my son!’ I told him about all his eight brothers and sisters and took my whole family to visit him at his Starbucks.”
Big. Boom. Pow. 📖



Dr. Adaeze Howard with her family.

The Future Doctor Stephanie



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Uncommon Good graduate and aspiring doctor, Stephanie Contreras.

Stephanie’s mom and dad were a couple of teens old beyond their years when they made their way alone to the United States. Her mother, Victoria, had been one of a family of 12 children living on a hardscrabble farm in Sinaloa, Mexico. As a small child she was put to work in the fields, but even with all of the children working, they often went hungry. At the age of 15 she came to this country to live with one of her older brothers, earning money by cleaning houses and hotels. Stephanie’s father, Santiago, was one of a family of seven children of a poor butcher and dairyman in a little town near Guadalajara. He came to the U.S. at age 16 and found work here in a small mechanic shop.

Even the direst poverty was no obstacle to love, however. Santiago and Victoria met and married even though they were so poor that they were living in a car. A couple of weeks before their daughter, Stephanie, was born, they had saved up enough money to move into a little apartment. Santiago, from the very beginning, was ecstatic about having a baby girl. When Stephanie was born he looked into her eyes and exclaimed, “This is the fulfillment of everything I’ve lived for!” Even though he and Victoria had no other furniture, he made it his first priority to build his baby a crib.

From the very beginning, Stephanie had a special bond with her father. Her parents had only been able to attend school up to the 6th grade, and both felt that an education was something to be treasured. Stephanie loved school and excelled at it, in contrast to her brothers who hated school, and so she was her father’s hope. He called her his “Little Parrot” because she was so curious and talkative. Even though he did not have the benefit of an education, he was interested in many subjects and he and Stephanie would have long talks about psychology, philosophy and the meaning of life. Santiago also was a talented inventor. When he would talk about what he wanted to invent, people laughed at him. But invariably he would create his invention and people stopped laughing when they saw that his creations really worked. Stephanie says that her dad was a big dreamer and that she gets a lot of her inspiration from him.

When Stephanie was eleven, her father tried to help a relative who was even poorer than they were. But when the relative got into drugs, Santiago told him to stop coming around the house. This made the man angry. One morning at 9am a group of five men burst into the family’s home, and held Stephanie and her mother and brothers hostage. The men ransacked the house looking for money and said they were waiting for Santiago. At 3pm they heard Santiago’s car pull up to the house. The men told their hostages that they would kill Santiago if they

called the police. They ran out of the house, grabbed Santiago, pulled him into the truck and drove away. Victoria called the police and told them her husband had been kidnapped. A week later his dead body was found in the San Bernardino mountains. The murderers were never found.

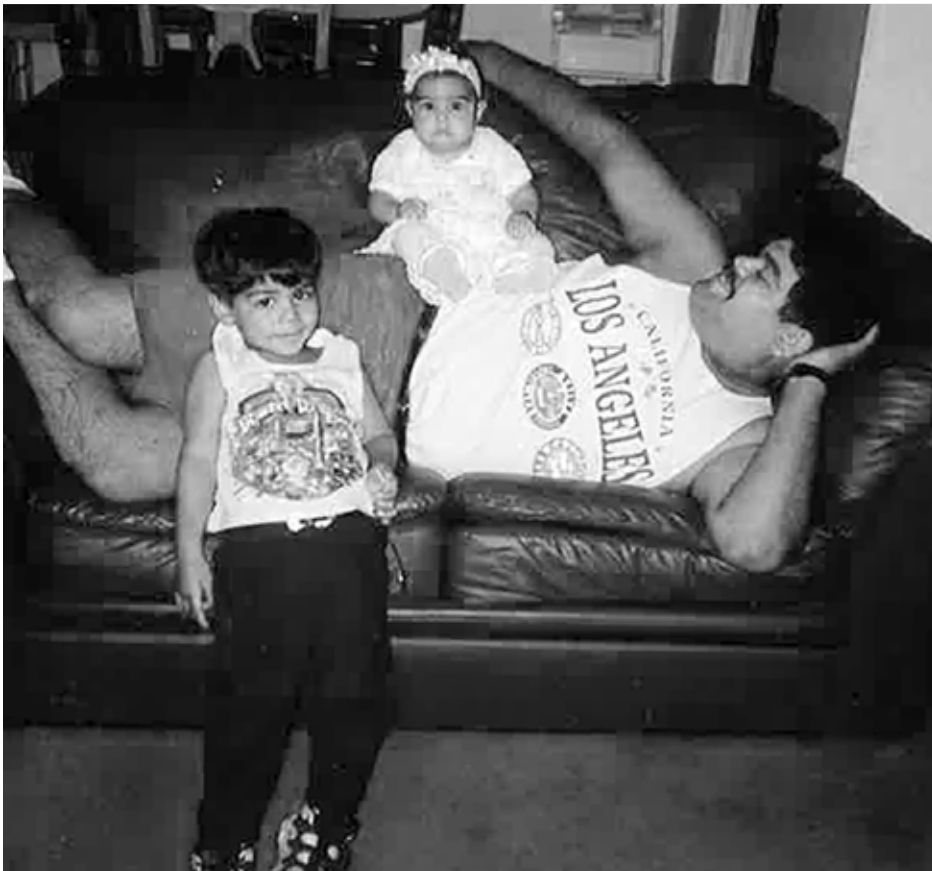
With no income, Victoria moved the family in with her sister. There were ten people living in a one bedroom, one bathroom apartment. She began to clean houses to make money but it was six months before she was able to afford to move the family into its own apartment.

“This experience of being understood, cared for, and healed, sparked Stephanie’s interest in medicine.”

The tragic murder ended Stephanie’s childhood. She suppressed her emotions, trying to be strong and perfect for her family. She tried to control her environment, including her own body. She got interested in nutrition and realized that there were problems with the traditional Mexican diet which was heavy on meat and lard. She changed her eating habits and started losing a lot of weight. Her family had never heard of anorexia and complimented her on her weight loss. Between her first and second year of high school Stephanie traveled alone to Mexico to visit her father’s grave. She was staying with relatives who were very poor and who ate poor people’s food, which lacked vegetables but made liberal use of lard. Stephanie was horrified but knew that she could not ask her relatives for vegetables which they could not afford. So she tried to live on fruit alone and lost even more weight. When she returned home she was so happy to have access to vegetables again that she tried living just on veggies. She lost more weight, was constantly cold, and started having other health problems.

Alarmed at her daughter’s condition, Victoria took Stephanie to the hospital. There a kind young resident, Dr. Casillas, took the time to do a thorough interview with Stephanie. At this point her heart rate was that of a baby, she had fuzz growing on her arms, had dangerously low blood sugar, and was in a state of high anxiety. Dr. Casillas diagnosed her as suffering from anorexia and explained the disease to her and to her mother. He then worked very hard to pull strings to get her hospitalized at Children’s Hospital where there were experts on anorexia. There a team of psychiatrists, therapists, nutritionists and doctors worked to return her to health. This experience of being understood, cared for, and healed, sparked Stephanie’s interest in medicine.

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Baby Stephanie with her dad and brother.

Photo by Contreras Family

The Future Doctor Stephanie *(con't. from page 5)*

When Stephanie entered Uncommon Good, at first she was hesitant because it seemed too good to be true. But then she plunged in, getting involved in theater, taking college and medical school tours, and becoming an officer and then the president of Teen Green, Uncommon Good's youth environmental program. She developed an interest in Uncommon Good's CAUSA farm program as she explored having a healthy relationship to food. She was hired to work over a summer break as the program's market manager and enjoyed learning how to interact with customers. When it came time to apply for college, she felt ready to try something beyond her comfort zone. Uncommon Good's Education Programs Director, Carlos Carrillo, suggested Boston College for her to consider. She applied, was accepted, and was given a generous financial aid package.

Now a pre-med student at Boston College, Stephanie is thriving. She attributes her success to coping skills that she developed through the hardships she has suffered, but also to her leadership experience at Uncommon Good as Teen Green president. As a future doctor she wants to integrate what she learned from Uncommon Good's farm program and teach others in low-income communities about healthy food and the relationship between nutrition and medicine so that others do not have to suffer as she did.

Stephanie describes her mother as her "best friend" and appreciates all that she sacrificed to help her make the journey to college. She also feels her father's presence, especially in the month of February which was the month in which he died. Feeling him with her gave her the courage to travel across the country to pursue her education and motivates her to keep studying hard so that she can become a doctor and inspire and help others with her story. "I have a passion for helping others," she told us, "and I want to use medicine to do that."



Young Stephanie with her parents.

Photo by Contreas Family



Stephanie working for Uncommon Good's urban farm project.

Photo by Nancy Mintie

Uncommon Good Graduate Wins Fulbright Scholarship *(con't. from page 3)*

“We were all working towards one cause, which was the rising of this building and I thought that was so beautiful because Uncommon Good was bringing people together for the betterment of the world.”

When it came time to apply to college, Uncommon Good’s Education Programs Director, Carlos Carrillo, suggested Madelene apply to Bates College, which he felt would be a good fit for her. When the school responded with a full scholarship offer of \$230,000 Madelene was so excited that she accepted on the spot. “Then I went and looked the school up on a map and realized it was in Maine and it snowed there!” she said.

Her freshman year was a tough one. She was homesick, freezing cold, and experiencing huge culture shock in a very white college located in one of the whitest states in the union. Because her features don’t obviously identify her as a Latina, the students assumed she was Caucasian and sometimes made racist remarks in her presence. Madelene responded by embracing her identity, becoming co-president of the campus group Latinas Unidas, and starting a tutoring program for the children of migrant farmworkers who traveled to the state to harvest its famous blueberries. She also took heart from the memory of her father’s courageous journey to the United States, feeling that as his

daughter she also could overcome all obstacles in her path.

Madelene excelled academically at Bates. She earned her Bachelor’s degree in Anthropology and received the Andrew Hamill prize for the outstanding thesis in that department. She also was selected to conduct undergraduate research at Columbia University. After graduation, she was awarded a Fulbright to teach low-income high school students in Spain.

Today Madelene is a beautiful, soulful, thoughtful young woman. Here is how she reflects upon her college years and her time with Uncommon Good:

“I did a lot of community service in college and I think that has to do a lot with what Uncommon Good rooted in me. I wanted to give back to others because so many people, like my mentors and the staff from Uncommon Good, have given to me. So I was really dedicated to helping anyone in any way I could.”

When I asked Madelene what she would like to do at the end of her Fulbright grant, she responded, “I’d like to work at a place like Uncommon Good.”



Madelene (center) and her mother, Monica, (second from left) serve as honorary ground breakers at Uncommon Good’s Whole Earth Building ground breaking ceremony.