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A Well-Timed Glance and a Second Chance For USF Graduates Brandon and Virmary Rodriguez, It Leads to Love, a Life Together and a New Latino Scholarship in a Program that Keeps on Giving

By Dave Scheiber, USF Foundation



The way Brandon and Virmary Rodriguez recall the story, their life forever changed two decades ago when she made her way one day to an unfamiliar nook of USF's sprawling Tampa campus to drop a math class.

If not for that mundane moment, you can safely bet that the Tampa couple wouldn't be sitting at a local seafood shack during a recent lunch hour rush, reminiscing about marriage, children and careers – and a passion for the university that brought them together quite by chance.

The truth is, it was more like Brandon's *second* chance – having unwittingly missed out on the first one.

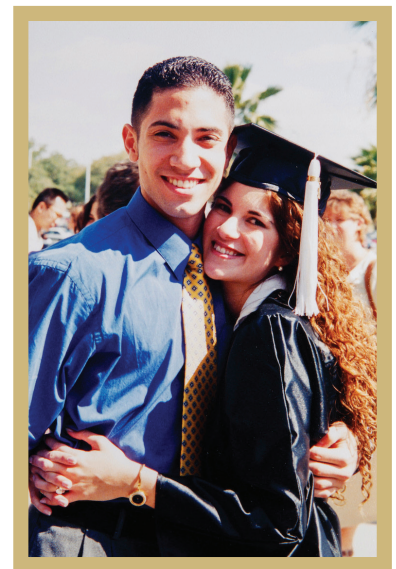
They recount the tale of a relationship that almost never happened with banter befitting a romantic comedy, teasing and jabbing each other with their own recollections of what exactly transpired. The end result: a foundation of true love, an unusual journey through unforeseen challenges and a desire to give back to USF with the creation this year of the *Dr. Brandon and Virmary Rodriguez Family Scholarship* to support the Latino Scholarship Program.

"Somebody was there for me when I needed it, and we're glad to be able to be there for others now," he says.

For Brandon, offering a helping hand to Hispanic students at USF takes him back to his freshman year, when the program provided financial support that helped him pursue his dream of becoming an eye surgeon – one he has fulfilled as a busy and successful Tampa Bay ophthalmologist. Now he and Virmary want to help other young Latino students achieve their goals in life.

"I never get tired of the chance we have to make dreams come true in some way – and see these students just bloom," says USF's Director of Diversity and Inclusion Patsy Sánchez, '95 and MA '98, who also oversees the Latino Scholarship Program.

"They knew they wanted to help and a scholarship is what made sense," adds Luz Randolph, '06 and M.Ed. '08, the USF Foundation's development officer for diversity initiatives. "For them, it all centered on one question: 'How do we help a program that allowed us to get to where we are now?'"



But how they *really* got to where they are now is another matter entirely. A quick review is in order of that fateful day – and the events preceding it – that made everything possible.

It all began when a fraternity brother of Brandon's decided to play matchmaker. He had gotten to know a sophomore co-ed named Virmary Torres, and was sure that she and his freshman pal, Brandon, would be perfect for each other.

The friend had dutifully talked up Brandon to Virmary, and arranged to bring her to a nearby restaurant, where they all would meet. Apparently, however, the plans weren't communicated clearly to Brandon, who mistakenly assumed his frat brother was dating the young woman who had been hearing rave reviews about him. "I really didn't pay any attention to her at all," he says. "And I've *never* heard the end of that."

Making matters worse, a USF cheerleader with whom Brandon had been on several dates spotted him, walked up, sat on his lap and proceeded to give him a big smooch. So much for any hopes of a love connection.

"Right in front of me! Can you believe it?" Virmary exclaims. "All I could think was, 'I'm out!'"

But fast forward two years. Now a communications and public relations major, Virmary had to drop the aforementioned math class she'd regretted signing up for. So she trekked to a part of campus she normally never would have visited – and very likely would never go to again. At that particular moment, Brandon, a biology major on a pre-med track, happened to look up and catch a glimpse of her walking nearby. They'd exchanged only a few muted hellos at parties here and there since the ill-fated introduction, but this time a light flickered on.

"I'd never seen her on my side of campus, so I wondered what she was doing there," he explains. "It's funny, because if I hadn't noticed her right at that second, there's a good chance I would never have seen her again."

Something about the serendipitous situation prompted him to take action. So he ran and caught up with her, asking what brought her to his neck of the woods.

"Basically, he was following me – and I was trying to ignore him," she interjects.

But they stopped to chat, and Brandon invited Virmary to a frat party that weekend. "He said, 'Why don't you come and invite some of your friends – and make sure they're all girls,'" she says, shaking her head.

In spite of her reservations, she decided to go, and – much to her surprise – found Brandon to be entirely different than the cocky guy she'd initially pegged him for. "I realized by the end of the party that he had changed during those two years," she says. "He was a lot more mature. One of my girlfriends whispered, 'Don't you think he's kind of cute?' And I said, 'Yeah, he's okay. I guess he's kind of growing on me.'"



They went on their first date soon after and never looked back – attending parties, movies and fraternity events, and learning how much they actually had in common.

For one, both their fathers were in the same field. Brandon's dad worked in pharmaceutical sales, a job that had taken the family from New York City to Los Angeles to Tampa. Virmary's family, meanwhile, moved to Florida from Puerto Rico when she was 12. Her father went to work as a Tampa pharmacist, and her mother opened up a cake shop, as the family developed deep roots in the area.

Brandon graduated magna cum laude in 1998 from USF's honors biology program, and was accepted at Penn State's medical school to study ophthalmology. One year later, Virmary graduated with a degree in public relations and the two were married in 1999 at St. Paul's Catholic Church in Carrollwood. But big changes were on the horizon. First came a move, with the newlywed couple heading to Brandon's native New York to start a new chapter of their lives. "He really wanted to leave Florida and move



north, and I was like, ‘Sure, buddy, we’ll go with that,’ but I knew we’d be back in Tampa eventually,” Virmary says, smiling.

There was quite a detour first, however. Brandon came from a military family and he had attended USF with help not only from the Latino Scholarship Program but also a scholarship from the U.S. Navy. That made him an inactive reservist after leaving USF, and would commit him to some four years of regular training to repay the Navy. “Every man in my family had served in a time of war, including my father, who fought in Vietnam, so I was proud to do that,” he says.

Brandon imagined he would do his Navy duty and then move on. But everything changed on Sept. 11, 2001 with the terrorist attacks. He was a senior in medical school at the time, and it wasn’t long before he received a letter from the Navy. “They said, ‘Listen, we’re having a war and you’re not doing training anymore – when med school is over, you’re coming in to start serving,’” he recalls. “At the time, they were looking for any able-bodied men to join the Marine Corps infantry, and you could get your choice of duty station if you volunteered.”

The options were Camp Pendleton in Southern California, Camp Lejeune in North Carolina or the Marine base in Hawaii. “So I thought, ‘I’ll go to Hawaii – fantastic!’” he remembers. “How bad can that be?”

Pretty bad, as it turned out. The training with the 3rd Marine Division was challenging, requiring training for months at a time in jungle and mountainous environments. Fortunately, he was able to delay his deployment in order to build a small house in Hawaii where Virmary and newborn baby, Alyssa, could live while he was away. But in short order, Brandon was sent to fight in Afghanistan, and Virmary returned to Tampa with her baby – praying that her husband would make it home safely. After six-and-a-half harrowing months in Kunar Province and Korengal, otherwise known as the Valley of Death, he did.

For Virmary, it was a difficult time to say the least. She gave birth to the couple’s second child, Anabella, along the way and essentially lived life as a single mom in Tampa. But in 2007, Brandon finally returned home, leaving the military as a lieutenant commander to resume his quest to become an eye surgeon.

They decided to move back to New York, where Brandon did his fellowship at Cornell University’s Manhattan campus. Meanwhile, Virmary got a job in pharmaceutical sales, but left the position to have the couple’s third child and first son, Ashton, in 2011. By that point, she and Brandon were each getting fed up with the cold weather, and a return to Tampa seemed increasingly appealing for family reasons as well.

“I really wanted to come back and be near my parents and family,” Virmary says. “This is what home is for me.”

They moved back to Tampa in 2011 and quickly established new roots in familiar territory. Brandon soon signed on with St. Luke’s Cataract and Laser Institute, and it was only a matter of time before he and Virmary reconnected with their alma mater.

The defining moment occurred in 2015, during the Latino Scholarship ceremony. Sánchez’s theme for the event was reuniting past recipients with their donors, and Brandon was paired with retired founding director Donna Parrino. She had been his sponsor and mentor when he was awarded the *Esperanza Salgado Memorial Scholarship* – established by Parrino to honor her

mother and ensure that her legacy would help open doors for students. Each spoke movingly from adjacent podiums, with Brandon sharing the major impact that the scholarship had on him. When he was done, Dr. Ray Ortiz, a longtime program supporter, approached him with a short but powerful message: “Now it’s your turn.”

The words were a trigger, making Brandon and Virmary wonder how they could make a difference on their own. They had always envisioned themselves contributing in some way. And the timing seemed right now. Working with the USF Foundation, they created an operating scholarship, which will be awarded this fall. In fact, two students will benefit each year since a match is being provided by the Helios Education Foundation, an organization dedicated to creating post-secondary opportunities for students in Florida and Arizona.

“We hope that happens with every student who comes through our program but we never know when that match will light – it did for Brandon after hearing Dr. Ortiz,” Sánchez says. “His words truly resonated with him right then and there.”



Brandon with sponsor Donna Parrino at a Latino Scholarship Program event in 1997.



The Rodriguez family: Brandon, Virmary, Alyssa, 13, Anna-bella, 11, and Ashton, 6.

Like most of the students who appear before the scholarship selection committee, Brandon's heart pounded nervously as he made a pitch for the scholarship, expressing his hope of one day becoming an eye surgeon. “I hear them tell us they want to become doctors, dentists, engineers, teachers, and then we see them do just that!” Sánchez says. “We welcome back Brandon as the successful ophthalmologist he told us he would become – and we can’t help but boast about his success and the success of the hundreds of graduates for more than a quarter of a century.”

The Latino Scholarship Program benefits high-achieving students who are the first in their families to attend college and need financial support. In the course of its 26 years, more than \$4.8 million has been raised in endowed funds and some 500-plus students have graduated from the program. Its alumni have gone on to work in the community in an array of professional positions – including education, health, law, engineering and much more.

“That initial gift is one that never stops giving,” Sánchez adds. “And that is evident now more than ever before, as more graduates like Brandon and his wife come back 20 years later to say, ‘I’m giving back for all that’s been given to me.’ To see these students come full circle is just so wonderful.”

Brandon and Virmary know they owe a lot to the program that has helped so many since its inception – not to mention the chance meeting 20 years ago that changed everything.

For information on how to create a scholarship in USF's Latino Scholarship Program or support the program, please contact Luz Randolph, Development Officer for Diversity Initiatives in the USF Foundation, at (813) 974-6766 or at lrandolph@usf.edu; or Patsy Sánchez, Director of Diversity and Inclusion and the Latino Scholarship Program, at (813) 974-3827 or patsysanchez@usf.edu