

David and Gary's Story

When I was graduating from high school a man on one of the committees interviewing us for scholarships gave me his card and later directed me to a private foundation that paid for my college education. It was expected that I would someday do the same for a deserving young student with college aspirations.

I had been looking for The One for many years; the last great-nephew I'd given money for college replied when I suggested he keep me informed of his progress that I could "follow him on Facebook." Choosing David Reyna happened naturally, over time. He'd been coming to my house with his mom, our housekeeper, practically since he arrived from Mexico at the age of five. I think I first took notice of David when he was 14; Rosalba asked me to look at his seriously crooked teeth, and I agreed to help with orthodontics. David's genuine gratitude and the innocent joy in life itself that he beamed to the world with that beautiful new smile were all the motivation I needed to want to be the one to help him achieve a good life, if possible with that hope and joy intact.

Last fall I went to his high school, East Austin College Prep Academy, and met with a school counselor, who assured me that David is college material and a good student. His parents had gotten him into the charter school to get him away from the violent bullying they feared at the public high school he'd tried to attend. I'm afraid the charter school curriculum was deficient in such areas as computer training and higher math, but I concur that the environment was a healthier one for David. He has expressed an interest in engineering, so he has some catching up to do with higher math and computer skills; he has also mentioned the practicality of a business degree.

David was accepted at Texas State and was offered a tuition scholarship at Concordia University here in Austin, but he has opted (sensibly, I believe) to enroll this fall at Austin Community College, with the expectation of later transferring to an appropriate four-year university.

To expose David to types of engineering and engineering professionals, I approached Bob Dailey at AT&T Labs (or whatever they are calling the R&D division these days), and he agreed to an office visit. David and I were given a tour of each of the eight floors of the building, with an engineer waiting on each floor to explain that department's work to David. One of the engineers said to David, "When I was five years old I was selling Chiclets on the streets in Mexico; like you, my parents are housecleaners and laborers and speak no English. I graduated from UT, and I'd like to help you negotiate getting there." Hector did follow up and still is in contact with David and his parents.

I have given David my pledge to pay for his college education with part of my retirement savings. I have already been paying David not to work during his high school years, having missed out on my own youth by working full time at fast food restaurants throughout high school. It is really gratifying to me that he got to play—and excel—on the school baseball team, which made it to state semi-finals.

David's graduation was a momentous occasion for his family, and being there was very gratifying for me. I took as my guest Bob Dailey, the AT&T engineer. In one of those amazing small-world coincidences, a few days earlier Bob was chatting (in Spanish) with the handyman at his condominium project, when Javier happened to mention that his son David was about to graduate...

What David needs now is greater exposure to professional/corporate culture, so that he can learn how to present himself in the larger world and find his career path from among the many choices available to him. From the beginning of my sponsorship of David I have stressed that it is not my intention to separate him from his cultural heritage, or his family or their tight-knit church group; now, however, it is time to step out into the world. Exposure through internships and part-time/summer work in an office environment will help guide him to an attainable career path.

At the party given by his church and family in honor of his graduation, David stood up and thanked God, then his mother, and then he turned to me and said, "Gary, I want to thank you for all the support you have given me over the years, and I want to tell you with all my heart that I love you." It was a stunning moment; I felt that love coming from everyone in the room, and it affected me so deeply that I am having trouble even writing these words. No "you can follow me on Facebook" from this young man.

Today as a graduation gift I am taking David, his girlfriend (same high school class), and his parents to the matinee performance of "In the Heights." I think the thrill of it will be a great way to help David and his family launch the next chapter of their journey through the difficult life of an immigrant family.

I can't end my country's hateful treatment of Latino immigrants, but I can help David, and I ask you to join me in helping to keep that hopeful joy in his eyes.

