

UNCOMMON GOOD

FALL 2022

Mental Health Program an Incredible Success

After its initial year of operation, Uncommon Good's first-of-its-kind-in-the-US mental health pilot program has received its third-party professional evaluation. After completing the report, the evaluator called with tremendous excitement. She told us that the program was producing the greatest success rates of any mental health intervention that she had evaluated in her decades of practice, and greater success than any other program that she had read about in the professional literature. Clients entered our program with moderate to severe levels of depression, anxiety, and stress, and at the end of their peer counseling series of sessions, all of the participants' levels of depression, anxiety and stress had returned to normal levels.

Based on this success, Uncommon Good plans to expand the program in 2023. Eventually, the program has the potential to revolutionize the delivery of mental health services to low-income populations across the United States.

Uncommon Good Celebrates Its First Female Medical Student



Photo by Family of Alexis Carmona

Alexis Carmona, Uncommon Good's first female graduate to attend medical school

Alexis Carmona's life is a living testament for the need to diversify the medical profession. Her story begins like that of most of our students. Her parents were born into impoverished families in Mexico City. Her mother, Jacqueline, was put to work as a janitor at the age of seven to help support her family of seven. Her father, Alex, lived with his extended family of ten in one room that was considerably smaller than Alexis' dorm apartment when she went to college. Another family of ten lived in the room next door to theirs. Not surprisingly, shortly after they were married, Jacqueline and Alexis left for the United States to escape the grinding poverty of their youth.

Alexis' misadventures with the healthcare system began when she was a fetus. Her mother was told, by mistake, that Alexis would be born with Down syndrome. By middle school, Alexis had developed Hashimoto's disease, an autoimmune illness affecting the thyroid gland. This went undiagnosed, but her mother was told, again mistakenly, that Alexis was developing epilepsy. Alexis then was misdiagnosed with hypothyroidism and given medication for that condition. Today, Jacqueline is ridden with guilt, blaming herself for not being a good enough medical advocate for her daughter. But Alexis attributes these errors to the language barrier, a lack of continuity of care due to her parents' poverty, and the inability of the medical staff to communicate, even with

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Modern Day Miracles

This past summer Uncommon Good staff and volunteers, under the leadership of Megan Rainey, performed the near miraculous feat of making enthusiastic English readers and writers out of our screen addicted, English as a second language, Uncommon Good kids.

Our Reading Camp took 4th through 7th graders, most of whom were in the habit of reading little but comic books, if anything at all, and had them read four novel length books by noted children's authors in a mere four weeks! I interviewed one of the participants, eleven-year-old Richard, who, prior to the reading camp confined his literary interests to comics, in particular a comic hero called Dog Man. When I asked who Dog Man was, Richard explained that there once was a hapless police officer and police dog who unfortunately suffered a tragic accident but fortunately encountered a team of enterprising surgeons who managed to

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Reading camp participant Alex, with his mother, Elizabeth (front row) and Uncommon Good camp staff, Jenna Peck and Megan Rainey (back row)

Photo by Nancy Mintie

Farm to Pivot Table

Dad spells his name Erick. His son spells his name Eric. They are members of the Santizo Family, one of the most beloved of Uncommon Good's families.

Erick was born in Guatemala into desperate circumstances. His grandmother was attempting to support her daughter and three children by washing clothes. As soon as he was old enough, Erick started to work to help support the women. But there were almost no jobs, and those that did exist involved long hours of back breaking toil for almost no money. The situation was unviable in every way. So, at the age of nineteen, Erick came to the United States, seeking work that would help him support his relatives back home. But life was hard in the new country, too. He didn't speak English, didn't understand the culture, didn't have any contacts, and had no relevant job experience. His first job was torture. He worked outside in the heat, with outside ovens, making brass and metal parts. He then got a job as a painter, but because he did not have a car, his long hours of work were extended by lengthy bus rides to and from the company.

After seven years of hard labor, a bright light entered Erick's life. He met his sweetheart, Monica, at an English class, and the two fell in love. When Monica's tourist visa expired and she had to return to Guadalajara, he followed her, and there he learned to be a carpenter. Eventually, Erick was able to return to the U.S. with Monica and his mother. He got a job at a small company making rustic furniture, and soon thereafter, the couple's two children, Madelene and Eric, were born.

Erick and Monica enrolled their kids in Uncommon Good's education program. Along the way the entire family helped us build



Uncommon Good farmer, Erick Santizo, with his son, Uncommon Good data analyst, Eric Santizo

Photo by Nancy Mintie

our Whole Earth Building office, and the children became leaders in our youth environmental leadership and community service group. Madelene received a full scholarship to Bates College and studied at Columbia as well, ultimately receiving a Fulbright Scholarship to teach in Spain. She's now the Partner Success Operations Manager for Mentor Collective.

Son Eric attended Sonoma State University and earned a degree in business. He works for the Anaheim Indoor Market Place, assisting

“I’m proud to say I am a farmer, and my friends are intrigued by my job. They tell me they’d like to have this kind of job.”

older Asian and Latin American vendors who remind him of his parents. He also is helping to create digital media for his cousin's Mexican restaurant. Last but not least, we've hired Eric to be a data analyst for us here at Uncommon Good, compiling and interpreting the data that we need for our grant proposals. It's a special joy and satisfaction to have one of our very own graduates as a colleague.

But hiring one Eric was not good enough for us. When we first started our farm program about a dozen years ago, dad Erick has expressed interest in it. Though we were unable to hire him at that time, we recently had an opening for a farmer. When we asked Erick if he was still interested, he said “yes,” to our delight. In addition to growing our food, he's recently branched out and has started conducting tours of our farm plots for school children, with great success.

“I'm very happy because I like this work,” he told us. “I'm proud to say I am a farmer, and my friends are intrigued by my job. They tell me they'd like to have this kind of job. It's very beautiful because I can see the growth of the plants and I'm producing food not just for my own



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Madelene Santizo displaying some of Uncommon Good's prized tomatoes



Monica and Madelene Santizo (3rd and 4th from left) at the groundbreaking for Uncommon Good's Whole Earth Building



Eric Santizo (4th from left) with other boys who participated in building the Whole Earth Building

Farm *(con't. from page 2)*

family but to feed other families, too.”

When I asked the two men if there was anything else they'd like to add to this story, son Eric said:

“I'm really proud of my dad and his willingness to learn something new and take on a new job at this stage of his life.”

Dad Erick said:

“I'm very proud of my kids and know that they understand my story and what I've overcome for them. And I'm very proud of my wife, Monica. She changed my life. Without her I wouldn't be here. Her love has made me feel like a great man.”

I couldn't agree more, except to add that Monica has been blessed with not just one great man, but two.

First Uncommon Good Graduate to Attend Claremont McKenna College

Luis Beltran's mother was one of thirteen children born to impoverished parents in Mexico. She grew up helping her mother sell odds and ends on the sidewalk. When she was a teenager, she travelled to the United States to get work so that she could send money home to her family. She labored in a perfume factory, ran a daycare business from her living quarters, and now is a caregiver for the elderly. Through it all, she has never stopped sending help back to her family in Mexico.

Luis' father also has had a life of great challenges. Born into a poor family in Mexico, he was put to work as a child on a subsistence farm. His mother died when he was eight, leaving his father to raise their seven children alone. At nineteen, he came to this country to make money to send to his dad. He worked as a line cook at the BC Cafe in Claremont, and for the last dozen years in an upholstery factory in North Hollywood, making the long commute from his home in Pomona daily to support his family.

Though they had been denied the chance to receive a full education, both parents wanted that opportunity for Luis and his brother and sister. When they learned about Uncommon Good's education program, they enrolled their children. The first to complete our program was their daughter, Belen, who now has her degree in public health from UC Merced. The second to join was Luis. He remembers getting a mentor, Rodrigo, a first-generation student at the Claremont Colleges. Hanging out with Rodrigo was the first time that Luis had even been on a college campus. As a 6th grade boy, it was natural that the thing that impressed him most was the “all you can eat” policy in the dining halls! It wasn't until he got into high school, and we started working with him on his college applications that he realized how prestigious the Claremont Colleges were. He then set his sights on Claremont McKenna College and ultimately was accepted there, becoming the first Uncommon Good graduate to attend that school.

Now a sophomore, he is working towards a dual degree in economics and computer science and is taking a heavy load of classes both at Claremont McKenna College and Harvey Mudd College, one of the other Claremont Colleges that is also one of the premier engineering schools in the country. Though our conversation occurred in just the third week of the fall term, Luis told me that he already had 34 assignments! But the biggest surprise was when I asked him about his long-term goals. Here's what he said:

“My main goal is to give back to my parents and make them proud. I want them to be able to retire. They raised me to be the best I can be. I've researched the jobs that make the most money out of college and the top one is connotative trader. Those are the people who use computer science to predict trends in the stock market. The biggest connotative trader is a company called Jane Street that was started by a Claremont McKenna alum. Graduates right out of college can start there at \$400,000 a year.”

It seems that Mr. and Mrs. Beltran are going to be in very good hands indeed.



Luis Beltran, Uncommon Good's first graduate to attend Claremont McKenna College

Uncommon Good Celebrates Its First Female Medical Student

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interpreters, in a way that her uneducated parents could understand.

When the Great Recession arrived, Alex's construction work dried up and the family lost their home. However, the silver lining in all of this was finding Uncommon Good. Alexis and her brother were signed up for our program, and Alexis was promptly matched with a mentor, Ann Marie, a neurobiology major at the local Pomona College. A new world started to open up for her.

"Ann Marie introduced me to cultural experiences, like taking me to hear Tibetan throat singers," Alexis recalls. "Even the auditorium where the concert was, was like a museum to me. I also remember just walking through her dorm building with her and hearing different kinds of music coming out of each different room, music that I'd never heard before. I started to develop my love for world music, and appreciation for other cultures, that I have today. I remember inviting her home for dinner and my family being so impressed with her. She was the first person who had ever come over who had gone to college and we really admired how poised and nice and professional she was. She inspired me to start to dream about college for myself."

After Ann Marie graduated, Alexis was matched with a new mentor, Ashley, who now is starting her residency in emergency medicine. Her encouragement helped Alexis to start to believe that she, too, could pursue medicine and be the kind of doctor for her community that she had needed so desperately. Alexis and Ann Marie remain friends today, with Ann Marie continuing to guide her on her journey to medical school.

With Uncommon Good's guidance, Alexis was accepted to the University of California at Irvine. Even though she was working her way through school, Alexis made the time to give back to Uncommon Good. She led tours of her campus for our high school students, encouraging them to see that like her, they, too, could be successful at a large, competitive university.

"I like seeing the gleam in your students' eyes when I tell them that college is hard but also fun, and that you learn a lot of your peers and about yourself. I remember being a student on those college tours and now it's fun to be on the other side of that experience!"

Alexis also translated for our annual diabetes clinics, helping Uncommon Good families to understand and manage their diabetes. In return, Uncommon Good arranged for an internship for her at White



Alexis Carmona being congratulated by her parents at her graduation from the University of California at Irvine

Photo by Family of Alexis Carmona

Memorial Hospital.

"I loved shadowing the family medicine doctors at White Memorial. I saw everything from birth to death and was never bored! After that experience, I realized what kind of impact I could have as a doctor."

After graduation, Alexis signed up for another year of preparation in the graduate pre-med program at the University of California at Riverside. She worked her way through the program by substitute teaching. Her first day of teaching was an online assignment during the pandemic. She arrived at the teacher's classroom only to find that no instructions had been left for her about how to turn on the system, get into the Zoom class. There also was no lesson plan to follow. She managed to figure out how to get into the Zoom class, and then made up a lesson plan on the spot based on the things that they teacher had posted on bulletin boards around the classroom.

However, in the midst of her graduate program, in December of 2020, she was diagnosed with throat cancer. She received her diagnosis the day before her first final of her graduate program. At first she thought she would have to postpone her exams until she had dealt with the shock of her diagnosis. But then she decided to go ahead with her exams and ended up getting A's on all of them. In addition to work and school, she also found the time and energy to teach Sunday School at her church.

She was scheduled for cancer surgery in January but it had to be postponed because, though vaccinated, she contracted COVID. The surgery was rescheduled for early March but had to be postponed again because she got COVID a second time. Finally, the surgery was performed at the end of March. She tried to keep up with her studies, through the pain and fatigue of the cancer and the surgery, but ultimately had to take a week off from her studies. But then she rallied, caught up and graduated from the program.

She took the MCAT in August of 2021 and received the happy news of her acceptance to the medical school at UC Riverside this summer. As Uncommon Good's first female graduate to go to medical school, she is looking forward to inspiring the kids in our health career pipeline. She wants to share with them the motto that has helped her to succeed: "Ponte las pilas" which means "Strap on your batteries, charge yourself up, and go!"



Alexis Carmona at her White Coat Ceremony at the University of California at Riverside School of Medicine

Photo by Family of Alexis Carmona

Modern Day Miracles

(con't. from page 1)

salvage them both by sewing the dog's head onto the man's body. Ergo, Dog Man.

"I have the whole series!" Richard exclaimed happily.

I certainly could see why Richard was so captivated by this startling tale, but I also was heartened to learn that his reading horizons had been broadened considerably by our summer camp. Richard's mother, Luz, a former factory worker and immigrant, said it was "fantastic and amazing" to see her son develop a love for reading.

"Since that first week of the camp, he's spent all his time reading, and talking to me about the books," she told us. "And when I went to drop him off for the camp in the morning, I saw all the kids smiling, and when I went to pick him up, the kids were talking excitedly to their parents!"

Another camp participant, eleven-year-old Alex, is the delightful spitting image of the Boy Scout in the animated film "Up" who was on a cheerful earnest mission to earn his merit badge by helping the elderly, whether they needed it or not.

Eat your hearts out, parents of phone-addicted uncommunicative middle-schoolers everywhere!

Another camp participant, eleven-year-old Alex, is the delightful spitting image of the Boy Scout in the animated film "Up" who was on a cheerful earnest mission to earn his merit badge by helping the elderly whether they needed it or not. Prior to our camp, Alex's taste in reading was confined to comics, especially the Captain Underpants series. Needless to say, but I will anyway, we were happy to see Alex take on a more elevated reading challenge and do so with such enthusiasm. His immigrant mother,

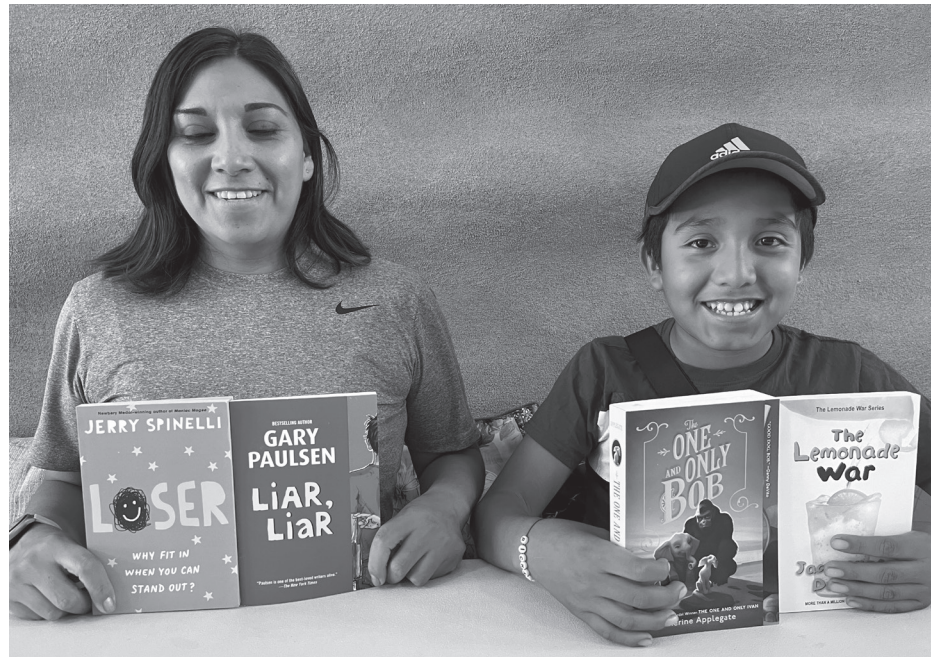


Photo by Nancy Mintie

Reading camp participant Richard with his mother, Luz

a housekeeper with aspirations of opening her own flower shop, said that in the morning Alex would pester her, saying, "Come on, it's time to go to reading camp!" and would describe the day's planned activities. "I really saw him come to life," she told us. Alex summed up his reaction to the camp by telling us, "It was fun! I want to take it again!"

Megan and Bobbie Jo Holguin, who assisted with the camp, both commented that one of their favorite take-aways was the discussions that developed among the kids inspired by the books. Topics the students treated with great empathy included neuro-diverse people and victims of gun violence.

The writing camp centered around writing about works of art. The students were presented with a range of artworks, from graffiti artists to Van Gogh, and asked to write about their reactions to the paintings. Author and camp volunteer Eileen Flaxman said that she was stunned when a thirteen-year-old boy wrote of his chosen painting, "It simply filled me with joy to look at this."

Upon starting the writing camp, some of the participants hardly could write a sentence. And Megan, who led the classes, did not go easy on the students. I sat in on one of her sessions and felt that the material easily could have been part of the community college English classes she used to teach. I wondered how the kids would react to being so challenged. But by the end of the camp, they each had a new set of writing skills, a portfolio of their compositions, and uniformly reported that they were proud of themselves for having become confident writers. I'm fairly sure that Megan will be one of those teachers that the kids will never forget!

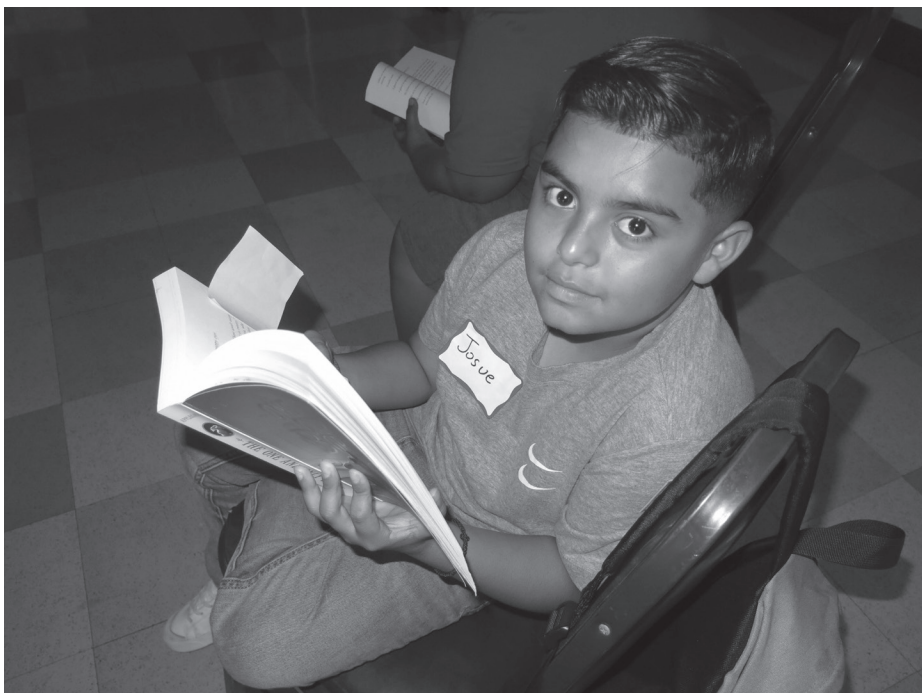


Photo by Carlos Carrillo

Reading camp participant

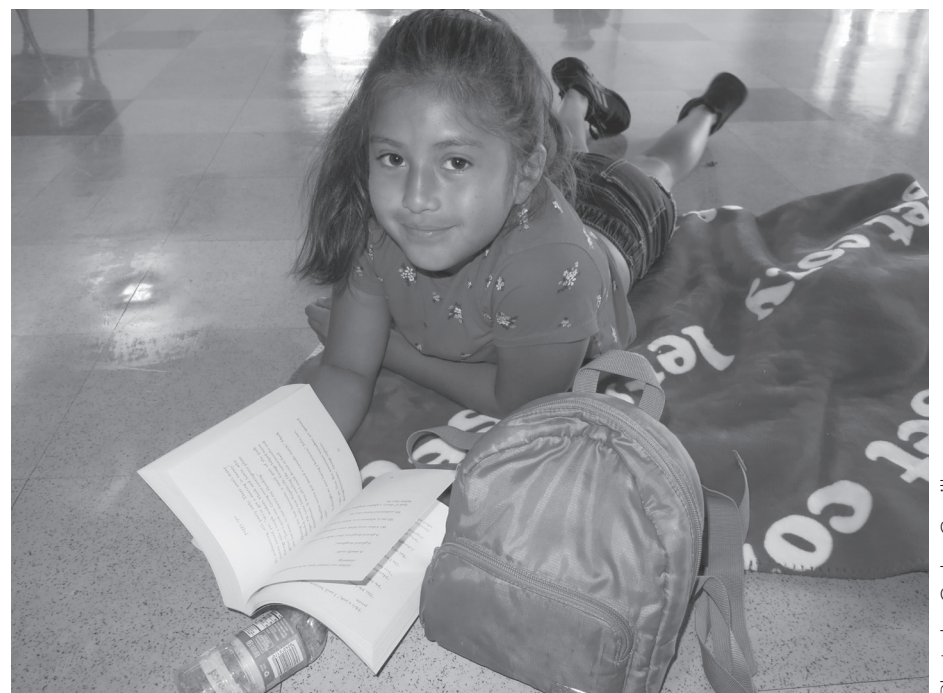


Photo by Carlos Carrillo

Reading camp participant

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.



University of California, Merced, college tour

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, Ukrainian and Afghan refugees, and day laborers. Also, the produce is made available to community members in return for a donation.



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Uncommon Good Farm Program Director, Johanna Larios



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Uncommon Good student displays our peaches

What Do We Do? *(cont. from p. 6)*

3. **Medicine for the Economically Disadvantaged (MED):** This program helps 160 (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 well over 300,000 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.



Photo by Family of Ahn Le

Uncommon Good MED physician Ahn Le, M.D. with a patient

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 populated continent 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

Students assisting with the building of the Whole Earth Building



Photo by Carlos Carrillo

Uncommon Good's Whole Earth Building surrounded by native plants

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