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Jeronimo Maradiaga’s Journey

For Jeronimo Maradiaga ’09J, the walk around the South Bronx one rainy March morning was filled with nostalgia—a tour of the landmarks of his life.

The south entrance to the Bronx Zoo, where Maradiaga worked at a concession in high school to help support his family. The discount store on 179th Street, where he worked a second job, hefting boxes in a dusty stockroom. The apartment house at Addams Place, where he lived as a small child—until thieves tore the front door off the hinges. Another apartment on an unpaved back street, Old Kingsbridge Road, where he and his older brother, Oscar, played baseball before the family was eventually evicted.

“I loved this neighborhood,” Maradiaga said, gazing down the row of tenements and the graffiti-scribed stoops. “We’d be playing out here. We were friends with some of the drug dealers who worked around here. They would come to us and say, ‘You guys should go inside right now.’ And we’d go inside and we’d hear gunshots or whatever.”

He caught himself, aware, as he often is, of how his upbringing can be misunderstood.

“As odd as that might seem,” Maradiaga added, “it was a sense of community.”

He doesn’t tell that story very often, and he almost never did at Colby. Nor did many in the Colby community know that the intense, premad-sworn guy in the Yankees hat was responsible for his single-parent mother, who was seriously ill. That Maradiaga had been technically truant at 6,000-student John F. Kennedy High School in the Bronx because he couldn’t work two jobs, do his homework, and go to school every day. That through much of his college career, Colby was Maradiaga’s permanent address because he had no other home.
“In the beginning I felt ashamed, almost like I’d try to hide it,” he said. “Toward the end I felt it was important for people to realize that someone from the South Bronx, someone who is economically impoverished, someone who was homeless most of the time he was at Colby, could be at Colby and be successful there. So when people asked me, ‘What do your parents do?’ I’d still, like, hesitate initially, but I would say, ‘My mom’s ill. I don’t know my dad. My dad’s been out of my life.”

It’s been a long time since Maradiaga has been ashamed. A Posse Scholar at Colby, selected from New York City public schools for his academic and leadership abilities, he capped an academically successful, socially arduous, and sometimes fitful Colby career by winning a prestigious Thomas J. Watson Fellowship. Maradiaga is one of 40 fellows chosen from several hundred candidates nationwide. He received $25,000 to spend the year traveling around the world, asking young people in disadvantaged and marginalized communities to tell him about their lives and their notions of success.

He is looking for young people like himself. He plans to tell them that his own path has been one of both achievement and inner conflict, a collision of cultures. And then he will listen to and document their stories, giving a voice to those too often lost in the din.

Maradiaga’s Bronx neighborhood, East Tremont, is, like much of New York City, a filled-to-the-brim melting pot of ethnicities and races, the cacophonous home to thousands of people jockeying to get by, to get ahead. Some parts are homey (Arthur Avenue’s Little Italy), while others are tattered. At times the place can be dangerous. Maradiaga liked his junior high school, J.H.S. 45, he said as he walked past the big brick building flush on Lorillard Place, though students were sometimes kept late because gang wars had broken out at nearby Roosevelt High.

“They would tell us not to wear red or not to wear blue,” he said, “just because it would cause problems.”

Yes, he and his brother were held up at knife-point by older kids, he said, but he cautioned that robberies were the exception, not the rule, and not to “read too much into the tale.” Street crime, he said, “is an urban problem, not a Bronx problem.”

Rosa Alicia Aleman, his mother, wasn’t taking any chances.

Dark-haired and slight, Aleman was raised in the Honduran industrial city of San Pedro Sula. In her late 20s, she set out alone for the United States, leaving Maradiaga’s two half brothers behind with family. She first settled in Los Angeles, then moved to New York City, where Jeronimo and Oscar Maradiaga were born. Their father left the family when they were 5 and 6, and Aleman was left to provide for her two children alone—and to keep them safe. “She wanted us to be in the house,” Maradiaga recalled. “She was always working. She worked in factories, she waitressed. Two jobs, sometimes three.”

Often it wasn’t enough. The single mom and her two latchkey kids began what Maradiaga calls “our migration around the Bronx.” Money was tight at best, and when it ran out, evictions followed. The family would live with friends and even spent a few nights on the subway. They would move to a new apartment with the help of friends, everyone lugging belongings down the street. Maradiaga remembers a basement apartment that flooded every time it rained. “My mom hated that place,” he said. “She was very unhappy.”

And then, when Maradiaga was a sophomore at JFK High (dubbed by the students “Jail For Kids”), his mom became very sick. She had no health insurance and no income. In an abrupt role reversal, her two sons took over. Oscar worked in restaurants. Jeronimo worked at the zoo and the store. Then an uninspired student, his jobs taught him something: that he disliked manual labor. “I hated lifting things,” he said. “I was like, this is going to be my life.”

At first his studies were a diversion, a refuge from waiting on tourists and stocking shelves. Then it dawned on him that school could be more than a respite. It could be his ticket. “My junior year I started thinking, way in the back of my head, maybe this could be my way out.”

Maradiaga describes his high school life as “work and study, work and study.” He didn’t hang out, kept to himself. Maradiaga was smart, inquisitive, self-aware. And junior year, someone finally noticed.

It was in an Advanced Placement history class. Teacher Jessica Goring said her department head came into the class to talk about Fed Challenge, an economics competition. “He pulled out a five-dollar bill and he said, ‘I can give this five dollars to whoever can tell me the current
chairman of the Federal Reserve.’ Jeronimo immediately says, ‘Alan Greenspan’ and takes the money. My boss was shocked.”

Goring said she learned then that Maradiaga was not only smart, but paying attention to the world around him. Over time she learned much more. Once he asked her how to proceed after getting an eviction notice. Later it emerged that he and his brother were “taking care of the household, acting as adults,” Goring said.

Now assistant principal of the Bronx School of Law and Finance, a small school within Kennedy High, Goring remembers Maradiaga coming to school three days out of five. But in a high school where one of three students graduated, he did his work—and well. His academic prowess and quiet leadership won him the respect of other students, Goring said. Maradiaga was president of National Honor Society and the Red Cross Club. Senior year he was tapped as a Posse Scholar, a highly competitive program, and before withdrawing to accept the Posse offer he was a finalist for a prestigious New York Times scholarship “for people who have overcome hardship,” as Maradiaga puts it.

But while there were accolades at school, at home the hardship was unrelenting, the stress overwhelming.

Ever since the boys were very young, their mother had confided in them, talking about money and about the bills that just kept on coming. “All her stress became our stress,” Maradiaga said.

And then the burden shifted.

His brother had graduated from high school and was working full time in a restaurant; Maradiaga was juggling his two jobs and his studies. His senior year he and his brother took over the family’s finances completely, with Jeronimo wresting control from their increasingly debilitated mother. “That was one of the hardest things,” Maradiaga said, walking past a dark brick building where his mother had once sewed.

“What was the hardest thing?” Maradiaga said, grinning and shaking his head. (Jeronimo, his mentor. His roommate’s mentor was Ian Rice, a 1999 Harvard graduate and vice president at J.P. Morgan, the investment bank. Rice was immediately struck by his positive attitude, his extraordinary strength of character and strength of will.”

With Rice at the bank and Goring at JFK High encouraging him, Maradiaga spent three Saturdays a month at Minds Matter, taking SAT prep courses, doing group work on subjects like conflict resolution. Senior year it was Tuesday-afternoon training at the Posse offices on Wall Street, at the far end of Manhattan from the Bronx. Some students saw this as a break from their routine. “I hated it,” Maradiaga said. “It just meant that day I had to work later.”

But it paid off.

Maradiaga emerged from the rounds of intensive interviews and evaluations as a Posse Scholar, giving him a full college scholarship. Oscar Maradiaga, out of school and working in a barbecue restaurant, gave him his blessing, said he would take care of the home front. But only when the selection process was over did Maradiaga tell his mother, who valued a high school degree as a prerequisite to a full-time job. Maradiaga spoke to her, as always, in Spanish. “I was already accepted into Colby when I told her,” he remembered. “I said, ‘Mom, I’m going away. To college.’ She was like, ‘What? Why?’”

While other first-years arrived at Colby with their parents in packed SUVs, Maradiaga came to Mayflower Hill with Rice, his mentor. His roommate’s parents hugged their son and said goodbye. “I didn’t really think my experience was that bizarre,” Maradiaga said, over pizza on Arthur Avenue. “I thought everyone was going to show up by themselves.”

Rice, Goring, and another of Maradiaga’s teachers bought him clothes, a television, and a DVD player so he had some of the trappings of a kid going off to college, for which he said he is very grateful.

“It still wasn’t my parents,” Maradiaga said. “I had still left my mom a few weeks...
before going to Colby, my mom had just left [for Honduras]. My brother was here [in N.Y.], homeless. I was here in this pristine place and in a sense I was a part of that, but I wasn’t. And I realized I wasn’t. It was very difficult.”

The waves of alienation came early and often. Like most new first-year students, Maradiaga went on a COOT (Colby Outdoor Orientation Trip), trading the comfort of a dorm room and the bountiful cafeterias for a tent and sleeping bag and gorp in a bag. “I was like, what the hell is this?” he said. “Why am I pretending to be poor? Sleeping on the ground, on dirt? This is like poverty. This makes no damn sense.”

The college party scene didn’t make sense, either, not to a guy who had spent his whole life threading through a minefield of drugs and alcohol because that was the only way he would succeed. Where he came from, drunks and druggies ended up in dead-end jobs or worse.

“When I got to Colby and I saw people drinking, I was like, ‘What? What is this?’” Maradiaga said. “I was so disappointed. I thought it was going to be this huge intellectual community where people were all about their classes. I don’t know what I was expecting, but certainly not Doghead [an annual marathon St. Patrick’s Day party].”

The relative wealth of the students overwhelmed him, as did their stereotypes about the Bronx. Other students assumed he must have gone to a specialized academic high school. One asked him if he was in a gang. And the backdrop to this feeling that he didn’t belong was “an immense amount of guilt,” about leaving his mother, about the luxury of being a full-time student, Maradiaga said. “My freshman year I didn’t allow myself to party or have fun. I didn’t allow myself to be happy.”

Said Sandra Sohne-Johnston, now associate director of admissions and financial aid and then Maradiaga’s Colby Posse mentor, “He came to college as an adult, not as an 18-year-old young man.”

But Maradiaga knew how to be a successful student, and he threw himself into his studies with characteristic single-mindedness. Even there, he felt less prepared than students from suburban high schools and elite prep schools. “Just think about it,” he said. “[In high school] I was going to class every other day.”

While some students come to Colby with vague but altruistic plans to help “save the world,” Maradiaga’s goals were narrow and clear: get a Colby degree, go to medical school, become a doctor, and support his family. But family obligations nearly derailed his plans entirely.

The spring of his first year, Maradiaga’s mother, who had moved in with relatives in Honduras, fell more seriously ill and had to find another living situation. Maradiaga felt he had to bring her back to the United States and help support her. He was going to withdraw from Colby. Then help arrived: Sohne-Johnston gave him some money; a professor bought his mother’s plane ticket; President William D. Adams chipped in. Maradiaga’s mother was moved to Florida, where she stayed with another of her sons, one of Maradiaga’s half brothers. Maradiaga went on to do a Duke premed program that summer, and returned to Colby for his sophomore year.

But trouble struck again that fall. His mother was still ill. The money was gone. She had to leave the apartment where she was staying. Maradiaga decided to withdraw from Colby and go earn money to help her. Administrators and Colby and Posse mentors urged him to stay, but the need to take care of his mother prevailed.

“I still remember,” he said. “I walked into Dear [Mark] Serdjenian’s office and I signed the papers. I was going to withdraw. I had tears welling up. I’m like, you had a nice time in college. Now back to the real world.”

Within a week he was in New York City. He had no place to stay, no job. His mom and brother were essentially homeless, staying in motels in Pennsylvania and Florida. He stayed in a hostel, another night in a homeless shelter, made his way to the Brooklyn home of a close friend, Rebecca Travis ‘07, another Posse Scholar. “I was all over the place Maradiaga said.

Recalling the pain of that time, he sighed. Paused. Took a deep breath and continued.

It was Sohne-Johnston who again came to his aid, he said. Her sister’s fiancé worked for a big Manhattan law firm. He got Maradiaga an interview with the human resources department there. Maradiaga went and talked to them, but they said they had nothing for him. “I explained the situation. At that point, I was crying. I was like, ‘I’m homele I need a job. Can you please help me out? I’ve done everything right in life. I need some help.”

His plea got him a referral to a temp agency. He told his story again and eventually got placed as a file clerk at another Manhattan law firm. The fiancé collected dress clothes from colleagues and Maradiaga went to work. The job paid well but he needed more money to set up an apartment for his mother, so he got a job at the front desk of a gym, working nights. He was working 90 hours a week, saving everything he could, tapping the law firm’s experts to help him navigate the health-care bureaucracy on his mom’s behalf.

All the while he told himself not to forget what he had left behind. “I was making money but I said ‘Don’t settle for this. Don’t lose sight of school. This is not what you want.”

What Maradiaga wanted was contentment, and realized that for him that came through his studie
his intellectual exploration. This was at a time when his mother finally was eligible for Social Security disability. He and Oscar set her up in Miami: food, cell phone, money in case something went wrong. She was set, for the moment. But the experience caused Maradiaga to reconsider his own life. “I didn’t have a home. I didn’t have a job, necessarily. For my own sanity I had to redefine success. I had to redefine how to be happy. Otherwise I don’t think I would have made it through.”

He returned to Colby that January and found that he valued things even he had taken for granted. “The luxuries,” he said. “A place to stay and food.”

Maradiaga’s home was a single in Colby Gardens, a temporary dorm in a former convent. But as he was released from the day-to-day demands of his overwhelming family obligations, he found himself exhausted from his grueling pace in New York, crashing emotionally, unable to even go to class. Like a marathon runner he had crossed a finish line and fallen. “He did fine on the test, but he thought he had studied enough to blow it away,” she said.

Maradiaga came in later and they discussed strategies, including studying with other students instead of going it alone. “Something just shifted,” Tilden said. “That second exam, he just blew it away. The highest score in the class. And this is with fifty students. He did the same thing on the final.”

While he continued to focus on medical school, Maradiaga started connecting with professors more and seemed to be changing his sense of himself, Tilden said. He began to emerge as a leader among her students. Maradiaga worked in Tilden’s lab and did a Jan Plan research course at the Mount Desert Island Biological Laboratory. When other Colby students there left the kitchen a mess, it was Maradiaga (who knew what it was like to do that job, day after day)

“...It was okay for me to take care of myself.”

But he also was more acutely aware of his marginalized status. In his job hunt, he had been turned down because he had no permanent New York address, but he had no address because he had no job. At Colby he had to explain repeatedly, he said, why he couldn’t submit W-2 forms from his parents. And when he returned from leave, most students assumed he’d left to travel.

“Someone said, ‘Did you leave for good reasons or bad reasons?’ I actually appreciated that. It wasn’t, ‘Oh, were you hot-air ballooning over Africa?’ It wasn’t that assumption.”

But Maradiaga also knew he wasn’t alone, that every city, every country, every continent has countless young people like him, people who are outside of the mainstream, separated by poverty, race, ethnicity. What are their dreams, he wondered. What are their notions of success? And the seed of what would be his Watson proposal (see page 24) was planted.

Andrea Tilden, associate professor of biology, remembers the intense guy in her mammalian physiology course, a prerequisite for medical school. Maradiaga, a sophomore, studied hard for the first exam and thought he had the material mastered, Tilden recalled. “He did fine on the test, but he thought he had studied enough to blow it away,” she said.

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“For him it was important that people understood that you can’t just imply that issues of wealth aren’t important, that to attend an institution like Colby means you’re privileged, to not let people forget that.” — Rebecca Travis ’07
A Watson on the Margins

There were competing notions of success in Jeronimo Maradiaga’s life: a high school diploma, a job, and a paycheck to help support his family versus years of college and professional school to achieve personal and intellectual goals.

Maradiaga, a 2009 Thomas J. Watson Fellow, chose the latter, and the decision still leaves him with conflicting feelings of guilt and accomplishment. For Maradiaga, who aspires to be an emergency-room doctor, “the road to success was confused.” He knows there are others like him around the country and the world, young people with “marginalized backgrounds,” shaped partly by family and tradition and partly by schools, television, the Internet. Do they attempt, Maradiaga asks, to follow the model pushed by the groups in power (education, material wealth, social status)?

“For a portion of America, and the majority of the world for that matter, this narrowly constructed definition of success involving a college education and monetary wealth is utterly unattainable, and in many cases not even desired,” he wrote in his Watson proposal. “Where are these stories?”

For the next year, Maradiaga will travel the world (India, Jordan, South Africa, Ecuador, and the Dominican Republic) in search of such stories. The plan is to go to each place and determine what the society defines as success. Then he will talk to high school students marginalized because of their race, religion, and/or socioeconomic class. He will also interview school administrators and parents. “In form, these success narratives will resemble my Watson fellowship personal statement. In content, I can only imagine how they will differ,” Maradiaga wrote.

He plans to take photos, videotape interviews, and post them on a blog. “This, in a small but significant way, will be done in order to provide a diverse, more inclusive definition of success,” he wrote.

As he has explained countless times since receiving the fellowship, he will not be writing a paper. “The Watson is about the process,” Maradiaga said. “It’s about you changing.” —GB

who helped the cook clean up. He also gave the other students a stern lecture, saying that was not the way you treated people. “It certainly never happened again,” Tilden said.

She refers to Maradiaga’s “sense of righteousness.” It’s something that other faculty noted, including Kim Besio, associate professor of East Asian studies. Besio said Maradiaga was “just a bulldog” when it came to mastering Chinese, which he took for the first time as a second-semester sophomore. She said the then 21-year-old reminded her not of other students she’s taught over the years, but of her own father, now a retired veterinarian.

“My father was also one of the first people in his family to go to college,” Besio said. “Jeronimo has that dignity.”

That dignity, say those who know him, may come from seeing college not as a rite of passage but as a gift and responsibility.

Maradiaga is mindful that he is an exception among countless other disadvantaged people.

That knowledge often left him in the minority in class discussions and debate surrounding campus issues related to treatment of minority students. He also stood up for the minority community on issues, including protest of a Cinco de Mayo party T-shirt that featured a caricature of an illegal immigrant.

“For him it was important that people understood that you can’t just imply that issues of wealth aren’t important, that to attend an institution like Colby means you’re privileged, to not let people forget that,” said Travis, Maradiaga’s friend and fellow Posse Scholar, who now works with an education nonprofit in New York. “It’s something that can get lost at Colby.”

Despite the obstacles, Maradiaga seized academic opportunities with relish. He did biology research and the Duke premed internship. He studied in Taiwan through a Freeman Foundation grant in the summer of 2006, and he completed an intensive language program at Beijing University during the 2008 Summer Olympics. Accepted to a Johns Hopkins University master’s program in Chinese in Nanjing, he deferred enrollment for a year to do his Watson project. Johns Hopkins and medical school will follow, Maradiaga says.

“He’s an intellectual who wants to know everything he can know,” said Goring, who still is close to Maradiaga and considers him part of her family. “He reads, he talks, he thinks constantly. He couldn’t be contained in a smaller world.”

But expanding his world has come—and continues to come—at a cost.

Maradiaga worked on his Watson fellowship proposal for 18 months and thought about it even longer. Several of the people in this story read it in various drafts. “I’ve never wanted anything so badly,” he said. “When I got the e-mail that I was a Watson Fellow—I can’t even describe it in words. I was happy, but it was subtle and quiet. It was really a dream come true.”

“Everyone I speak to from Colby—my teachers, my mentors—they’re all really happy. That individualist notion of success.”

And his family?

“My mom is never going to agree with my version of success,”
Maradiaga said. “She thinks I’m failing in some ways, that I’m not successful by living up to my obligations to the family.”

Six years after he broke the news that he was leaving to go to college, he had to break the news that he was leaving again, this time to travel around the world. “When I told my mom, she hung up on me,” Maradiaga said.

Aleman flew from Florida to New York in early April. Maradiaga was looking for a stable place for her to live. “We’re essentially homeless again,” he said at the time.

Mother and son stayed with Howard, a middle-school teacher, and Travis in Brooklyn. Maradiaga’s departure—he was planning to travel first to India—was looming, but first he had to take care of his family situation.

A scene fraught with tension and guilt? Not entirely. “The most illuminating thing about having his mother with me is how incredibly happy he is when she’s around,” Howard said. “They have such a strong bond with each other.”

In fact, the drive that has led Maradiaga out of the Bronx—to Colby and China, and now to a year-long mission to mine the dreams of marginalized young people—comes from the one person who, in Maradiaga’s circle of friends and family, may understand his remarkable trajectory the least.

“People get their sources of inspiration,” Oscar Maradiaga said, “and I guess my mom was his.”

It was their mother who “opened the floodgates,” Oscar said, coming to the United States alone. Their mother, who left elementary school to work in the family’s bodega, was determined that her sons would get an education and have a better life. To her, the brothers said, that was a high school diploma, but the emphasis on education was there.

Said Howard, “They always saw her as someone who was working very hard to make their lives better.”

And now Jeronimo Maradiaga is a source of inspiration himself.

After eight years working in a restaurant, Oscar Maradiaga, described by his younger brother as “one of the smartest people I know,” said he has decided to go back to school. He said he’d like to become a teacher, to pass on the gift of education to others. “I’m coming to realize how important it is,” he said, “and Jeronimo knows the importance of it. It opens doors. You’re enlightened by your experiences.”

The next stage of Maradiaga’s journey was to begin this summer (a stipulation of the fellowship is that he leaves before August 1). His mother had moved into an apartment in Queens with Oscar and his wife, Julia. Things were stabilized on the homefront. “A real big part of me feels like, am I being selfish?” he said. “A lot of those same feelings, I’m reliving them now.”

But the plan is unfolding. Maradiaga said he still intends to become a doctor, to work in a New York emergency room. Though his Watson project isn’t related to medicine, it is all about adapting to different cultures and places and listening to people with empathy and respect.

And the project began with this story, Maradiaga’s. He deliberated for days before agreeing to tell it. Ultimately he decided that he couldn’t ask other people to speak of their lives, hardships, and dreams if he wasn’t willing to reveal his own.

“A part of me doesn’t want my business to be out there,” he said. “But another part of me is like, no. I want people to know this. I want people to know that I had all these things against me and I still graduated from college. I want people to realize that you can do that.”

**Postscript:**

Leaving New York City at midnight, Jeronimo Maradiaga’s mother and his brother, Oscar, rode for 11 hours to Waterville to attend commencement, Sunday, May 24. They toured the campus and met many of Jeronimo Maradiaga’s friends, including students, staff, faculty, and administrators. Sitting on a bench outside Lunder House before the Posse graduation ceremony the Saturday before commencement, Rosa Alicia Aleman said everywhere she went on campus, people greeted her and said what a special person her son is.

The issues of the past were just that. “Muy orgulloso.” [I’m very proud,] she said. “No hay palabras.” [There are no words.]