

FREE AND BRAVE

By Afro-Bolivian English Language Learners



FREE AND BRAVE

*A project by the College Horizons Outreach Program "Cohort 3"
at Universidad Católica Boliviana "San Pablo" and
sponsored by the Embassy of the United States of America*



UNIVERSIDAD
CATÓLICA
BOLIVIANA



*Designed by Alizon Vasquez Morillas
grantee "Cohort 3"
2023*

Index

Alizon Vasquez	2-3
Matihus Medina	4-5
Alexandra Arismendi	6-7
John Angola Maconde	8-9
Alejandro Poma	10-11
Aleli Lazo	12
Clever Zarate	13
Paulette Calderón	14
Axel Ayaviri	15
Isaac Adhemir Perez Rey	16
Concepción Iriondo	17-20
Michel Pedreros	21
Wendy Vasquez	22
Alexandra Jira	23-24
Leslie Urichi	25
Gerusalen Torrez	26-27

Preface

In 2019, the US Embassy and the Language Center of Universidad Católica Boliviana “San Pablo” agreed to be partners in the implementation of the “College Horizons Outreach Program,” a 2-year English program for Afro-Bolivian youth. This is when a big educational adventure of almost four years started. Since then, we have worked with three cohorts in total. Two of them have graduated successfully, and the current cohort, affectionately called “CHOP 3,” is expected to graduate in December, 2023.

As the Head of the Language Center and one of their former English instructors, I have been fortunate to get to know all grantees, from all cohorts, who have striven to reach a high English level as well as learn more about their own identity, goals, and dreams. The current cohort has filled our hearts with even more hope and love because of their positive attitude and tenacity. They are brave warriors. They have been facing all types of social, emotional, educational, and family challenges, but despite all these obstacles, they have decided to believe in themselves and their skills.

This collection of memoirs is proof of their hard work learning English. In their stories, they have been able to express deep emotions, but especially they have poured their own identities, which are complex and all unique, into the written word. Most have experienced discrimination and racism due to their skin color or appearance, but still, they are kind and sweet. They all have goals and dreams which I am sure they will be reaching in the near future.

Our goal with this collection of memoirs is to give all these grantees a voice, so more individuals can get to know them and appreciate the fact that Afro-descendant youth is part of our beautiful diverse Bolivia. We all hope you enjoy these stories.

Mónica Flores Rojas
Head of the Language Center
Universidad Católica Boliviana
“San Pablo”





Brown Skin Girl

by Alizon Vasquez

I was born in Chulumani Sud Yungas in 1996. My name is Alizon Vasquez Morillas. I had a nice childhood there with my family but when I was 2 years old, I became seriously ill and I almost died. I'm alive thanks to my brother but it is a long story to tell.

When I was 8 years old my parents decided to bring me to La Paz with my two older sisters and my brother. When I arrived, I felt lost, without friends, I felt alone in a strange place so I got sick because I missed my parents so much. I really didn't want to be here. For a long time, I felt like this, missing Yungas and hating being here. I didn't like the weather, even now I don't like it. I really hate cold weather. Moreover, my parents didn't come to visit us often so it was a very difficult time for me because I was a child and I needed them. As time passed by, I got used to being here and well La Paz became my new home. I remember that I used to go to Yungas every vacation.

I have been in 3 different schools since I arrived. When I was in the last school, I met my best friend, Leslie Ibáñez. We are friends even now. When I was in my senior year, I faced the discrimination because of my skin color, but when I was at the University, I met new friends and I also met my first boyfriend too.

It was funny when my father found out because when I told him that I had a boyfriend, my sister told him that she was getting married, too.

At that time, I was very shy. I was very different from the way I am now.

When I was finishing University the pandemic suddenly started, so I stayed in Yungas for two long years but at that time I didn't want to be there because I had plans in La Paz, but I couldn't come back. This time around I was different. The work there was too hard so I realized that I didn't like it.

Then, I understood why my parents brought me here. They didn't want that for me. Now I'm grateful to them, I'm grateful for what they sacrificed for all of their children.

In 2022. I found out about this scholarship thanks to my best friends. I was not sure about applying but I decided to do it. When they called me and told me that I had gotten the scholarship I was really, really, really happy! It was a big change to meet my brothers and sisters from my own culture, I thought.

Before starting, I didn't know other black people in the city, nobody. I saw black people on the streets but I didn't talk with them because I was shy as I said earlier. Now I know I can do it.

This opportunity has changed my life because I have met interesting people like uncle Juan Angola Maconde. He is an important writer of Afro-Bolivian history and he has a lot of knowledge about our culture. I made many friends too.

I am grateful to life for this opportunity.

As Beyonce said,

"Brown skin girl
your skin just like pearls
the best thing in the world
never trade you for anybody else."

A Bit about Me

By Matihus Medina

My name is Matihus Medina. I'm a twenty-eight-year-old guy and I'm from Bolivia. I'm an Afro Bolivian, but I wasn't born in Los Yungas. I was born in La Paz, so I went to school and university here. Right now, I'm studying English thanks to a scholarship I applied for. It's a scholarship for Afro Bolivian students, so I'm grateful for that because I'm learning a foreign language. It's really important for many reasons and of course it has been a challenge for me, but now I feel wonderful because now I can understand English much better. I have an excellent opportunity.

There are many interesting things about me. When I was at elementary school, I was a really good soccer player. I played soccer every day. I was also an excellent runner. I won some competitions. Then, when I was a teenager, I started playing basketball. I played basketball for a long time, maybe 5 years. I just wanted to play that, but I usually played alone or with some friends because basketball isn't a really important sport in my country. Sadly, I'm not playing any sport now. After that, I enlisted in the ARMY for a short time, only for one year, and I went there only on Saturdays. Here in Bolivia, we call it, Pre-Military Service. I enjoyed that time doing a lot of exercise. There I learnt to fire a gun.

That was incredible! Some years later, I studied bakery for a year and after that I worked in a typical and famous food place here, called Salteñas "Paceña," and then I worked in the Donut Factory. I love donuts and salteñas!

I also studied Social Communication at UMSA and when I was there, on the third year, I took an extracurricular guitar class. I learnt how to play the guitar better, and after that I fell in love with music. I think music is one of the most important things in my life. Learning music is wonderful.

Now I'm learning how to play the piano, well the keyboard really, and I love to practice. There is just one thing I love besides playing the piano and it's playing video games. I have been playing video games since I was a child. I have a phrase in my life and it's if you think you can't you're right, but if you think you can, you're right too. When I think I can't do something, I just remember those words. I can do everything I set my mind to. Everyone can if they really want to.



Obstacles

By Alexandra Arismendi

I am Alexandra Esther Arismendi Garcia and I was born in La Paz, Bolivia. When I was a baby, I was sick all the time because I was very fragile. My mom was worried, but she took care of me, her daughter, with love and patience.

Time passed by and I grew up and overcame obstacles related to my health. My parents were proud of their dear daughter, me, because I was a cheerful, creative, gentle and smart. At school my teachers told my parents their daughter was very talented for drawing, making stories and doing poetry and other subjects like mathematics, biology and art, but in physical education that was different because I had difficulties with my hip so I was working hard to do exercise. I needed therapy, so I went to “Clinica del Deporte” every day and I took swimming classes too. Learning how to swim was very difficult for me, so I practiced a lot and after three months, after many attempts and mistakes, I faced my fear and I finally learned to swim, but the swimming pool and water with chlorine brought many problems to my life because it caused burns on my face.

I cried in front of the mirror many times, and I hated to go to school because my classmates bothered me. That was hard but I got over the situation, but these problems were nothing compared to my father’s death and how that affected me.

Now I'm nineteen years old. I'm still learning about life and people. Growing up is hard. Many people can't mature even if they are old, but you have to learn to live with them because a strong person is not someone who screams, humiliates or hurts others. A strong person is someone who is calm and doesn't hurt someone else. I'm not perfect. I know my vision about life can change through time, but I will keep trying to be a good person and overcome any obstacle.





Life Heritage

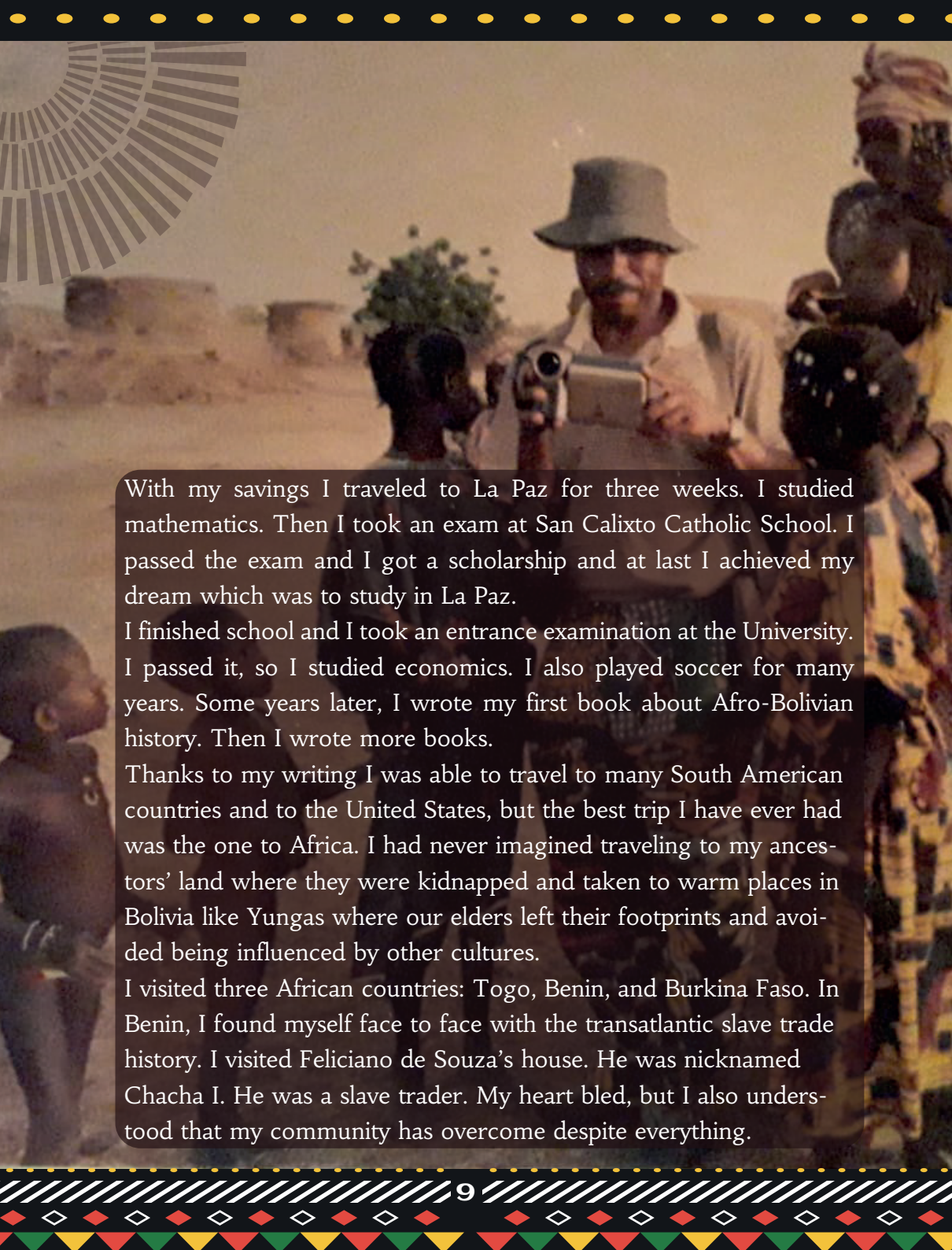
By Juan Angola Maconde

I was born in Dorado Chico, an Afro-descendant community, located in Yungas in 1950. My mother's name was Irene Maconde Zambrana and her mother's name was Modesta Zambrana and her father's name was Constancio Maconde. My father's name was Santiago Angola Larrea. His mother's name was Juana Larrea, and his father's name was Dionicio Angola.

My parents had twelve children and I was the last son. I have only met three sisters and two brothers.

I went to school. This school was located in the community where I was born. I studied in my community for only three years. Then, I left my community and I went to Coripata School. I completed the 4th, 5th and 6th grade in Capt. Luis Rivero Sanchez School. To avoid being hungry, I rang the church bell at 6:30 every morning. For this job the church paid me some money. Then, I studied my first three years in a public school called Eduardo Avaroa in the same town. During these last three school years, I worked three hours a day in the same church, but at the carpenter's workshop. My job was from 13:00 to 14:00 during lunch break, and from 16:30 to 18:30 after class. I made money with my job and paid for food, my house rent and I decided to save some money.

During these six years, I was near my family. My dream like any other young boy was to travel to the city, so I decided to travel to La Paz, but for me that dream seemed to be impossible, because I not only expected to make money, but also to save some.



With my savings I traveled to La Paz for three weeks. I studied mathematics. Then I took an exam at San Calixto Catholic School. I passed the exam and I got a scholarship and at last I achieved my dream which was to study in La Paz.

I finished school and I took an entrance examination at the University. I passed it, so I studied economics. I also played soccer for many years. Some years later, I wrote my first book about Afro-Bolivian history. Then I wrote more books.

Thanks to my writing I was able to travel to many South American countries and to the United States, but the best trip I have ever had was the one to Africa. I had never imagined traveling to my ancestors' land where they were kidnapped and taken to warm places in Bolivia like Yungas where our elders left their footprints and avoided being influenced by other cultures.

I visited three African countries: Togo, Benin, and Burkina Faso. In Benin, I found myself face to face with the transatlantic slave trade history. I visited Feliciano de Souza's house. He was nicknamed Chacha I. He was a slave trader. My heart bled, but I also understood that my community has overcome despite everything.

An Adventure of a Lifetime

By Alejandro Poma Villarreal

I was born in La Paz in 1995. I live with my mother and three siblings. I remember that when I was a child, I was sponsored by an American family thanks to a Program called “Compassion International,” so I was able to get two other mothers. Their names are Jan and Kim Stold.

I’m Afro-Bolivian. Agu, my grandmother, was Afro-Bolivian. I have never met my father, so I don’t have any memories of him. I studied in a public school, so my teacher didn’t teach me about Afro-Bolivian culture and I thought I was all alone. In 2018, I had an incredible opportunity to travel to the United States. My mother, Paula, and my grandmother, Agu, gave me their savings to take this trip, and I was so grateful. It was a dream come true to explore different cities, including Boston, Miami, Florida, and New York.

My journey began in Boston, where I visited MIT University because I had a workshop about statistics. I also indulged in some delicious lobster rolls, which was a highlight of my trip.



From Boston I flew to Miami, Florida, where I sunbathed on beautiful beaches and I experienced nightlife in South Beach. My next stop was the iconic New York City, where the bright lights of Times Square put a smile on my face.

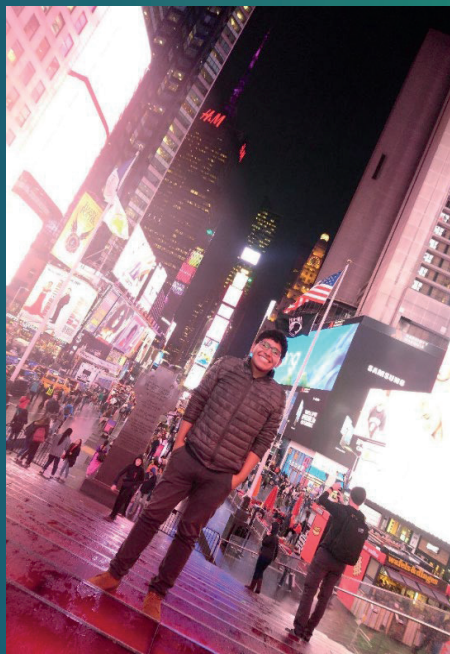
I explored Central Park and I visited the One World Trade Center, a very famous skyscraper. I couldn't believe I was there! During my trip, I created lasting memories from visiting the famous Universal Studio in Miami to walking across the Brooklyn Bridge in New York City. I also tried various food from classic American burgers. For example, "Shake Shack" or "Pizza i\$."

I also enjoyed going shopping in the fashion districts and buying souvenirs to remember my trip. I even managed to get some great deals in the outlets of Florida. As I reflect on my trip to the United States,

I am grateful for the opportunity my mom and the university gave me to experience different cities and cultures. It was a trip of a lifetime. I have many good memories that will last forever.

In 2022, I had an incredible opportunity to study English in Bolivia. I got the College Horizons Outreach Program grant. I have been learning about Afro-Bolivian culture and practicing my English even more, so I'm motivated to return to the United States.

I'm grateful to many people, my parents, siblings, and friends because they encourage me to keep on going every day.





Dancing Ballet

By Aleli Lazo

When I was in 1st grade I loved to dance and I always practiced at home watching videos of dancers or movies.

One day when I was dancing in the living room of my house, the owner of the house where I lived came to see what I was doing. That's when he saw me dancing and told my mom that there were ballet school and that day was the last day for registration and my mom went and handed in all the requirements.

Weeks later, I took the admission exam and my cousin also took the exam. In total there were two hundred girls taking the exam and from all those girls only twenty passed and I was one among them from that day on I entered the ballet.

From that moment I have been dancing there. Only one time I was about to quit ballet.

That time was when I had a problem with my tardiness. I was the best in my class but I had been late more than seven times and we could only have three tardies and that's why I almost dropped out but they gave me another chance because the director told my mom not to quit ballet because I had a great future and that's why I didn't quit.





My Sister

By Clever Zarate

When I was child, I was the only son in my family. For that reason, I felt alone because I wanted a friend, a buddy, I needed a brother or a sister. I had lots of friends. That's true but I wanted a friend. So, when my mother got pregnant, I was happy because finally I was going to have a sister. My sister Hosanna was born on May 14th, 2017 and I think that was one of the most important days of my life. When I met my sister, I felt like the happiest person in the world because she was my dream come true. My sister was so small, so tiny, and the first time that I saw her was so special for me. I will never forget that moment. Then, my sister started to grow. First, she was 1 year old, and time flew, she got bigger every day. She started to speak. First, she said dad and then she said mom. It was beautiful. Every day she did something new. When she was small, she was a little naughty. I can remember when she played with my things, and it was fun. Then she got older and she was four when she started school. She started school in quarantine and it was a great experience because I had classes near her. I was having classes on my cell phone while she was having classes on the computer and I helped her with some things and I remembered my childhood with her.

Now, she's five and she's in first grade. She's beautiful and kind. She likes singing and drawing and she's big. She's very big. She's very special for me. Although, some days we're angry at each other, we usually get along well. She's a very good person and I'm thankful to God for her life because she's the best sister in the world.



Thank you, Mom

By Paulette Calderón

When I was nine years old my mother passed away. That day something in my heart got lost. I remember that I said “why did she die?” and “why?”

I felt very sad after that. I was thinking and I thinking, then I had the need to be someone or something in life, but I didn't know how, so I continue studying and I tried to be the best in my classes but it has been very difficult. After my mother passed away, I was one of the best in my classes and in high school I was a good student but I wasn't the best student, but I didn't give up and I tried to be the best.

Now I know what I will be in the future and I have a life plan. I'm going to be a sports teacher because I love sports and I don't know what my life would be like if I didn't play sports.

I am very grateful for everything my mother taught me during the time she was with me and thanks to her I was able to grow stronger every day.



Writing is not my Cup of Tea

By Axel Ayaviri



When I got this scholarship, I was like a rock. I had never thought I was going to succeed, I thought I was going to fail because the day I introduced myself, I was sick and I thought I was going to fail and lose it but... They, see me, I'm still here.

When the classes started, I thought we had to go to the university but luckily it was going to be online for a while. I didn't really enjoy the first two weeks of classes because we covered very basic English that I already understood but I realized that there were a lot of things I forgot. I think the only thing I'm good at is speaking. I always try to emphasize every expression I learn, and have fun.

Like everyone, I found an area that is complicated for me, writing. I've never been good at expressing myself in writing. I usually write a very short thing or an unnecessary thing.

I don't know the reason, but I think that's because I don't know how to explain my ideas and feelings because I'm a person who doesn't expect much from others. However, I think now I write better than before. I know how to explain something like theory or something that's interesting to me but my problem is that I'm so slow at writing, but I feel the way I can improve my English is by writing. I don't enjoy writing when I'm forced to do so. I know that I have to do it, but I think I have to start doing it by myself. When I was a child, I tried to write a little story about dinosaurs. I remember that I drew a lot of dinosaurs on that little "book", and I think that I can try this again.



Willpower

By: Isaac Adhemir Perez Rey

This story is based on the time when I was a cadet of the military school and we used to go to rural locations. I spent one month in one of those rural locations and during that month I got to know my comrades. I learned more about their weaknesses and strengths. I spent time with them. We laughed, got angry at each other, and worried about certain things.

I remember once military officials made us participate in a parade to protest for the loss of access to the sea. They took us along a road and we had to hold a giant flag along the road. That day I tested all my physical endurance because the day before I hadn't slept well. We walked from 1:00 pm to midnight with our rifles.

Military people call their rifles "girlfriends" because it's your war buddy that will save your life. I was wearing "diablito," which is a garment that keeps the legs warm, a sweater, and gloves on, but I still felt very cold.

The next day I had to endure a sunny day with such clothes on. There was nowhere to leave our clothes; that road had no trees. The whole place had wild straw all over. All this lasted almost all day and we didn't have lunch and all I wanted was to sleep but that night I had to be in the guard post and the next day I continued the orientation and patrol instruction.

Be Strong!

By Concepción Iriondo

I was born on December 8th in 1990 in Naranjani, Yungas. My mom named me Deisy Concepción, but when my dad went to the main town to register my name, he had forgotten Deisy and just named me “Concepción,” but all my family and friends call me Deisy. I’m Concepción only in paper.

Everybody describes their mothers as the best in the world, but I describe my mother as the best in the universe because she was a very strong mother. She worked hard and at the same time took care of her children. She was understanding and kind with all of us.

My dad was a happy person. He didn’t like drinking alcohol or smoking. He was a soccer player, and worked hard to raise his five children, but life wasn’t easy for them because they went through a lot of big problems.

In Naranjani, there isn’t elementary school, so my parents decided to take us La Paz along with our aunt. I was 5 years old, and I was separated from my mom because I had to start school.

My aunt’s husband was very mean to us. He used to hit us, especially my older siblings. We saw my parents only 3 or 4 times a year, but they always sent us money. It was sad for them to be away from their children, but we had to study.

On vacation we went to Yungas and we were so happy, but when we had to go back to la Paz it was sad. My parents decided to rent a small room in another part of the city, so my siblings and I lived alone. Sometimes we didn’t have any food or money, but we spent special times together.

Back then it was very difficult to communicate with my parents because they didn't have a cellphone or phone and coming to la Paz was hard for them.

While writing this, I'm feeling melancholic because I remember why I love my siblings so much. My dad wanted to buy a car to transport oranges, but he was mugged and lost all his money. After that, my parents wanted to buy a small house in La Paz, but they were scammed. Later, my brother wanted to become a military officer, but one day he had an accident when he went to see my parents. He was electrocuted. He stayed in the hospital for almost 15 months and my parents got heartbroken and spent all their money trying to help him. We used to help them to work on vacation or holidays. My brother fell into depression. After a few years, he died. It was a terrible blow for my mother and father because some years ago, three of my siblings died. But I didn't know them because I was a baby but my brother was like a father to us. When we lived alone, he had more responsibility than us. My heart was broken.

My sister, Mary, had a baby. She named him "Isaias." When Isaias was 2 years old, she died. I remember playing with her, she was a very outgoing person. When I was bullied at school, we were almost always alone without our parents. My others classmates made fun of me because my clothes and shoes were old. Mary always protected me. She was strong, brave, rebellious and pretty. When she died, I felt I died too. This is the reason why her son is now my son. Whenever I see him, I remember my sister. I used to go to Naranjani to visit and help my parents at that time because they were in charge of Mary's baby. They took care of him for about 3 years.

I have one question for God. I guess if I see him one day, I'll ask him, "Why is life harder for some people?"

When I was 5 months pregnant, I went to Yungas. I thought my mother would be disappointed at me. I cried when I saw her. I felt really lonely at that moment, but she hugged me and told me, "My dear daughter, don't cry I'm here with you. You aren't alone. Now that you are here with me, you can cry, but when you are alone you have to be strong and continue living for your son." Those words are marked in my heart and I will always remember them.

Two months later, my world fell apart, we found out that my mom was sick. She had "cancer." The doctor told us that she only had two months to live, only two months. Can you imagine this? My sister, Mirian, and I tried to do everything to help her. When my son was a baby my mom was on chemotherapy. My father got sick too. He got depressed because they had been together since they were 15 years old. My dad was 66 years old and he felt sad for my mom. Nine months later, my mom died, so my dad needed a lot of care. We tried to help him too, but a year later he died too.

My brother was with his wife in Santa Cruz, and my sister with her husband in La Paz.

When I returned to Naranjani without my dad and without my mom, I remember that I walked across the balcony. I went in to my parents' room, my siblings' room and I sat on the bench and I looked at the yard and I felt completely lonely. Why? If some years earlier, on vacation, I was with my whole family. My mom was playing soccer with us. She was the goalkeeper.

My siblings and I were playing while my dad laughed, but now no one was there, only me and I cried a lot. Life was going to be different for me. I was alone with two children. I saw my little children, my two angels and decided to continue for them. I also decided I wouldn't fight over anything with my siblings. Now I think that life is short I want to improve myself, of course, but the most important thing for me is to love my family, talk to my siblings and have a good time with my children. Now I just thank God for the good and the bad moments and I ask him to take care of them. Whenever I feel sad, I remember my mother's words, "Be strong."





Trying to Shine

By Michel Pedreros

Regarding my life journey, the truth is that I don't know where to start, but I think I will start by telling you some things that have changed my life. I think that since I was child my life hasn't been easy. At first, I didn't adapt to school well because I suffered bullying very frequently and that's why now, for example, I don't let my hair down. I was ashamed of my hair, my skin color, and my physical traits for a long time.

I learned to love myself just one year ago and it's something I'm still working on. I learned to get out of there when I stopped caring about other people's opinions. I stopped listening to their comments and started doing what I like. By dressing as I liked, I learned to love myself. However, depression hits me sometimes, so I cry and then it goes away.

Another difficult moment was when my father abandoned me. It was difficult. Now I feel the consequences like always looking for guys who give me a lot of affection because my father didn't do it. For example, when they give me gifts, I believe they love me. It's difficult, but it's also something that I'm beginning to try to overcome. That is the most important thing about my life.

Recommendation: If you are a person who doesn't know how to start loving and accepting yourself as you are, take a deep breath and ignore the bad comments, and continue with your life. When people only seek to offend or hurt you, they will say very ugly things, so it is our decision to listen or let it affect us. Start looking in the mirror and tell yourself how beautiful you are.



The Battle

By Wendy Vasquez

On February 20th, 2022, four friends, two girls and two boys, went for a walk in the morning. They took a lot of food and drinks with them. They decided to visit one place before lunch. Then suddenly, three men stood in front of them. They were holding rocks, guns and sticks. Those men robbed these friends.

They hit them and they shot one of the girls. After hurting all of them, these men escaped with all things they could take, such as cellphones, money and backpacks. They even took the food and drinks.

One of the girls could save her cellphone so they could use that to call the police and her family. They stayed in the hospital for many days to recover. They couldn't believe what happened to them, but they were brave and could survive because they fought for their life. When they left the hospital, they continued feeling scared, nervous, and down probably for 3 months, but they tried to forget that horrible moment.

As time passed by, they could feel better and they came back to life. Sometimes I feel scared when I remember that moment because it was so difficult, but I just think of God. I pray and ask for strength to continue with my life.

Only thanks to God and my son, I can continue living now. This awful event was difficult in every sense because I lost my job, and my family and I spent a lot of money because I had to stay in the hospital. They felt down too.

Now my friends and I try to help each other by talking about our story to keep our faith and overcome our fears.

Loving Life

By Alexandra Jira

I don't remember a lot of things of my childhood, but yesterday I had an activity at school about my journey too, so I was able to remember some things. I think I have had a good life. From 2007 to 2015 I had a quiet life. Then, my sisters were born.

I think we had some problems, but they weren't really important. In 2015, I started seeing life differently. I noticed problems in my family, but I thought they would go away. Then, from 2018 to 2019 I think I had my best years. At school everything was wonderful as well as at home, but then 2020 started and it was terrible for me. I was really sad. I had many family problems and I wanted to die.

I changed my personality and I hated life. I believe it was a really interesting stage in my life. I learned a lot of things. I read a lot of books and when I said, "OK, I don't want to live anymore," I read "Hasta el último de mis días." That book opened my eyes and I started loving life. If I didn't want to end up like the protagonist of the book, I needed to love life, and I had to try to change everything that was happened at that time, so I started changing everything.

The next year, in 2021, I changed my whole life. I changed schools. I changed friends. I believe I was reborn. It was the most important decision of my life. I started spending time with other people and other types of friends. I heard their problems. I understood I wasn't the only person with problems in the world.

Now, I believe life is the most beautiful thing in the world. Of course, there are some problems, but you have the power to overcome these problems. Your life doesn't end with your problems. You must continue and if you have to leave people, such as friends or maybe family members because you feel they don't help you with your progress, do it. Do everything to love your life. Finally, yesterday in our mentoring session, Kevin Celis said a very interesting thing, he said, "O ganas, o aprendes," so I believe this is the best description of life.





Reach your Dreams

By Leslie Uruchi

In 2021, I made an important decision. I was resolved to continue my studies at the university because I hadn't done it before because of work and later because of my children, but then one day I told my family, "Mom wants to finish the university, so I'm going to go back to school." I was very scared because I knew my kids were my responsibility and I needed to be with them and my heart was hurt, but the biggest surprise was what my kids and my husband told me. My kids said, "Mom, you are a good person and an intelligent woman, so we think it's a good idea for you to go back to the university. My husband told me, "Leslie, you are smart. You can do it. I'm so happy about your decision and I will support you all the way through. We are a team."

It wasn't easy for me because at the beginning I couldn't be away from my kids. I needed to see them all the time. I asked myself, "Are you sure about this decision? Your kids need you! Why do you cry at night if you are happy now?"

There were many questions in my mind. It was very difficult but I continued with the university. One year later, I got a scholarship to study English, so I think I was blessed, and I'm very thankful to the people who have helped me with this. Since that day I have organized my week. Every day, I cook for my family in the morning, so I know that they eat well because their health and education are important to me. I help my kids with their activities in the afternoon. I can handle this and other things because when I have to do something, I just do it.

Every day I wake up, and I tell myself, "Leslie, you are a brave woman, so you can handle anything in life.

You are the best. I love you!"

I'm not perfect, but I'm always Myself

By: Gerasalen Torrez Cornejo

Maybe I don't have much to tell you about my journey, but many people who know me do, so I'm writing about what people think about me because I'm really good at listening and writing.

Many people say that I'm unique because I'm creative, not always, but when I really like something, I'm very creative.

My philosophy teacher says that I'm selfish and that I always want to win. I think I'm selfish, but I'm not a bad person. I believe that being selfish is not bad. I think it is important to focus on yourself to improve your skills.

Many of my friends say that I'm a very joyful person. I think that I am a happy person when I'm with them, but they don't always see me the way I see myself. Sometimes I feel alone and sad, but maybe my joy is so big that people can't see my sadness and it's easy to ignore that.

My best friend says that I'm boring because I'm almost always reading, and that I hate men. I think it's a little misunderstanding because I really like to read and I don't hate men. I hate sexism. I hate injustice and I think my friend doesn't know me very well to be my best friend, but it's OK I never expected much from her.


My religion teacher says that I know nothing because I don't believe in religion and God, but I think that she doesn't know me well because I believe in God, but I don't agree with many things related to religion. I think that we are just a game for God and the devil, and that God is bipolar and I don't have much to say about religion. I don't believe in religion because I don't need it because I'm energy.

A person I love, who was a friend, told me that I was unique because I understood her problems and that I was always there for her. I think it's not true because I failed her. I failed her many times. When I think about why she was so good to me and why I was so cold with her, I feel bad. I hate these memories I have with her because these memories make me cry. It's one of the few times when my pride made me make a bad decision and I feel lonely without her. I hope things will be the way they were before, but I know things have changed. However, she's still important to me.

A friend once told me that I have many talents and I have a lot to give, but I shouldn't be afraid. It's true. I've always been talented and I know that I can give more, but sometimes I'm afraid of losing. My family says that I'm a good person, but I don't think they're telling the truth because they are my family and they will always say that about me.

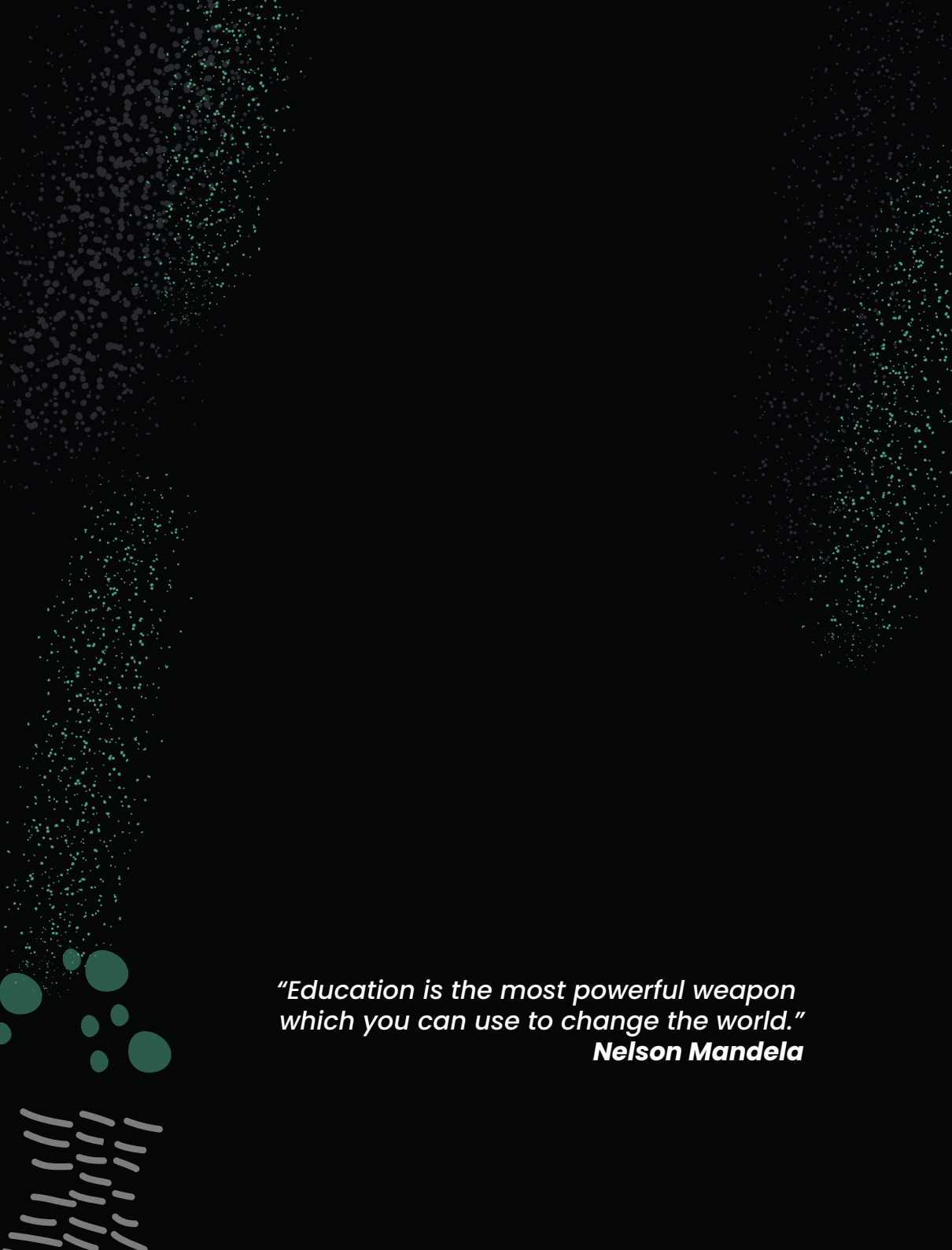
Well that's what they think of me. I did this because it's hard to talk about myself because I still don't know how to see myself. I'm still creating the life of my dreams and maybe I will try again tomorrow because I'm seventeen years old, so I will continue building my journey and I will do my best to become a good human being.



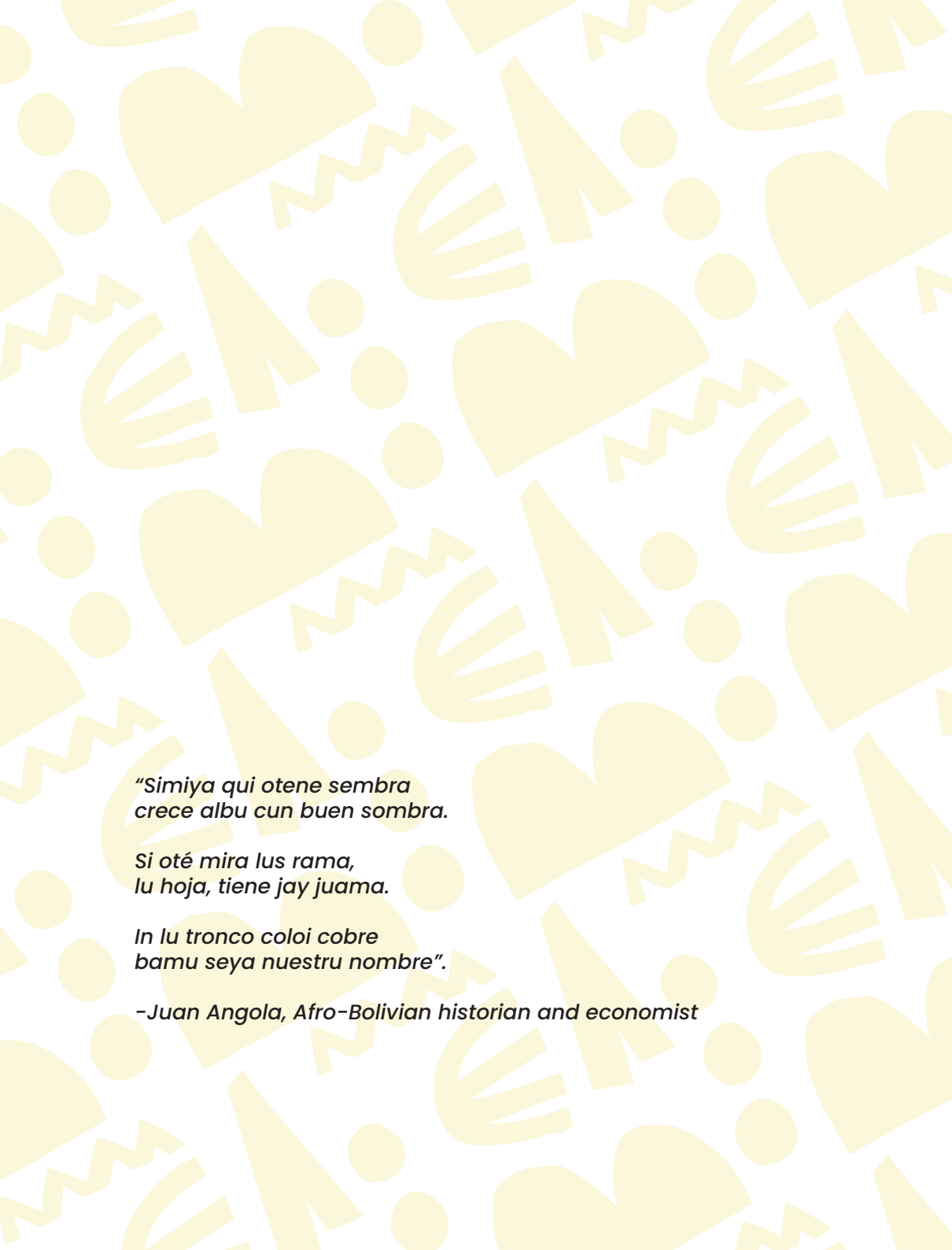


CHOP

College Horizons Outreach Program



*"Education is the most powerful weapon
which you can use to change the world."*
Nelson Mandela




*“Simiya qui otene sembra
crece albu cun buen sombra.*

*Si oté mira lus rama,
lu hoja, tiene jay juama.*

*In lu tronco coloi cobre
bamu seya nuestro nombre”.*

-Juan Angola, Afro-Bolivian historian and economist



*"De la semilla que tú sembraste,
Creció un árbol con buena sombra.*

*Si tú observas las ramas
las hojas tienen fama.*

*En el tronco color cobre
sellaremos nuestros nombres".*

-Juan Angola, Afro-Bolivian historian and economist



WE ARE AFRICANS
NOT BECAUSE WE WERE
BORN IN AFRICA
WE ARE AFRICANS
BECAUSE
AFRICA WAS BORN
WITHIN OURSELVES

