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How One Student Put Off College For A Year And Changed His Life

By Cathy Tyson

A preponderance of high school graduates raised in Lamorinda head directly to college, and Lafayette resident Mike Meo was the only student in his entire graduating class at De La Salle High School to defer. Instead he chose to spend the better part of a school year in a tiny town called Magangué, Colombia. It all started when he took a trip to Tijuana, Mexico in February of his senior year, with his church youth group, volunteering at a school. "I realized this was my calling – teaching and learning."

"Some of my friends thought I was crazy, but in the end they were supportive. Around here, there is a machine that funnels kids directly to college."

The concept of deferment was virtually unheard of at his prestigious Christian Brothers college prep school. Early spring of his senior year, like most students, Mike had already applied to a num-

ber of universities, and was waiting for, hopefully, acceptance letters. Unsure of where to start this process, Mike spoke with his counselor at De La Salle, who connected him with one of the head Brothers in San Francisco who it turns out is friends with the head Brother in Colombia.

Next he received acceptance letters from Hampshire College in Massachusetts and Lewis and Clark in Oregon. Unbeknownst to his parents, he spoke with the administration at Hampshire, his first choice, to inquire about deferment. No problem, 5% - 10% of the students at this small liberal arts college defer.

The next hurdle was broaching the subject with Mom and Dad. "At first I just spoke about the concept of deferment and its many benefits just to introduce them to the idea." In the end, they were concerned for his safety, but supportive.



Mike Meo teaching a class

Long story short, instead of flying east to Hampshire College, on Sept. 7th of 2006, Mike flew south to Bogotá, Columbia. It was clearly a leap of faith, as prior to his departure he had no idea about Columbia in general, Magangué in particular, calling home, a hospital in case he was injured, drinking water etc.

He was able to stay at the De La Salle University in Bogotá for a week to get acclimated and visit the surrounding villages.

Mike ended up teaching 15 classes at 4 different schools, developed his own curriculum, and mastered the Spanish language. He was a bit of a celebrity in town due to his outsider status and his pronunciation skills.

"These kids are the most ambitious students; half of them are hungry, it's 110 degrees out, they have nothing but old desks and a beat up chalkboard, and they would stay in class for an hour after the final bell rang."

His blog, www.mikecolom-bia.blogspot.com details his entire journey. Early in his trip, on September 13, he writes, "The transition from dependent to independent began on Sunday, when I arrived. I still know very little, I still can't fully understand the language. Every little thing is a huge achievement for me. Every phrase I learn is that much more independence...In one week, I have gained a new appreciation for so many things."

By December, Mike was enjoying life in Colombia. "Everything is so beautiful here because everything is so different. It's hard to forget here, that change, that freshness of life. I am in this weird stage right now, where I feel so comfortable here, so at home in this town. Where I feel different but not like a foreigner...Everything waits for me to find it and capture it."

Fast-forward to late August 2007, Mike leaves for Hampshire College a changed man. "There are about a billion ways that this experience has affected me. I have grown in ways I couldn't have imagined – I have a new perspective, new eyes, new dreams, and a new purpose in life and motivation."

Mike wants to invite students and parents considering a gap year to contact him via e-mail at kiiyaker@sbcglobal.net

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Meo and friends on the playground

"It Doesn't Have to Happen" at Campolindo

By Sophie Braccini

Moraga Police Chief Mark Ruppenthal was among many staffing a new information table at Campolindo's Cougar Days on August 22. Ruppenthal was there to support the "It Doesn't Have to Happen" campaign sponsored by the Campolindo Parents' Club Healthy Choice Committee.

"It Doesn't Have to Happen" is sponsored by Friday Night Live (FNL), an agency funded by the California State Department of Alcohol and Drugs and the Office of Traffic Safety. The core of this prevention program is aimed at encouraging teens to stand up for their friends. Its message is "Friends ask friends to drive safe." Program Coordinator Al Crancer explains, "Friends are the first line of defense, along with family, to prevent unsafe behavior; friends that ask for a change often get it."

Chief Ruppenthal wants his department to be at the forefront



Moraga P.D. Chief Ruppenthal, Campo student Scott Fournier, Program Coordinator Al Crancer and Healthy Choice Committee Co-chair Margaret Qualls during Cougar Days Photo by Sophie Braccini

of prevention, and comments, "The Lamorinda community has had enough tragic events, we need to foster prevention and part of this is supporting this program that educates kids into making the correct choices."

For the program to work it's essential that kids feel comfortable making the right decision, so it's hoped that a large number of teens will take the It Doesn't Have to Happen pledge: "I pledge to do my best to act when a friend is about to drink and drive, speed too

fast for conditions or ride unbuckled." Teen who take the pledge receive a coupon from Subway, Nation's or Burger King.

Margaret Qualls, Co-chair of the Healthy Choice Committee at Campolindo was happy with the response during Cougar Days, "This was very successful, the parents were extremely interested and the awareness of their children was definitely increased. Safe driving is really a priority of the Healthy Choice Committee this year as well as stress reduction."

Local Seniors Enjoy Continuing Education at Emeritus College

By Lee Borrowman

"Every study we have read on aging stresses the importance of continuing to learn in order to keep the brain stimulated and healthy. That is what Emeritus College does," say Joe and Jean Mulroy of Moraga. A program of Diablo Valley College, Emeritus offers affordable educational classes and activities designed specifically for older adults in a variety of locations throughout Contra Costa County.

The Mulroy's have enjoyed several Emeritus courses, explaining "The variety of subjects offers something for everyone. We took a course on opera, something we knew little about. At the completion of the course we attended an opera

in San Francisco with a completely different appreciation, which we would probably not have done with out the Emeritus class. A course on the history of Palestine gave us a perspective that continues to affect how we read the news on that area. The instructor was excellent and it was a pleasure to attend a class with intelligent, interested other seniors."

George and Julie Fisher agree. "We look forward to every brochure from Emeritus College with the anticipation of new and exciting classes," they enthuse, continuing, "These no-fuss offerings are just perfect for older adults hoping to keep their minds active and growing."

Classes meet from one day to six weeks, during the day, making it easy to fit a class into any schedule. The current course offerings include a tour of an Aboriginal Art exhibit at St. Mary's College on October 10 and a performance by historian Betty Marvin as architect Julia Morgan at the Lafayette Community Center on October 19. Classes at other locations include such diverse offerings as "Roosevelt and Truman," "The Art and Architecture of Rome," "A Capella Music of Cuba" and "Five-Minute Gourmet Meals."

For more information or to view the current schedule of classes, go to <http://www.dvc.edu/emmeritus/>, or call 925-906-9106.

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