

# UNCOMMON GOOD

SPRING 2022

## Uncommon Good Launches Groundbreaking Reading Initiative

When it comes to reading, Uncommon Good has done the math. The most recent research demonstrates that more than one in three U.S. children from kindergarten through third grade have little chance of reading at grade level by the end of the school year without major systemic interventions. In California, the situation is especially dire. It may come as a shock to proud residents of this state, but California has the lowest literacy rate in the nation, clocking in at just 76.9%. To put this into global perspective, developed nations almost always have a literacy rate of 96% or better, whilst the least developed nations have an average literacy rate of only 65%. (Care to guess which country has the highest literacy rate in the world? Bet you didn't guess that it's Uzbekistan at 99.9%!) It doesn't take much calculation to demonstrate that here in California, our literacy rate is much closer to that of the poorest nations in the world than it is to that of developed nations.

Another daunting reading statistic is that an estimated one in five persons has a reading disability. That means that people with reading disabilities make up about 20% of the population, which is close to the 23.1% of illiterate Californians. Could there be a connection?

*[continued on page 4]*

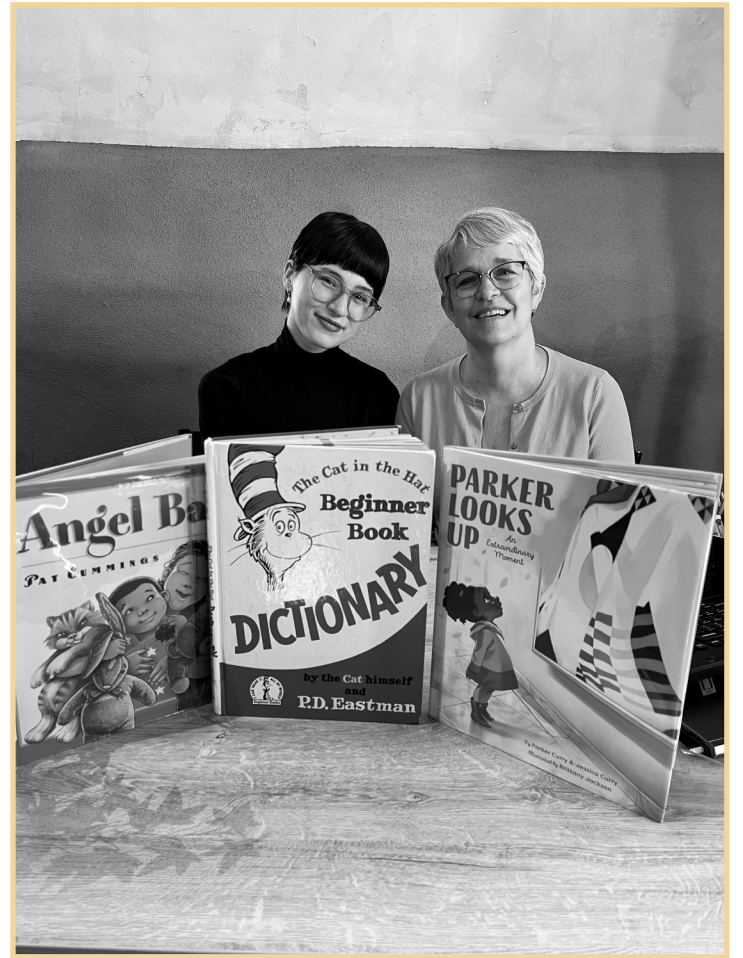


Photo by Nancy Mintie

Talia Betourney and Megan Rainey of Uncommon Good's new dyslexia program



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Viki Hollander and Jerry Fenning in their front yard which is being farmed by Uncommon Good

## Harvest of Justice

I just sit back and let my head spin around when I'm listening to husband and wife, Jerry Fenning and Viki Hollander. The conversation with the retired rehabilitation counselor and retired social worker races from farming, to medicine, to history, to Judaism, to the environment, to you-name-it! Seriously, these people need their own podcast!

Our connection with Jerry and Viki lies in the fact that we've been farming in the front yard of their home in Upland for the past eight years. Last year alone their yard produced nearly 1,000 lbs. of food for our low-income Uncommon Good families. Eight years ago, we had approached their temple in Pomona, Temple Beth Israel, with a request to use its grounds for farming. Jerry, who served on the temple's Board of Trustees, pitched the idea to the board and it graciously agreed. A most productive partnership was created, with the temple

*[continued on page 6]*

### INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Uncommon Good Student Wins Prestigious Scholarship .....	2
Pre-med Students Inspire Our Kids .....	3
What Do We Do? .....	4



# Uncommon Good Student Wins Prestigious Scholarships



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Uncommon Good student Luis Limon

Luis Limon Sr. came to the United States from Mexico at the age of fifteen and started supporting himself by working in landscaping. A few years later a pretty young visitor from Mexico's "breadbasket," Sinaloa, came for a visit and captured his heart. In the course of things, Luis Limon Jr. was born.

His parents brought little Luis to us at Uncommon Good when he was just in the fourth grade, hoping that we could show him the way to get an education and achieve success in this country. Over the ensuing nine years, the Limons have become part of our Uncommon Good family. Jessica has become one of our parent leaders and has taken the training to become one of our lay mental health counselors. The family's daughter has also joined our program, and Luis has emerged as one of our most outstanding students.

Luis gratefully took advantage of all of the opportunities we offered him. He was paired with a mentor from the local Claremont colleges who introduced him to college life and made it seem real and within his reach, though no one in his family had ever come near going to college. He wrote creative stories in our writing program, went to math camp and took computer coding classes. We helped him to apply for, and get accepted to PAYS, the exclusive college preparation program at Pomona College, one of the top liberal arts colleges in the nation.

Four years ago Luis also joined our sister organization, Gente Organizada, a community action organization for students and parents in his hometown of Pomona. There he became a student leader, working for the rights of immigrants, inspired by the journeys of his parents. He and other Gente students also lobbied the Pomona City Council for the establishment of a Youth Commission, to address the needs of young people in the city, in the face of withering ridicule by one of the Latinx City Council members. One of the great needs identified by Luis and his friends was mental health services. He realized

that many of the families in his community misunderstood mental health and didn't think that depression, anxiety and other forms of mental suffering were significant. This minimizing of mental health issues was reflected in the lack of services in this area for youth and their families. So Luis and the other youth organizers created a yearly conference called Healthy Young People Evolving that brought mental health education and resources into the community. When COVID arrived, they continued to hold their conferences virtually.

Luis' accomplishments have not gone unnoticed. Now a high school senior, he has been awarded a prestigious full scholarship from the Posse Foundation to attend Kalamazoo College in Michigan, ranked among the nation's top liberal arts schools. Over 15,000 highly qualified applicants applied for these scholarships this year and only 660 were awarded, a 4.4% acceptance rate. To put that figure into perspective, this year Harvard University had a 5% acceptance rate. Once in college, Luis plans to explore possible majors in pre-law, social work or education, all careers in which he could be of service to his community.

"I also want to encourage my little sister, Alison. We have a joke that I do everything first but then she does it better!"

I asked Luis what he'd like me to include in this article and his answer will give you an insight into the quality of his character:

"I want to say thank you to my parents. They've worked so hard and they don't speak English but they've been there for me every step of the way. I also want to encourage my little sister Alison. We have a joke that I do everything first but then she does it better! She joins every sports team, every club, everything at Uncommon Good and Gente. I'd like to set an example for her for going to college. I also want to thank Uncommon Good for being the gateway to all the resources that have helped me get to college."

Perhaps the most poignant honor that Luis has received thus far is being awarded a Martin Luther King, Jr. scholarship for his efforts to address needs in his community. Commenting on the award, Luis said that when he doubted his ability to make a difference and to succeed he would remind himself of this quote from Martin Luther King, Jr.:

"Everybody can be great ...because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."



# Pre-med Students Inspire Our Kids

Six years ago a human whirlwind swept into Uncommon Good in the form of Andrew Alix, a pre-med student at Keck Graduate Institute (KGI). Andrew's family had fled from the Philippines in the 1980s to escape the oppressive Marcos regime. Even though they themselves were struggling immigrants, they reached out to help others, and in the process taught their son Andrew the value of compassion in action, which led to his desire to become a doctor. While engaged in demanding graduate level pre-med classes at KGI, Andrew realized that he was surrounded by a very talented group of students who had no organized way to help those in need in the community. To remedy this, he created KGI Empowering Youth (the KEY Club) which was a partnership in which KGI students volunteered to mentor Uncommon Good youth and introduce them to careers in medicine.

Andrew's work continues on today under the dynamic leadership of another KGI Filipino American student, Bettina Pasamba, this year's KEY Club President. Her parents came to the U.S. to work as nurses and settled in Bakersfield, California. From them, she inherited an interest in the health professions and also compassionate action. On their return trips to the Philippines, her family would bring Balikbayan boxes (which means "returning to the country" in Tagalog) backed with gifts from the U.S. for less well-off relatives. Once in college, Bettina went on medical mission trips to Honduras and Nicaragua, which instilled in her a desire to become a dentist for the less fortunate, combining her interests in medicine and altruism. Now at KGI, she will earn her Masters in Applied Science degree this spring, and apply to dental school.

Bettina is being ably assisted this year by the KEY Club Vice-President, Samantha Patricio, who also will receive her Masters in Applied Science in the spring and will be applying to medical school. Samantha is the daughter of parents who immigrated from Mexico, and she grew up in California's San Fernando Valley. As a child, she noticed that her parents struggled in medical appointments because of language difficulties, but she had great faith in the medical system, especially hospitals.

"I assumed that when a person went to a hospital, they always got better," she told us. "Once when I was little, I almost got hit by a car in front of a hospital. I'll never forget the look of fear on my mom's face. But I wasn't concerned at all because I thought that because I was in front of a hospital, they would take care of me if anything happened and I wouldn't die. But then my grandparents got sick and some family members died of heart failure. They went to the hospital, but they didn't get better. When I realized this, I got



KGI Empowering Youth Club members at a health career fair for Uncommon Good students



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Samantha Patricio and Bettina Pasamba of Keck Graduate Institute

interested in the subject of health, started reading up on it, and volunteered at a hospital when I was in high school. I loved helping the patients feel better, especially the ones that looked like me and spoke Spanish. These experiences inspired me to become a doctor. I'd like to specialize in cardiology because of my family's history of heart disease."

After graduating from high school, Samantha earned a generous scholarship to the College of St. Benedict, a women's college in Minnesota. There, some rude shocks awaited her. One was the weather. One day in winter, wearing jeans, she went across the street from her campus to a coffee shop. It was so bitterly cold that in that short walk she managed to get frost bite on her shins! Another shock was cultural. Though St. Benedict's president was a woman of color, and 25% of the student body was BIPOC (Black, Indigenous or People of Color), a portion of the white students had never encountered a person of another ethnicity prior to college. The women students navigated these cultural encounters fairly well, but it was a different story at their partner school, Saint John's University, a men's college where the women went to take some of their classes. An ugly incident went national when some of the male students were filmed singing a racist song on a school bus trip. The administration of St. John's initially took a neutral position about the controversy and so Samantha and other concerned students hit the streets to demonstrate against racism at the school.

Now working together in the KEY Club, Bettina and Samantha have overseen an amazing array of programming, undeterred by COVID. They've recruited 80 of their fellow KGI students for the club. Their list of offerings for Uncommon Good kids and families include a diabetes clinic, a health career fair, a 5K run, health and nutrition classes for parents, a health fair, presentations for our high school students, and fun activities for mentors and mentees such as a holiday gingerbread house building event. Bettina has put a special focus on mental health.

"In my culture people don't talk about their feelings, and this is similar to the Latinx culture," she told us. "But once we got a few of the moms talking, the dam broke and everyone starting sharing."

Samantha also has been enjoying her work with our students and their parents.

"Uncommon Good is like the Upward Bound program that I benefited from when I was a kid," she said. "I feel like I know these families. The parents have been very kind to me and have really opened up about their lives, from the very first workshop when we talked about the importance of laughter and smiling."

Thank you, Samantha and Bettina, and all of our wonderful KEY Club volunteers, for putting smiles on the faces of our Uncommon Good kids and their families!

Photo by Bettina Pasamba



# Uncommon Good Launches Groundbreaking Reading Initiative

(cont. from page 1)

Could our low literacy rate be a result, at least in part, of the fact that we are not addressing the needs of students with reading disabilities?

A few fun facts about reading disabilities:

1. By far the most common reading disability is dyslexia, estimated to affect up to 15% of the population.
2. For the past 30 years, neuroscience has demonstrated that using a method called "structured literacy," dyslexic students could be taught to read.
3. It turns out that structured literacy is actually the best way to teach anyone to read.
4. If structured literacy were taught in our schools, 95% of kids could be reading proficiently.
5. Teacher education programs in colleges in this country do not teach future teachers to use structured literacy to teach reading, and as a result, most school districts do not teach reading through structured literacy.

Shockingly, the majority of young people in juvenile detention in this country have reading disabilities

Since schools are not using structured literacy, the one in five students who have a reading disability struggle. If their parents are educated, the parents figure out that their little Johnny is not learning to read, and embark on a search to find out why and to get their child the help he needs. However, if the student comes from a poor family in which the parents haven't had much education themselves, they may not realize that there is a problem. If they do understand that their child is faltering in school, they may conclude that it's because he's lazy or dumb. That child does not get the help he needs and so fails in school, perpetuates a life of poverty, and often ends up in the juvenile justice system. Shockingly, the majority of young people in juvenile detention in this country have reading disabilities.

Understanding these dynamics, and seeing them play out in the lives of our students, we have become convinced that this is a civil rights issue. If one out of every five low-income students are condemned to failure in school and in life because neither their schools nor their parents know how to help them, this is a grave

injustice. It also is a great loss to society. For dyslexics are often exceedingly bright and able to make great contributions to our world. The most famous dyslexic person was Albert Einstein, who was so weak in subjects involving speech and writing that his teachers opined that nothing would become of him. Other famous and famously bright dyslexic people include our first president, George Washington, entrepreneur Richard Branson, filmmaker Steven Spielberg, and comedian Robin Williams.

However, the stars finally aligned for Uncommon Good's dyslexic students when Megan Rainey joined our staff. Hired as our Development Director, she also is a dyslexia specialist. She came by her dyslexia knowledge the way it usually happens, by being the mother of two dyslexic children.

"I was a college writing instructor who wrote my Masters thesis on why reading and writing should be taught together," Megan told us. "But in all of my teacher preparation, I'd never read anything about the science of reading or dyslexia. Then, when my twins were in the third grade, I was told by their school that the window had closed for learning to read and write for them. The school personnel told me that they didn't know why my girls couldn't read. So I pulled them out of school, home schooled them, and started researching. By the time they were in seventh grade I had figured out that they were dyslexic. I went back and informed the school of what I'd learned, only to be told by them that dyslexia doesn't exist!"

Motivated by what she'd learned, Megan started the nonprofit Dyslexia Alliance in Sacramento, to help parents of dyslexic children, in addition to working full time and tutoring her own daughters up to five hours a night. In three years, the twins went from reading at a 3rd grade level to reading at the 11th grade level. Today one of those young women is an engineer and the other is getting her Masters degree in education.

Once Megan joined us here at Uncommon Good, we began to believe that at last we could offer some help to our dyslexic students. Their need was heart breaking. One of our dyslexic students, in a desperate effort to fit in, carried around books and pretended to read them, even though in actuality she could not read. Others were told they were not working hard enough, even though dyslexic kids work much harder, using five times the brain activity to read, than other students.

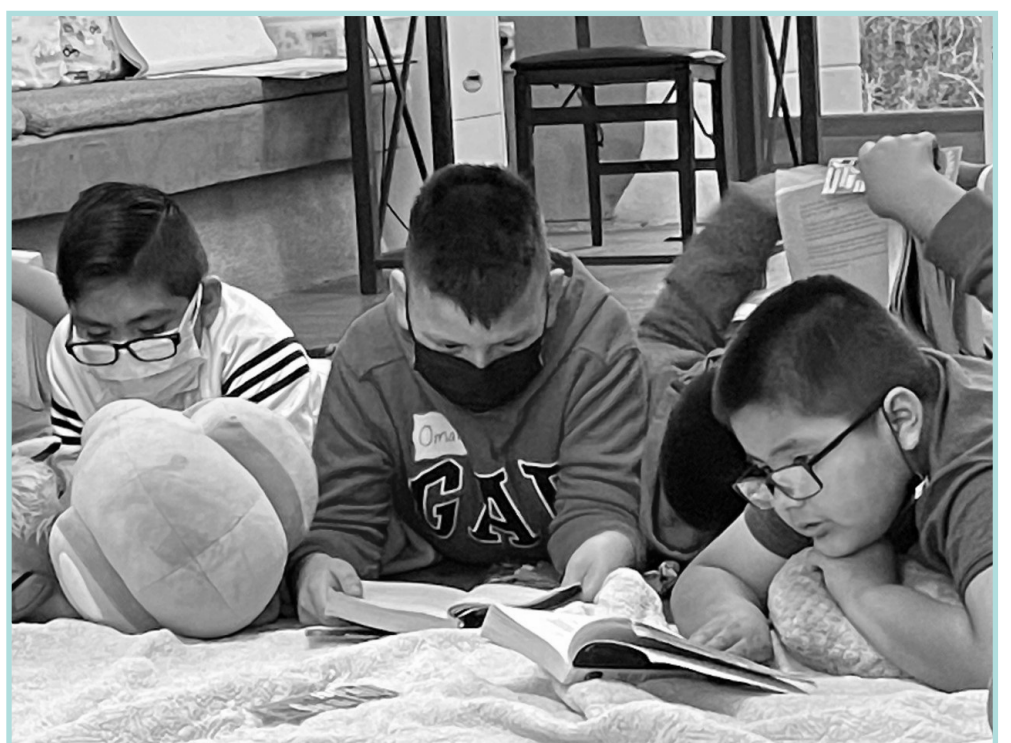


Photo by Megan Rainey

Students at Uncommon Good's Read Aloud Club that promotes reading



"You can see them grow pale with physical and mental exhaustion," Megan explains. "When you are tutoring them you have to take breaks for water and exercise to relax their brains."

One of our eighth grade dyslexic students stays up until 1am every morning to finish his homework. Others are humiliated when teachers require them to read aloud, or to exchange papers with other students for grading. Some parents punish their children for not "working hard enough." One mother took away all her daughter's outside activities and forbade her from seeing friends, forcing her to spend all of her time staring at homework that she could not read. After learning from us about dyslexia, one mother exclaimed, "I feel so bad now because I've been telling her for years that she's just stupid."

In an effort to get help for our dyslexic students, Megan began searching for funding to teach them via structured literacy, but was unsuccessful. Most foundations simply cannot grasp the tragedy that our schools, with their dedicated and well-meaning teachers, are failing our kids on such an epic scale. But we felt that this issue was too important not to move forward, so we reallocated some of Megan's valuable time away from fundraising and into dyslexia awareness work with our kids' school districts. It was an uphill climb. Never in the 17 years that we had been working with local school children in our education program, had one child been identified as dyslexic by their school. If one in five children is estimated to be dyslexic, this means that thousands of struggling readers are being overlooked each year. However, to its great credit, some of the decision makers within our largest local public school system eventually began to listen and became willing to learn. They've even provided some funding to

"There's no one correct way for brains to work, and in fact, seeing problems in different ways is a benefit to our society"

explore putting a system in place to identify and help their dyslexic students. Megan is working with the district to help them to create this system, and to educate its administration and teachers about dyslexia. She also is identifying Uncommon Good students with dyslexia and helping them and their parents understand their condition.

Funding provided by the school district has enabled Uncommon Good to hire a Dyslexia Assistant for Megan. This assistant, Talia

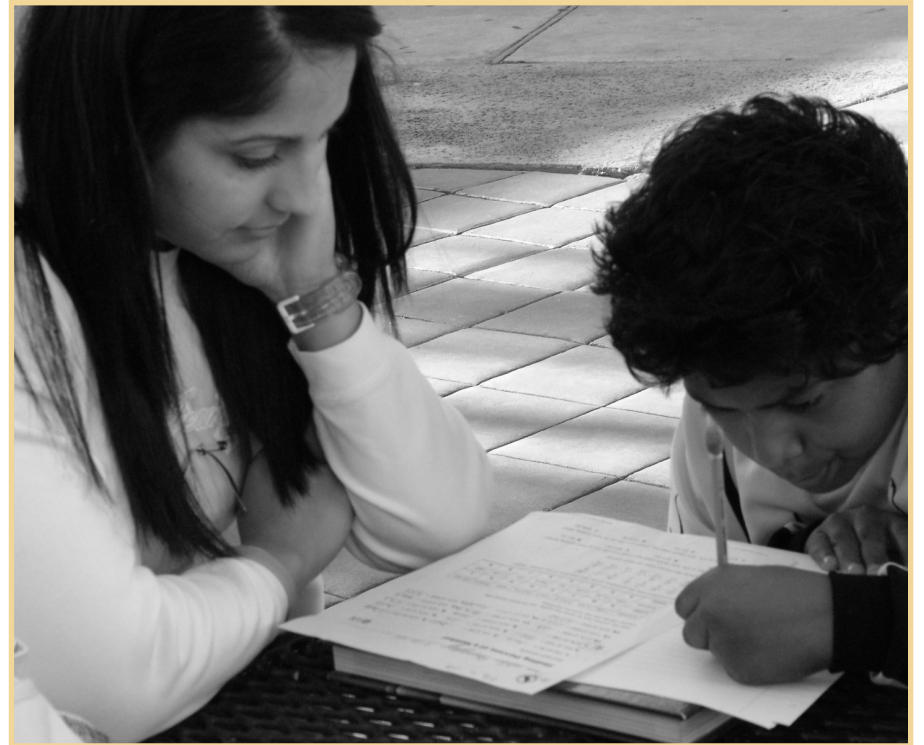


Photo by Nancy Mintie

Volunteer tutor works with an Uncommon Good student

Betourney, grew up in a small town at the foot of the Appalachian Mountains in West Virginia. The daughter of a disabled single mother, times were tough growing up. The household often did not have food, electricity or running water. A first generation college student, Talia was accepted at prestigious Brown University, but couldn't afford to go. So she attended West Virginia University, studying linguistics, since she has a passion for language. In addition to English, she speaks French, Korean and Arabic, an all the more impressive feat since those are very dissimilar languages. While in college she supported herself with odd jobs cleaning houses and babysitting until she got a job in the school's linguistics department. Her assignment was categorizing all of the different dialects in Appalachia. In 2016, she presented her research at the Linguistics Society of America in Washington, DC. After graduation and her move to California, Talia began tutoring students.

"When I was working with Chinese students I noticed that a few of them were showing signs of dyslexia. So it seemed that dyslexia was not just an English language thing. I got interested in the subject and educated myself about dyslexia," she told me.

Here at Uncommon Good, Talia is serving as the representative for families of dyslexic students at school district meetings to determine the students' needs. She also tutors our dyslexic students and supervises the other tutors we've hired. She regularly evaluates all of our dyslexic students' reading and writing skills to make sure they are progressing. She'll be running our audio books classes this summer and will be our lead person training school district educators how to screen, accommodate and tutor their dyslexic pupils.

"I want to continue to uplift the idea of neurodiversity. No matter how you learn or your brain approaches problems, it is valid, whether you are dyslexic, autistic, or have ADHD or another similar condition. There's no one correct way for brains to work, and in fact, seeing problems in different ways is a benefit to our society. Here at Uncommon Good, I want to help our dyslexic students fall in love with language, and open the doors that they feel have been closed to them - the doors to reading and writing."

Her analogy reminds me of the great magic doors in children's literature: the wardrobe door in the Chronicles of Narnia, the garden door in The Secret Garden, the door to the magical grandmother's attic in The Princess and the Goblin, the door at the end of the rabbit hole that's the entrance to Wonderland. There's a great truth those stories, dressed up in fairy tale jerkins and cloaks. Reading really does open the doors to worlds upon worlds, and I am so happy that our Uncommon Good kids are going to be able to travel there.



# Harvest of Justice

(cont. from page 1)

site producing nearly 4,000 lbs. of organic vegetables in just this past year. After shepherding our partnership through the temple, Jerry thought to himself:

"This would be great at my place, too! I wouldn't have to water, mow or weed anymore, just cut vegetables and eat!"

So he and Viki offered their yard to us and have since become the envy of the neighborhood for the lush vegetable garden in their front yard. Viki, who loves to cook, also has been delighted with the transformation.

"I've incorporated so many more greens that I hadn't even known about, like fava bean greens," she told us. "I've tried making my own palak paneer (an Indian dish) with beet greens. The variety here has made me a much more creative cook!"

"For centuries in Europe, Jews were not allowed to own land, even though they worked the land as agricultural laborers.... But even then, Jews started planting trees, to make sure the next generation would have fruit."

Jerry, who is a cancer survivor, also appreciates having a yard full of fresh produce, chock full of vitamins, minerals and antioxidants.

Jerry and Viki's generosity has rubbed off on their children and created another connection with Uncommon Good. One of their sons, Reece Fenning, MD, MPH, serves HIV/Hepatitis patients in community clinics in Santa Rosa. When he was working towards his Masters in Public Health degree at UCLA, he volunteered at Uncommon Good, helping us with doing the research that established the need for our first-of-its-kind-in-the-US mental health pilot program, and that helped us to obtain our first funding to launch that program.

One of the most interesting things I learned in the course of our conversation was how the couple's Jewish faith encourages social action and care of the earth. There is the holiday of Tu B'Shvat, the Jewish Arbor Day, in which the planting of trees is encouraged.

"For centuries in Europe, Jews were not allowed to own land, even



Photo by Johanna Larios

Uncommon Good interns help at the Temple Beth Israel farm plot

though they worked the land as agricultural laborers," Jerry told me. "But even then, Jews started planting trees, to make sure the next generation would have fruit."

Shavuot and Sukkot are Jewish holidays that, among other things, involve giving thanks for the gifts of God and the earth's harvest. Yet not all of a field is supposed to be harvested according to Jewish law in the Torah. Rather, farmers are supposed to leave the corners of their fields unharvested so that there would be something left for the poor.

A Jewish religious leader from antiquity, Hillel the Elder, once said, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I?" For me, Jerry and Viki's home garden demonstrates this lovely balance, a win-win approach to growing food that benefits both them and also those in need in their community.



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Uncommon Good farmer Jose Garcia at the farm plot at Temple





Photo by Carlos Carrillo

## What Do We Do?

Uncommon Good is a 22-year-old nonprofit organization that breaks the intergenerational cycle of poverty through these programs in education, health and urban farming:

1. **Connect to College:** Over 1,000 low-income students and their parents are served through this program. 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.
2. **Community Alliance for Urban Sustainable Agriculture (CAUSA):** This is an urban farm enterprise that produces organically grown fruits and vegetables for low-income Uncommon Good families. Also, the produce is made available to community members in return for a donation.
3. **Medicine for the Economically Disadvantaged (MED):** This program helps 159 (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. MED doctors serve 344,185 low-income patients annually. The 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.
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.



Photo by Nancy Mintie



Photo by Nancy Mintie



Photo by Robert Hagbom



**UNCOMMON GOOD BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

**Alison Anderson, JD**  
*UCLA Law School emerita*

**Victor De la Cruz, JD**  
*Manatt Phelps & Phillips*

**Janet Evans**  
*Person to Person, ret.*

**Michael Fay**  
*Claremont Financial Group, ret.*

**Jesus Gomez, MD**  
*Southern California Permanente Medical Group*

**Norma Grannis**  
*Isla del Cerrito Micro Credit Project*

**Benjamin Hunsaker, MBA**  
*Beach Point Capital Management, LP*

**Walter D. Johnson, MD, MBA, MPH, FACS, FAANS**  
*World Health Organization, United Nations, ret.*

**Margaret Levy, JD**  
*ADR Services*

**Emma Lord Lewis, JD**  
*Blackstone, ret.*

**Marsha Moutrie, JD**  
*Santa Monica City Attorney, ret.*

**Crystal Silva, JD**  
*Wells Fargo & Company*

**UNCOMMON GOOD ADVISORY BOARD**

**Raquel D. Arias, MD, MPH**  
*Keck School of Medicine at USC*

**Patrick Dowling, MD, MPH**  
*UCLA School of Medicine*

**Brian Glennon, JD**  
*Latham & Watkins*

**Diana Ramos, MD, MPH**  
*Los Angeles County Health Department*

**Daniel Woods, JD**  
*Musick, Peeler & Garrett, LLP*



**Uncommon Good**  
211 W. Foothill Boulevard  
Claremont, California 91711  
909 625-2248  
[www.uncommongood.org](http://www.uncommongood.org)

Credits: Design donated by Giovanni Bonilla. Articles by Nancy Mintie



NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION  
U.S. POSTAGE PAID  
CLAREMONT, CA  
PERMIT NO. 54

**UNCOMMON GOOD**

211 W. Foothill Blvd.  
Claremont, CA  
91711

**RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED**