

UNCOMMON GOOD

SPRING 2024

Uncommon Good Student Goes to the Ivy League

This fall, Uncommon Good student Dylan Pina will be stepping into a venerable piece of American history. He will be attending Brown University, an Ivy League school founded in 1764 during the colonial period before the United States even was the United States. Originally established by Baptist leaders in Rhode Island, its founders nevertheless inserted into the school’s charter a very American provision guaranteeing full religious freedom for all faculty and students. In the ensuing 260 years of its existence, Brown has become a very exclusive institution, accepting only 6% of the students who apply.

I’d like to tell you about this remarkable young man (and his equally admirable mini-me younger brother Carlos) who has managed to climb to the heights of the U.S. educational system.

Dylan and Carlos are the sons of two Mexican immigrants. Their mother, Ceci, is one of the lay mental health workers in Uncommon Good’s groundbreaking mental health program. Their father, after whom Carlos is named, is a warehouse worker. Spanish was spoken in their home and consequently, when Dylan started school, he knew no English. However, when his school launched a contest that involved reading, Dylan’s natural competitiveness kicked in and he was determined to master English so he could win the contest. He became a voracious reader which enabled him to become fluent in English by the third grade. By this time, he’d developed a true love affair with reading. His mother says that by

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Dylan Pina-Martinez holding his acceptance letter from Brown University

Photo by Nancy Mintie



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Amir, Bibi and Khatera Zafar, refugees from Afghanistan

Brave Afghan Family Shares Its Story

When Afghanistan tragically fell to the Taliban on the other side of the world, I had no idea that it would affect me personally.....until it did. That was the day that a desperate little band showed up on our Uncommon Good doorstep. It was an Afghan family composed of father, mother, a grandmother with cancer who was confined to a wheelchair, two three-year old twins, and a one-year-old baby, all of whom had nothing but the clothes upon their backs. This is their incredible story.

Amir Zafar had been a successful young businessman in the import/export industry in Afghanistan. He was passionate about women’s education in a country in which there were few to no opportunities for women to go to a university. He had big dreams for his daughters and all the women and girls in his nation to be able to access higher education. And he didn’t just talk about the challenge, but put his own money and land behind it, donating property and raising funds to build the first private university that was open to women in his hometown of Mazar-e-Sharif. Though there were conflicts with the Taliban in other parts of the country at that time, Mazar-e-Sharif was considered safe. It was surrounded by government, American and German armed forces, in part because it was located next to a strategic airport.

After successfully launching his first university, the residents of another city, Kunduz, begged

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Uncommon Good Helps Dentist from an Ancient Lineage

As a child, when my family drove up the 5 freeway into East Los Angeles to grandmother's house, we would pass a strange and wondrous building. It looked like a castle and was adorned with large carvings of majestic winged princes and heraldic griffins. These long-remembered images came to life for me again today when I met one of our MED dentists, Nahrin Veronica Ebrahimi. You see, the building of my childhood memories was a tire factory built to resemble the ancient palace of Assyrian King Sargon II. Assyria (not to be confused with present day Syria) was a major Mesopotamian civilization that endured from the early Bronze Age to the Late Iron Age, first appearing in the 21st century BC. And Dr. Veronica is a descendant of that ancient people. She even speaks Assyrian, which amazingly is still a living language even though the Assyrian Empire ended in the 7th century BC. At its height, the empire's approximate boundaries were the Black Sea to the north, the Mediterranean Sea to the west, the Persian Gulf to the east, and Thebes in Egypt to the south.

Today, Assyrians live dispersed over the earth, but Veronica's family happened to live in Iran. Though the Assyrian religion was polytheistic in its ancient days, in present times Christianity is an intrinsic part of Assyrian identity. This became a dangerous problem in 1979 when the Islamic Revolution took over Iran. Practicing another religion other than Islam became punishable by death. Veronica's parents were forced to flee for their lives with their small children, first to Germany, then to the United States.

Here in the U.S., Veronica's parents worked very hard to support their family. They settled in the San Fernando Valley and took English classes. Her father found work in the HVAC installation business. Her mother raised her and her older brother, scrambling for resources to meet their needs. Veronica, in particular, had major dental issues, including needing braces, which in those days included external head gear.

When Veronica was a young woman, two major events occurred which would dictate the path of her life. The first was a personal conversion experience which inspired her to follow Jesus' admonition



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Dr. Veronica Ebrahimi with a pediatric dental prop

“to serve instead of to be served.” The second event occurred when her brother, who was three years her elder, decided to become a dentist. Seeing the profession through his eyes, and remembering the impact dentistry had upon her childhood, as well as understanding that being a dentist would be a way to serve others, Veronica decided to follow in his footsteps. She applied and was accepted to Tufts University School of Dental Medicine, the same school her brother had attended.

Upon graduating, Veronica followed her heart and her faith into work in community clinics serving the poor, first at El Proyecto del Barrio, then at the Saban Community Clinic in central Los Angeles. She wanted to work in community clinics serving those most in need, and where she would not be pressured to over-treat or over-charge or see an unsustainable volume of patients to increase the practice's bottom line. But these clinics pay the least of any of the jobs in the dental profession. Repaying her loans became a problem, especially given the high cost of living in Los Angeles County. She applied for a state loan repayment assistance program but was denied help because the program had insufficient funds.

Then Veronica discovered Uncommon Good and our MED program. She applied and with generous funding from The Rose Hills Foundation we were able to accept her into our program and provide financial assistance to help her repay her school loans.

I asked Veronica how she felt every morning waking up and coming to her clinic. The naturally reserved young woman threw back her head, flashed a huge smile and said:

“Oh, I have so much joy in what I'm doing because it's so meaningful to be able to alleviate pain and suffering! And above all, I work for God and so I strive for excellence because everything I do is for him.”

Amen! ■



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Dr. Ebrahimi with a patient

An Inquiring Mind Wants to Know

In this age of censorship and desperate attempts to silence dissent on both sides of the political aisle, Uncommon Good student Miranda, a Posse Scholarship recipient, is a breath of fresh air. Allow me to introduce you to her.

Miranda Moreno's father is a factory worker from Guanajuato, Mexico. Her mother is a school cafeteria worker from Michoacan, Mexico, a place famed for being the wintering grounds of one of the great beauties of the natural world, the Monarch butterfly. Like the Monarchs, her parents are migrants, having come to this country as young people. They fell in love, married, and had twins, Miranda and her brother Jesus.

Miranda and Jesus grew up in the City of Pomona and when they were in the 4th grade, their parents enrolled them in Uncommon Good's education program. We matched Miranda with a mentor whose parents were immigrants from Honduras.

"Having Jaqueline as a mentor is an amazing experience," Miranda told us. "We still talk and hang out. It's great having someone from a similar background to talk to. I can talk to her honestly about cultural issues, being the daughter of immigrants, going to college, the pressures to please our families, and the desire to pursue my own dreams."

Miranda, unlike many of her peers, has never lost the joy of learning. She enthusiastically participated in many of Uncommon Good's educational offerings. She tells us:

"I was in the music mania program until I aged out. It was so fun and uplifting, learning to perform, learning new skills of music and being able to express myself that way. I was in the Teen Green club and learned about environmental issues, how to address them and take action. I was the education chair of the Girls Leadership Circle and created workshops on the imposter syndrome suffered by women, and sex discrimination. At Uncommon Good there was room for my voice and my voice was listened to. Uncommon Good also helped me get into Pomona College's PAYS program to help me prepare for college. I took classes from a college professor there in Quantum Mechanics."



Posse Scholarship winner Miranda Moreno

Photo by Nancy Mintie

Miranda also has been active in her high school. She has participated in cross country, soccer and track. And notably, in this age of polarizing rhetoric, Miranda started a debate club to give herself and her fellow students the chance to fully discuss a range of issues.

"I started it because I'm very curious. I have my own views about things that don't always correlate with others, and I like to talk to people about different ideas. We started out with some fun topics to get students to come," she told us. "Things like what's better: Chick-fil-A or In N Out? We then moved on to subjects like: Should there be homework? Should sports be required? Should there be gun control? The most heated debate we had was: Does 'Pretty Privilege' exist? We had a good response, with up to 35 students at each meeting! And we raised the money for the club through bake sales."

Miranda's hard work, good grades, and inquiring mind have resulted in her receiving a coveted four-year Posse Scholarship. Ever intellectually adventurous, she has decided to go well out of her comfort zone and attend Kalamazoo College, a highly selective, nationally renowned school founded in 1833 in Michigan.

"I really liked the Kalamazoo approach to education," Miranda told us. "They have what they call the 'K Plan' which is less restrictive than most colleges' general education programs. It allows you to explore different fields and be interactive in those fields. I'll be able to explore all the things I'm interested in: political science, philosophy, sociology and math. And they have a good study abroad program. I'd like to go to a Spanish speaking country."

When asked about her dreams, Miranda replied, "I'd like to be a teacher, or someone like the people at Uncommon Good, who can make learning engaging and inspire kids to go to college. I want learning to bring students joy, and for that you need teachers who are passionate about their subjects. And you need to let students speak out and say how they feel about the subject you're teaching. I want to help students because others have empowered me. I want to help them to believe in themselves because that will take them very far."

We believe in YOU, Miranda, and can't wait to see all the places your inquiring mind will take you! ■



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Miranda Moreno with Carlos Carrillo and Michael French, education program staff at Uncommon Good

What Do We Do?

Uncommon Good is a 24-year-old nonprofit organization that breaks the intergenerational cycle of poverty through these programs in education, health and urban farming:

1. **Connect to College:** Nearly 1,000 low-income students and their parents are served through this program. Starting in the 4th grade, students are given mentors, tutors, 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 22.5 tons of organically grown fruits and vegetables for over 2,000 people of month, including low-income families, Ukrainian and Afghan refugees, and day laborers. Also, the produce is made available to wider community members in return for a donation.



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Dr. Ariel White, a pediatrician in Uncommon Good's MED program with two patients

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 Carlos Carrillo

Uncommon Good mentor and mentee



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Avocado gleaning

3. **Medicine for the Economically Disadvantaged (MED):** This program helps 170 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 approximately 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 Nancy Mintie

Uncommon Good's Whole Earth Building

Uncommon Good Student Goes to the Ivy League *(cont. from p. 1)*

the time he was in middle school, she tried to count the number of books he'd read but gave up after counting up to eighty! He became fascinated by the Harry Potter series and also the Percy Jackson books, young adult stories which bring Greek mythology into modern times. More recently, his taste in reading has become rather intense. He has enjoyed Wall Street and court thrillers such as *The Chairman* and *The King of Torts*. He also was inspired by *Unbroken*, the harrowing story of Olympian and WWII prisoner of war Louis Zamperini.

Younger brother Carlos, in contrast, started out hating reading. He describes how he would fall asleep out of boredom when forced to sit down and read a book. This changed dramatically, however, when he discovered the Harry Potter books, whose author J.K. Rowling is largely responsible for turning an entire generation of children into avid readers.

As they grew up together, the two brothers did nearly everything as a team. And what a team they were! They participated in sports: soccer, swimming and Tai Kwando, in which they only were prevented from winning black belts when the martial arts studio burned down just before their black belt exams.

They joined Uncommon Good when they each reached the fourth grade and both were assigned influential mentors as part of the program. "My mentor taught me a lot about college and how to be an adult," Dylan tells us. Carlos' mentor was a former Uncommon Good student who went into the biotech field. The boys participated in our Young Doctor Camp, which has led Carlos to be interested in pursuing a career in medicine. They were in our Teen Green environmental club, went to our summer science camp, participated in our arts and culture programming, and went on college explorations and educational field trips. Uncommon Good helped both brothers apply for and get accepted into Pomona College's PAYS program which prepares underrepresented students for college. Part of the PAYS experience is taking classes with college professors. It was there, while studying quantum mathematics, that Dylan's love for math was rekindled. He had become bored with math in high school because it was too easy, but now plans to major in the subject in college, with an eye towards a career either in tech or finance. In the past year, Uncommon Good helped Dylan apply for and receive a prestigious four-year Questbridge scholarship to Brown University.



Dylan and Carlos with their mother, Ceci

Photo by Nancy Mintie

But this wasn't all. The brothers also volunteer at a local hospital, participate in their school's robotics club and the high school chess club started by Carlos. Dylan actually taught his own mentor how to play chess, and Carlos started and led yet another chess club for Uncommon Good students. Both boys are also members of their school's academic decathlon team.

If that weren't enough, Dylan serves as the driver for his mother and brother while their dad is at work. And both brothers have worked weekends and holidays helping their father when he was in the construction field.

In recognition of his outstanding achievements, Dylan is being honored by his school as the top student in his graduating class.

As the time comes for these two good friends to be parted, I asked Carlos how he was feeling. He responded:

"I always just knew that my brother would go to an Ivy League school. I'm really happy for him and grateful that he has this opportunity. Now I want to follow in his footsteps. I'm going to apply for scholarships, too, and pursue my goals of graduating in the top ten in my class and going to an Ivy myself."

Stay tuned as we watch the ways in which these two remarkable young men are going to rock our world! ■

Book Sales Benefit Uncommon Good

Two books of poetry by Uncommon Good's Executive Director, Nancy Mintie, have been published and all sales are being donated to Uncommon Good. The first book, *Poems for a World Yet To Be*, among other subjects chronicles Mintie's early life and work with the unhoused and slum housing tenants of Los Angeles. The second book, *Poems from the One Heart Mind*, explores nature, relationships, world events and spirituality. The books are available for sale at Uncommon Good or on Amazon in paperback or on Kindle. ■



Brave Afghan Family Shares Its Story *(cont. from page 1)*

Amir to come and start one there, since there were no educational opportunities for women in that town or anywhere in the surrounding area. He answered their entreaty and recruited his brother-in-law to help him start a second co-educational university in Kunduz. At both of his schools, Islamic studies were not required, men and women sat together in classes, and the hijab was not mandated for the female students. “Our focus was on learning, not religion,” Amir explained. However, though the people of Kunduz supported the school and had modern views of education and gender equality, the surrounding countryside was controlled by the Taliban, who were opposed to women getting educated, working outside the home, or appearing in public without the hijab.

When the construction of the university began in Kunduz, Amir received a letter from the Taliban, warning him to stop building. “I thought it was crazy and I ignored it,” Amir told me. Then a second threatening letter was sent to Amir and the members of his team. Government officials were ignoring the Taliban and told him he had nothing to worry about. But the people of Kunduz began to warn him that since he and his project had come to the attention of the Taliban, he was in a dangerous situation. They welcomed the educational opportunity he was offering, but also felt that he was putting himself in peril by pursuing the project.

Amir started to grow uneasy about the safety of his family and started looking into options for moving to a safer neighboring country. They had been taking the grandmother, Bibi, to Pakistan for her chemotherapy, but Pakistan was the birthplace of the Taliban, and so was not considered a safe alternative. So he and his wife visited Uzbekistan and found that they liked it. They decided to apply for a visa to move to that country.

However, before they could obtain a visa, one night in the summer of 2021 while they were at dinner, a neighbor came frantically banging on their door. “You have to leave NOW!” he screamed. “The Taliban are here in the city!” Amir thought he was joking at first. “What are you talking about?” he asked. “We’re safe. The Americans are here.” “No, they’re gone! You have to get out NOW!” the neighbor cried.

Stunned, Amir turned on the TV and saw the unthinkable. The American and European forces had abruptly pulled out of the country, and the Taliban fighters were swarming into the city. Amir grabbed his children, Grandma Bibi and some documents, and ran to the car. But



Photo by Amir Zafar

The university that Amir Zafar co-founded in Afghanistan

his wife, Khatera, jumped out of the car and ran back into the house. “I have to get my gold!” she exclaimed. “No, come back! There’s no time,” Amir yelled. But she didn’t listen, ran into the house, and came running back with a bag containing her gold jewelry. (Afghan women prize gold jewelry and loving husbands give it to them on every special occasion to demonstrate their devotion to their wives.)

They sped towards the airport, through the fires that had started to burn around the city. But once they got to the airport, it was a mob scene. There was only one plane bound for the United States, and it was about to leave. The crowd pressed frantically forward, some people clinging to the wings of the plane. Amir and Khatera realized that they had no chance of making it through the throng, and that their children would be trampled if they tried.

By now, all the land borders to neighboring countries had been closed and the Taliban were in control of every city in Afghanistan. The family fled from city to city, trying to avoid notice. Amir grew his beard, attempting to blend in with Taliban men who are prevented from shaving by their religion. They used Khatera’s gold jewelry to pay for their food and lodging. But they knew that they couldn’t stay one step ahead of the Taliban forever and they would have to find a way out of the country. Their very lives were at stake, as the tragic fate of one of his partners in his college venture made clear. His university development team had included Dr. Mohammad Nader Alemi, one of the leading physicians in Afghanistan. Dr. Alemi was a psychiatrist and the head of the mental health department of the hospital in Mazar-e-Sharif. He was abducted by the Taliban and a \$350,000 ransom was extorted from his family. Even though his relatives paid the money, he was found dead in a ditch with signs of torture on his body. This shocking discovery precipitated an exodus of doctors out of the country, but not before four more of Amir’s university collaborators had been murdered by the Taliban.

While on the run, Amir learned that visas were being sold under the table for people to go to Pakistan. So he used Khatera’s gold jewelry to pay \$15,000 to get documents to get all of them passage to Pakistan. But the flow of people across the border was being controlled by the Taliban. An incredibly long line of people had formed at the border. Taliban agents decided the fate of each person. Some were allowed to cross over, but others were arrested and shot.

Amir and Khatera stood in the border line for three days and three nights, waiting for the decision that would decide their fate. Grandma Bibi sat in her wheelchair and each adult held one of the three children. “I couldn’t sit down for three days and three nights,” Amir recalled.



Photo by Zafar Family

Ground breaking for the co-ed Afghanistan university. Fourth from the right is Dr. Alemi, who was murdered by the Taliban for promoting women’s education

“There were no bathrooms. The women and children wore diapers and my children’s skin bled from irritation and infection from the dirty diapers. There was no food. We just had one packet of cookies to share. The children were crying from pain, hunger and exhaustion.”

Khatera added:

“The Taliban were pulling people out of the line and brutally whipping them. We tried to cover the children’s eyes so they wouldn’t see this, but our oldest daughter did.”

At last the family reached the head of the line. Amir and Khatera had decided that if Amir was arrested, the rest of the family would proceed to Pakistan and its relative safety if they could. Amir claimed to be a student and said that they were taking Bibi to Pakistan for chemotherapy. Fortunately, he had the documents to show that Bibi did indeed have cancer and had been given prior treatments in Pakistan. The half truth worked, and the family was allowed over the border.

Once in Pakistan, the family realized that they were only slightly safer than they had been in Afghanistan. People were getting arrested at random from secret lists. Amir knew that they needed to move once again. He went to a travel agency that applied to ten different countries to try to get visas for the family. Finally, one came through from Mexico. A friend of a friend claimed to have a place for the family to stay. So they flew to Monterey, Mexico, and were put in a house with one toilet and three rooms, that already had two other refugee families living there. The entire family moved into the remaining room of the house and lived there for two months.

However, danger raised its head yet again. Children and women were being kidnapped off of the street in Monterey and held for ransom. The locals were telling Amir to leave because it was not safe for his family. He went to the U.S. embassy and applied for a visa to the U.S. but it was denied.

In desperation, Amir paid a woman \$1,800 to get his family into the United States. They were taken to the border wall and a team of people grabbed his children and quickly climbed the wall with them in their arms, leaving the little ones on the other side. Their shoes had fallen off and they were crying. Amir and Khatera followed, climbing over the wall. Then several people tied ropes to Bibi and slowly and painfully hauled her over the wall. Her lips turned blue in the process. The family was apprehended by Border Patrol agents who sent them to a hotel operated by the Catholic Church in San Diego. There the family had a brief respite until one day they were told, without explanation, that they would be sent to a refugee center in Claremont, California.



Photo by Zafar Family

The Zafar family on the day they moved into their new home with community volunteers Jean Arnott, Sharon Sparks and Matthew Neeley

But after only one week in the Claremont facility, the family was told that they had to leave, even though their gold was gone and they had no way of accessing food and shelter. At that point, someone told them about Uncommon Good and they arrived upon our doorstep. We were shocked at their condition and frantically worked to find resources to help. We were able to give them a \$2,000 emergency grant, food from our farm program, and clothing.

Others from the community pitched in, but the family finally got its big break when their plight came to the attention of Matthew Neeley, the CEO of Hillcrest Retirement Community who also serves as a local volunteer communication director for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. One of the residents of Hillcrest, Mary Kay Ogden, who volunteers with Children’s Disaster Services, reached out to Matthew for help for the family. Matthew wrote an impassioned appeal to local faith leaders and community organizations, who responded with amazing kindness and generosity. A group of 35 community leaders including local pastors and representatives of relief organizations gathered at Hillcrest to decide how best to help this family. They were unified around what they called the “Interfaith Refugee Project.” Local churches and friends donated food, transportation, clothing, and needed services, such as teaching the family English. The interfaith community responded with magnificent generosity and remarkable unity that surpassed any theological differences in a unified effort to “love their neighbor.”

The Hillcrest Board approved the use of an unused home for this family at greatly discounted rent. From among the group’s members and other subsequent supporters, two years of rent has been donated, a car procured, a computer found, help was obtained for an asylum application and work permits, the children were enrolled in Head Start, food and clothing were all donated according to their need. An interfaith group known as Women of Faith completely furnished and stocked the house down to the last details such as providing eating utensils. Once both parents could legally work, they were given jobs at Hillcrest.

Amir and his family now are settling in to their new home. The children are in school, having fun celebrating American holidays like Halloween and Valentine’s Day. Amir and Khatera have learned an amazing amount of English in the short time they’ve been in this country. Bibi is continuing her cancer treatments and now can walk a bit. The parents still come to Uncommon Good for food. “Your spaghetti is the children’s favorite!” Khatera tells us. With the continued kind help from the good people of the Interfaith Refugee Project, Amir is working on becoming independent and able to support his family, giving them all the very happy ending that they deserve. ■



Photo by Zafar Family

Children’s bedroom in the house provided to the Zafars Family by Hillcrest Retirement Community

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