



### **Kid still writing from heart**

Dennis McCarthy, Columnist  
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The kid from Pacoima writes from his dorm at Stanford University to say thanks, and let anyone who might remember him from a few years back know what he's doing these days.

Daniel Gonzalez made the front page of the Daily News in 1999 - a shy 13-year-old eighth-grader who sat down one night and poured his heart out on paper.

Hundreds of kids living in some pretty tough neighborhoods all over the Valley were doing the same thing.

The shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado was still fresh on everyone's mind, and we wanted to know the daily pressures that children living in our own backyard faced - gangs, drugs, violence in school, teen pregnancy, peer pressure.

The winner of the essay contest got a \$200 savings bond. Danny Gonzalez was the winner.

"His essay was so touching and honest, right from the heart," one of the judges wrote. "I could see through his eyes what's going on out there with our children."

The \$200 was great, the kid told me at the time, but the look on his mother and father's faces when he won was even better.

"It made me feel so proud, and led me to be the first person in my family to go to college," Daniel, now 21, said this week by phone in between classes.

"I graduated with honors from Van Nuys Medical Magnet and am now a junior at Stanford University majoring in human biology."

The kid's a great success story, but you don't have to look very far to see why. It was all right there in that essay he wrote eight years ago.

"A friend of mine was pressured by his own family to fight in school or anywhere. I felt sad for him because when you're home you need the love and support of your family.

"You don't need to be pressured by your own family to hurt another individual."

He learned that from his father, Alberto Gonzalez, who worked nights in a textile mill, and his mom, Lupe, who worked days as a file clerk.

She was usually asleep when Alberto got home, and he was usually asleep when she left for work in the morning.

With six mouths to feed, they did what they had to do, but they always found extra time for their kids.

It was well past midnight when Alberto got home from work one day and found Lupe still awake, sitting at the kitchen table waiting for him.

"What's wrong?" he asked his wife.

"Nothing, I just want to tell you something, and I think it's too important to wait."

Lupe read Alberto their son's winning essay, pausing to watch the proud look on her husband's face when she got to the part about how kids growing up on some pretty mean streets need the love and support of their families.

The kind of love and support Daniel said he and his five brothers and sisters were getting from their humble, hard-working parents.

Lupe was home babysitting her grandchildren when I called her this week. Alberto's still working his textile job, along with another job on weekends at a neighborhood city park.

"Daniel was always a shy boy, but after he won that contest and you wrote about him, well, he just became so motivated," she said.

"He wasn't going to let gangs or anything else stop him. His baby sister, Laura, is just like him. Daniel left her all his old school books from Van Nuys Medical Magnet where she is student now - following in her big brother's footsteps.

"Alberto and I are proud of all our children."

Daniel doesn't think it matters where you come from. If you have enough commitment and passion, anything's possible.

He's going to get a chance to test that out this summer in Africa. With seven other Stanford students, he'll travel to the Mwange Refugee Camp in Zambia to open a health outreach education center for 20,000 refugees from the Congo, now living in squalor.

He grew up on some pretty tough streets, but the kid from Pacoima knows these refugee camps are going to make the barrio seem like Beverly Hills.

He'll be working to educate refugees on health issues such as malnutrition, malaria and sexually transmitted infections.

"We're seeking to empower the refugees to care for themselves and their families, to avert unnecessary illness and death in an environment of extreme material deprivation.

"I feel a great responsibility to give it my best effort, and contribute to some positive change for people in Mwange."

The kid still writes from the heart.

The financial aid and scholarship money Daniel gets to attend Stanford doesn't cover the trip, and the nonprofit organization sponsoring the program, FORGE, operates on a shoestring.

He's already raised a few hundred dollars of the \$7,500 he needs for the flight and living expenses in Africa from friends and family in Pacoima, but there's only so much the old neighborhood can give.

The kid knows it's not going to be easy working with children growing up in a much tougher neighborhood than he did, but he's looking forward to the challenge.

Like he says, it doesn't matter where you come from, if you have enough passion and commitment anything's possible.

Dennis McCarthy's column appears Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Sunday.

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How to help

Donations to help Daniel Gonzalez open a health outreach education center for refugees in Zambia can be made by sending a check to FORGE, P.O. Box 14425, Santa Rosa, CA, 95402. Write **For Daniel Gonzalez** on the check's memo line.