

UNCOMMON GOOD

FALL 2023

Uncommon Good Students Attend Stanford and Princeton

Mario Portillo's father's family fled El Salvador to escape the bloody civil war that raged there in the 1980s. His mother's family migrated from Mexico but returned there so often that her education was continually disrupted. When Mario was a little boy, his dad brought home discarded personal computers from his workplace. Mario demonstrated quite an aptitude for technology and would take them apart and build his own custom computers from the parts. When his parents enrolled him in Uncommon Good's education program, we nurtured his interest in science and technology. We found him a mentor who was a student at Keck Graduate Institute who taught him how to build a boat using a 3D printer. He took our coding classes, and we connected him with a college prep program at Pomona College that gave him an early taste of college life.

In high school Mario became fast friends with another Uncommon Good student, Bryan Martinez, whose parents also were immigrants, hailing from the central highlands of Mexico. Like Mario, Bryan has a genius for computer technology, and ever since he was

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Photo by Nancy Mintie

Mario Portillo and Bryan Martinez, Uncommon Good graduates accepted to the universities of Stanford and Princeton

From Cali to California

As a happy child, playing with his beloved dogs, and dreaming of becoming a veterinarian in his hometown of Santiago de Cali, Colombia, little did Julian Restrepo know that in a few short years he would be fleeing for his life.

The little boy's parents were accountants, which meant that the family could live comfortably and afford to send their children to school in a country that had scant public education beyond second grade. However, an ever-present danger lurked around the corners of the family's seemingly placid life. The government had recently cracked down on the Colombia based international drug cartel which had been led by the infamous Pablo Escobar. Notably, at the time of his death in a shootout with government agents, Escobar was the fourth richest man in the world, to the tune of \$30 billion. Unfortunately, his death created a vacuum into which poured numerous smaller

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Photo by Nancy Mintie

Dr. Julian Restrepo, a physician at Clinica Monsenor Oscar A. Romero, standing beneath a portrait of the clinic's namesake who was martyred for his advocacy for the poor of El Salvador

Uncommon Good Students Attend Stanford and Princeton *(cont. from page 1)*

little, had been taking old computers apart and rebuilding custom ones from the parts. Uncommon Good poured fuel on the fire of his interests, matching him with a mentor who was a software engineer at Amazon, and introducing him to classes in Scratch and Python at Harvey Mudd College. Bryan helpfully explained what Scratch and Python are by telling me:

“Scratch is a free programming language where the coding is already done for you. Python is a programming language used by pros for things like Instagram. Basically, Scratch is like using big Lego blocks and Python is like using smaller more complex Lego blocks.”

While high school students, Mario and Bryan decided that they wanted to enter a highly competitive global robotics competition called FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition in Science and Technology). They put together a team of public-school kids from their hometown of Pomona, a low-income, largely immigrant Latinx city on the eastern edge of Los Angeles County. They called themselves the Blueprints of Pomona.

“While high school students, Mario and Bryan decided that they wanted to enter a highly competitive global robotics competition called FIRST...”

The competition entailed building a robot that featured electrical circuits and that could compete in a game, somewhat akin to robot basketball, that had been created for the event. Entrants included teams from all the most prestigious, well-financed private schools in the region.

Mario and Bryan’s team created an adorable yellow and black robot that they christened “Bumblebee.” The kids were ecstatic when Bumblebee won first place in the competition for the Southern California area. They were even more elated when Bumblebee went on to win first place out of 48 teams in the Regional FIRST Competition. This gained them an invitation to the World FIRST Competition, along with the best 128 teams on the planet from 16 different countries, such as Norway,



Mario Portillo with his parents and Uncommon Good’s Carlos Carrillo at our graduation celebration

Photo by Nancy Mintie

Canada, China, Mexico, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia.

The World FIRST Competition was held in Houston in the spring of this year. Uncommon Good paid for Mario and Bryan’s expenses so they could participate. The boys were thrilled to meet brilliant students from all over the globe and thoroughly enjoyed the experience. Bumblebee acquitted himself honorably, winning 28th place out of the 128 teams.

More exciting honors awaited Mario and Bryan when they returned home. Mario was chosen as the Salutatorian of his high school. (Another Uncommon Good student was the Valedictorian.) He was accepted at Stanford University, Brown University and Harvey Mudd College. He chose to attend Stanford University on a scholarship from Edison that includes paid summer internships with Edison computer scientists. Between the scholarship and his financial aid, all his costs will be covered. While pursuing his college studies, he plans to continue to learn to speak the Chinese language. (He already is fluent in Spanish.) He’s also interested in studying abroad in Spain or Latin America.

Bryan was accepted to Princeton University and was given a coveted full ride Questbridge Scholarship, a program which receives 18,000 highly qualified applicants each year for just a small number of awards. He is excited to experience living in a different part of the country. He has declared his undergraduate focus in mechanical and aerospace engineering but also is considering majoring in computer science. He’d love to study abroad in China.

We hope that you share our excitement and joy as we send these two brilliant young men off to college and rewarding, fulfilling lives. ■



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Uncommon Good lay mental health workers. Back row: Vanessa T. Rivera, Alma Marbeli Flores, Cecilia Martinez. Front row: Maria Elena Limon Guitierrez, Elizabeth Preciado, Tere Delgado Sandoval, Mireya Escobar Guitierrez



Photo by Nancy Mintie



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Local Heroines Receive National Notice

This September the publication Scientific American flew a professional photographer, Peter Afriyie, out from New York to do a photo shoot with the lay women community mental health workers of Uncommon Good’s pilot mental health program. The photographs will illustrate an upcoming article about the program in the magazine. Currently, 18 women who are mothers of children in Uncommon Good’s education program have been trained and are employed as mental health workers through this program. All of their clients have reported the satisfactory resolution of their symptoms of anxiety, depression and stress by the end of their treatment. ■

Uncommon Good Celebrates Its New Arrival

Just as the wheels were about to fall off our farm program’s 2004 Ford Ranger pickup truck, the Ahmanson Foundation rode to the rescue this year with a grant that enabled us to purchase a new Toyota Tacoma pickup.

We are growing and gleaning 22.5 tons of organic fruits and vegetables annually. We have 9 farm plots and 230 community partners who allow us to harvest their excess fruit. We’re feeding 1,608 people in need each month, including our Uncommon Good students and their families, refugee families and day laborers. This represents a 25% increase over last year. In addition, community members have access to our farm fresh offerings in return for a donation to help pay for the costs of running the program.



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Uncommon Good’s farm team, Johanna Teissere, Nicholas Anchondo, Nicolas Reza and Erick Santizo with the farm program’s new truck

Thank you, Ahmanson Foundation and community partners, for keeping our farm program rolling along! ■

Letting the Little Children Come to Him

The first thing you notice about Dr. Patrick Atis is that he has a dazzling smile that lights up the whole room, which is a very good asset for a pediatrician! One immediately feels at ease and cheered in his presence, as if he were born for the role of a children's doctor. And perhaps he was.

His parents both immigrated from Haiti when they were but teenagers and met each other at a local church. They came seeking a superior education to what they could have obtained in their home country, where public school only goes through the primary grades. His dad had wanted to become a doctor, but a school counselor told him that since he had come to the United States not speaking English, that he would never make it in medical school, and it would best for him to pursue math or engineering.

It turned out that he became fluent in English fairly quickly, but by then had started down the path of engineering and had met and married his wife and started a family. So he sacrificed his dream of pursuing medicine so that he could support his wife and children.

“New York is the U.S. for immigrant Haitians,” Patrick explained. “The big shiny skyscrapers, Ellis Island, all the jobs – it all represents the American Dream to them. But because New York is so expensive, most of the Haitians move to nearby New Jersey, which is more affordable. That’s where I was born and grew up.

“I knew I wanted to be a doctor early on. When I was a little boy, I was very curious about the body. I’d examine my own body – the tendons in my hand, the connections to all the muscles in the body. I wanted to know what was going on under my skin. I was interested in the patterns of the veins. I liked to look at anatomical pictures. My dad noticed this and bought me a miniature skeleton.

“I thought my pediatrician was so brilliant and she gave me attention in a unique way. I was touched by how she took care of me. I wanted to do that for other people. When I got to high school, one of my uncles became a doctor and he and my dad and other uncles started a nonprofit medical mission organization for needy kids in Haiti. I would go with them every year while I was in high school and college and help out.”

Noting the extreme rarity of black male pediatricians, I asked Patrick why he was drawn to that specialty. He replied:

“I’ve always been interested in helping kids. I used to help feed and babysit my younger siblings and cousins. I was a camp counselor and taught Sunday School. Being with kids refreshes me. I have a younger cousin who’s autistic. He’s minimally verbal, just repeating what he hears other people say, and is very sensitive to textures, which made him a really picky eater. He was very attached to me when he was growing up. His face would just light up when he saw me. On the days when he wouldn’t see me, he’d ask his mom to let him look at my Facebook page on her phone and would scroll through the photos of me. And in fact, I’m still mentoring now. My mentee is a 17-year-old formerly incarcerated foster youth. His mom is an immigrant from Liberia. We talk about the challenges of having immigrant parents and of navigating different cultures. Recently our group had a check-in meeting

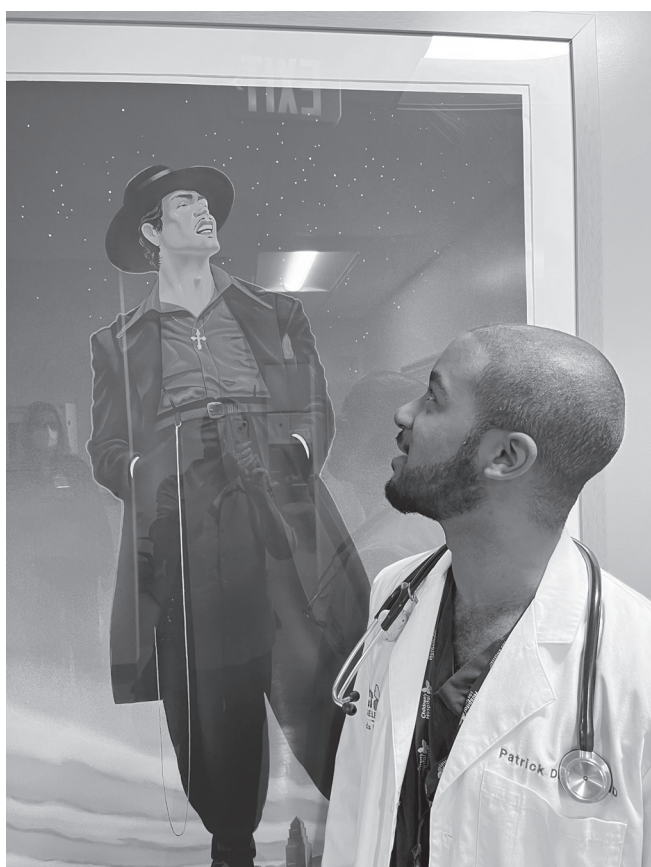
over Zoom. When I came on, my mentee broke out into a big smile and one of the counsellors said, “Why, Jordan, that’s the first time you’ve smiled all day!”

We also talked about the advantages of being a Black physician. Patrick had this to say:

“My Latinx and Black parents really like that I am their children’s pediatrician so that they’ll have a role model to look up to. Last month a Black grandmother brought in her grandson for a physical. ‘See?’ she said. ‘You can be a doctor just like him. See what you can accomplish!’ I notice how a family’s body language changes when a Black family sees a Black pediatrician come through the door. Their shoulders relax and they smile.”



Patrick Atis, MD, overshadowed by a painting of Cesar Chavez and Martin Luther King, Jr.



Dr. Atis admires a painting at this clinic of an iconic Zoot Suiter



Dr. Atis, pediatrician at an AltaMed clinic in East Los Angeles

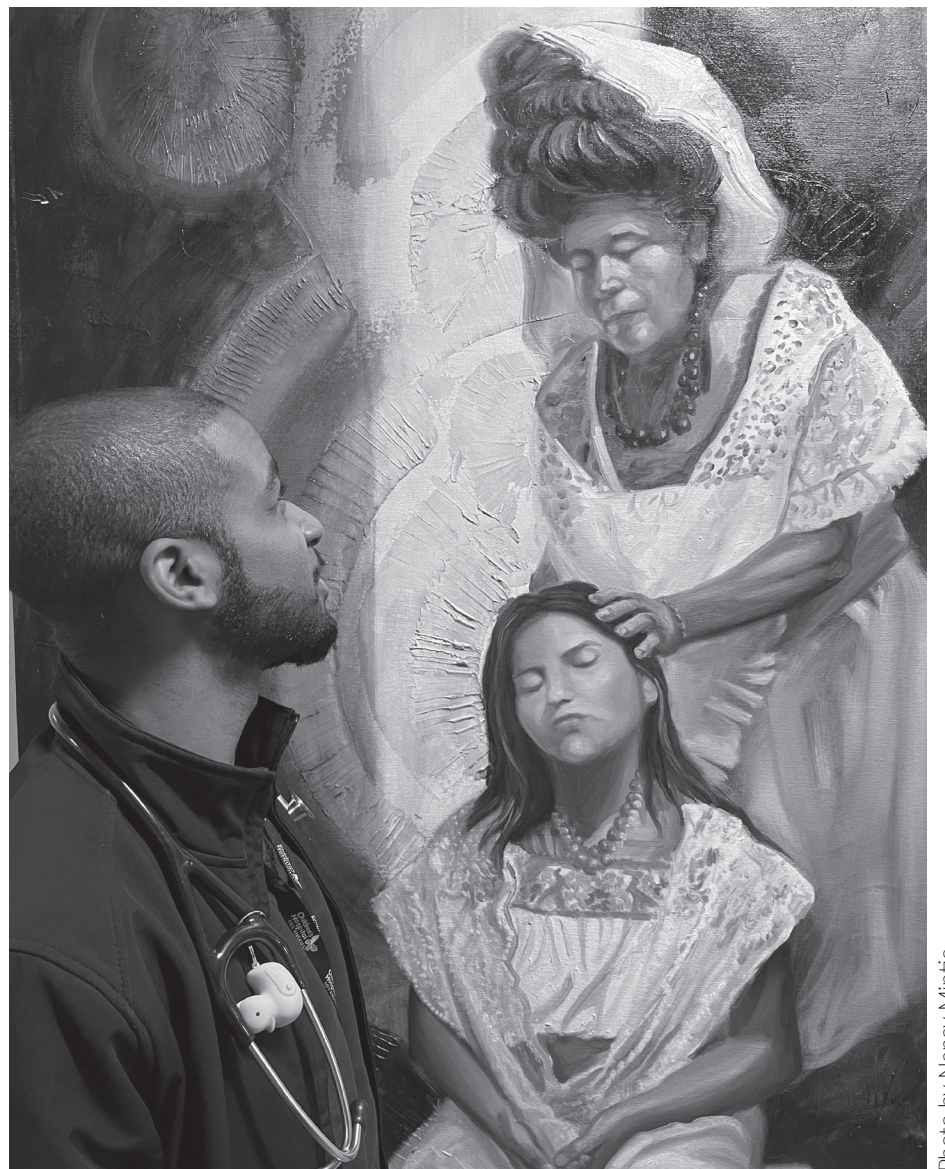
Patrick's autistic cousin was his inspiration for his special interest in pediatric nutrition. Compared to other physicians, Patrick's views are quite advanced on the subject.

"We only had two or three lectures about nutrition in medical school and those were pretty basic – just basic info about vitamins, carbs and protein. There wasn't any emphasis on preventive health through nutrition. But I think nutrition is the core of health. I try to get my patients to understand that they'll have better health outcomes if they just do something that they have to do everyday anyway (eating) but in a healthy way. Nutrition shouldn't just be a focus when you're sick, but also when you're well. I've become alarmed about pediatric obesity, something that isn't changing for the better. At some point I'd like to get involved in some policy work to address the fact that food recommendations are driven not by what is actually healthy but by the economic interests of the dairy, wheat, meat and corn industries. That's why the food pyramid doesn't address things like the harm in trans fats, corn syrup and processed foods.

"In my first year as an attending doctor, I created a task force on picky eaters. We created resources for parents, including sample menus, meal plans developed by nutritionists, and strategies for the various types of picky eaters, like those bothered by food textures, flavors, portions, visual or sensory cues. "

When it came time for the residency part of his medical training, Patrick decided he wanted to try living and working on the west coast and so chose Children's Hospital of Los Angeles as his site. While there, he had the opportunity to work in an Altamed community clinic. There he saw his patients grow from birth to toddlerhood. As his residency was coming

to an end, his patients' families begged him to stay on so he could continue to be their doctor. But he had a problem – a big problem: over \$313,000 in educational debt from college and medical school that had to be repaid. Doing so on a community clinic salary would be extremely difficult, if not impossible.



Dr. Atis admires a painting of a traditional healer

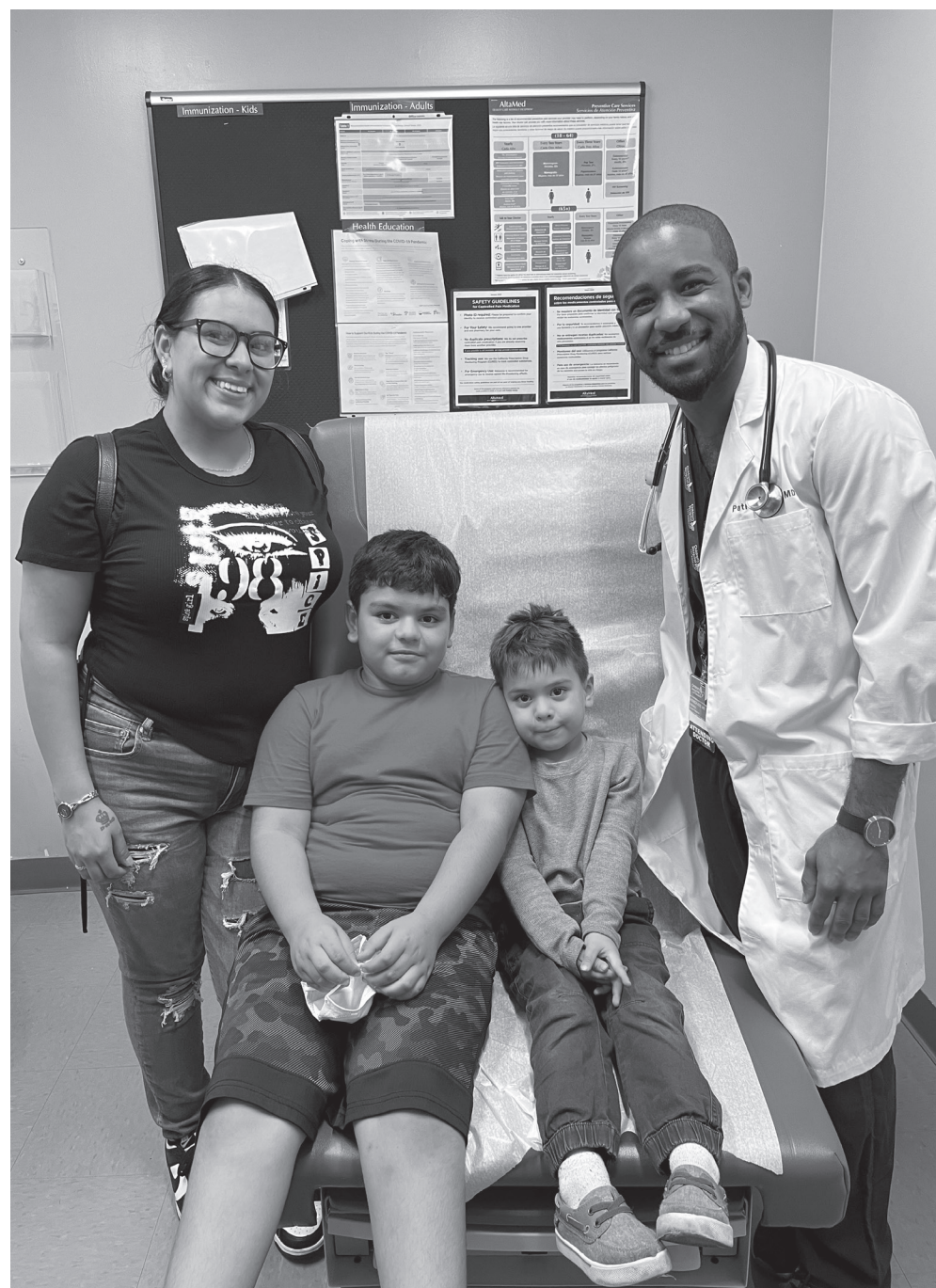
Fortunately, Patrick learned about Uncommon Good's MED program which helps doctors repay their school loans so that they can accept lower paying jobs in community clinics serving the poor. Uncommon Good was able to enroll Patrick and begin helping him to repay his educational debt while being the doctor he'd always wanted to be. He told us:

"Having your help means I can breathe easier knowing that this debt won't loom over my career forever. I'm able to focus more on my patients instead of worrying about the future. I can think of myself as a doctor, not a debtor."

One recent patient was an underweight two-year-old. Instead of just doing the usual, which would be to give the mother a referral to a nutritionist consultation, Patrick went the proverbial extra mile. He personally contacted the nutritionist to ask her to prepare an appropriate nutrition plan in advance of the appointment, and he made arrangements for the mother's insurance to cover the care. A month later, the child was gaining weight and Patrick was pleased with his progress. The boy's mother called Patrick and told him:

"I never before felt like a doctor really cared very much. But you went above and beyond. It means so much to me that I feel like crying."

Patrick didn't feel that he'd done anything special. "It was just a small kindness," he said. Perhaps. But let's not underestimate the power of a small act of kindness accompanied by a big warm smile. ■



Dr. Atis with two of his young patients and their mother

Photo by Nancy Mintie

Photo by Nancy Mintie

Photo by Family of Julian Restrepo



Dr. Julian Restrepo at his White Coat Ceremony with one of his Medical school professors

Photo by Family of Julian Restrepo



Dr. Restrepo with the first baby he delivered in his medical practice

From Cali to California *(cont. from page 1)*

drug lords and their minions who continued to wreak havoc in Colombia. In addition, the rebel group FARC (the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces) hid out in the jungle adjacent to the city, growing cocaine and preying upon the local populace.

As a result, little Julian grew up being able to recognize the sound of a car bomb. He participated in safety drills for bombings and terrorist attacks, much like the school children of the United States who have school shooting drills on their campuses. Kidnappings from churches and other acts of violence and crime were normalized in the society.

Though his father, who had a weak heart, tried to hide the truth from his family for as long as he could, the Restrepo family was in fact targeted by local drug lords. Their modus operandi was to kidnap a family member and then demand ransom. When Julian was fifteen-years-old, the thugs broke into the family home out in the countryside, locked everyone up, ransacked the house, and were overheard discussing their plan to kidnap the father. Fortunately, Julian and his brother were not at home at the time, and the adults managed to escape and ran all night to make it to the safety of the nearest town.

After that terrifying incident, the father sold the home to raise money to pay off the extortionists and tried to evade further attacks by moving and changing jobs. But it wasn't

enough, and he began to receive calls demanding more money or threatening the kidnapping of his boys. He realized that the vicious cycle would never end and

so he leveled with Julian and told him that he would have to move to live with distant relatives in Texas for his own safety. Sixteen-year-old Julian was devastated at the thought of being exiled from his family and friends and he protested. In response, his father told him a little white lie, that the separation would only be for a year.

Once in Texas, Julian moved in with his aunts who were uneducated and barely scraping by financially. His father had been ruined by the drug gangs and so couldn't afford to send him money to ease his plight. High school studies in the United States came easily for him however, since his education in Colombia had been quite superior to that offered in this country. After a time, he realized that he was not going to be able to return home. Consequently, he applied himself to his schoolwork and was awarded multiple scholarships to attend college at Prairie View A&M University (an historically-black university). The school offered a medical pipeline program which interested Julian. Though he had wanted to become a veterinarian when he was a child, this interest had evolved into a desire to become a doctor through his experience of growing up with a father who had a heart condition.

“When Julian was fifteen-years-old, the thugs broke into the family home out in the countryside, locked everyone up, ransacked the house, and were overheard discussing their plan to kidnap the father.”

Photo by Nancy Mintie



Dr. Restrepo with a colleague

Julian sailed through the pipeline program, and after college graduation, was admitted to Texas A&M Health Science Center College of Medicine. He came to Los Angeles for his medical residency, working at the large Los Angeles County-USC Medical Center, treating impoverished patients from all over the world. Upon graduation, he became a Family Medicine doctor at a free clinic located across the street from the county hospital. The clinic is named for Monsignor Oscar Romero, the Salvadorean prelate who was martyred for his advocacy on behalf of the poor and oppressed of his country. Struggling Immigrants and refugees, many from Latin America, are welcomed and treated there.

A significant obstacle was blocking Julian's path forward, however. He had graduated from medical school with \$220,000 in educational debt. Even though he made payments every month, the amount continued to climb because of the accruing interest. By the time he contacted us here at Uncommon Good, his debt had grown to just under \$300,000. Fortunately, he qualified for a generous program that we administer for L.A. Care, the nation's largest publicly operated health plan. Called Elevating the Safety Net, the program provides educational loan repayment assistance to doctors who serve the poor, including L.A. Care patients, in Los Angeles County.

Now, with help repaying his school loans, Julian can concentrate on his patients, such as a young mother and her six-year-old son whom he treated recently. They had just come to this country from Africa by way of Brazil, Central America and Mexico. The mother possessed only one bag of belongings, and the child was ill. The woman could not communicate with anyone because she spoke Portuguese. Fortunately, Julian spoke some Portuguese and put the mother at ease. He diagnosed the child with pneumonia and successfully treated his illness.

Another recent patient was a thirty-two-year-old Asian man who was very doctor-averse. He had heard good things about Julian from the community, however, and so came in to be treated for a painful skin condition. Julian noticed that his health was poor and convinced the patient to come back for a physical. His lab results showed uncontrolled diabetes, high cholesterol, dangerously high blood pressure and morbid obesity. Julian created a treatment plan for him and the man returned after three months, compliant with his doctor's orders, and in greatly improved health. Julian believes that he may have saved his life.

I'll let Julian have the last word, as he explains the satisfactions of his work:

"I've learned that as a Latin American immigrant turned physician, I can understand better than most how to connect with underserved patients and attend to their unique needs beyond a medical appointment. It is my honor to be able to serve this fragile patient population from a distinct angle that allows for better rapport, which often leads to better healthcare. This rapport gives me enormous joy and satisfaction to hold such an endearing and gratifying position in my community and play a pivotal role in so many lives." ■



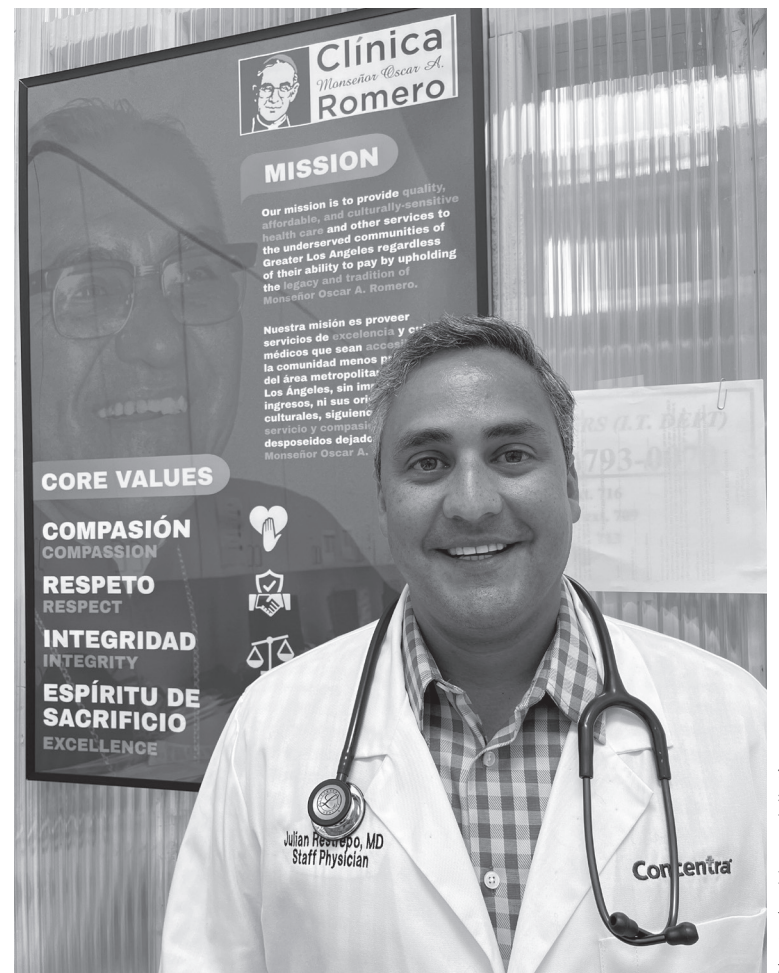
Dr. Restrepo with a client

Photo by Nancy Mintie



Photo by Julian Restrepo

Dr. Restrepo with a client



Dr. Julian Restrepo

Photo by Nancy Mintie

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