

What Does It Take?

Every month, The Young Men's Initiative profiles a man from New York City who is living out the goals of the Young Men's Initiative. These men have demonstrated the grit, guts, tenacity, and responsibility to reach a wide variety of goals. Read their stories below.



Angelo Cabrera is the founder and President of the Mexican-American Students Alliance. Angelo has an Associate's degree in computer programming and a Bachelor's degree in political science. He is currently pursuing his Master's degree in Non Profit Management from the School Public Affairs Baruch College.

Tell us a little about your childhood and family. What was it like for you growing up?

I came from a poor family in Mexico and we didn't have the financial resources to build a home. I remember our house was made of giant reeds and wood, and many times my parents hung containers from the ceiling when it was raining. I got the feeling that my family, and especially my brother and I, were always segregated because of our financial status. That was one of the reasons that I left home-- to provide financial opportunities for my family.

During my journey to New York, I ended up becoming homeless in Tijuana, Mexico for about a year. While walking on the streets of Tijuana, sometimes without eating for days, I met many kind people who helped me survive another day. I remember one day I was hungry and a street vendor gave me the rotten mangos he couldn't sell to his costumers. An empty box became my table, the hot summer floor became my chair and the mangos became my most precious meal. For nearly ten years after that I didn't want to eat mangos, I wanted to keep the sweetness of the flavor in my mouth as a symbol of survival. My life experience and the wonderful people who helped me at one point in my life have contributed in many ways to my passion and commitment to help others in need.

When I arrived in New York, things were not the way that I thought America was going to be from the beginning . . . I ended up working at a supermarket where I was locked in the basement for more than twelve hours, and in many cases without food or any water to drink. I stayed there for three years. One day the manager of the supermarket forget to lock the door of the basement and I decided to walkout in search for better opportunities. I was 18 years old and I didn't speak much English at that time. I remember I get lost in in Midtown Manhattan. I asked a young woman from South Korea for directions

with my limited English, I told her that I had just escaped from my horrible working conditions and I was lost and searching for a new job. She took my by the hand and brought me to her part-time job and help me get a job at the deli market as a sandwich maker. I regularly shared my dreams and aspiration to go to college to her. One day, she came to me with a notebook and an envelope and offered me a gift of \$280 dollars. The \$280 dollars was the registration fee for a GED (General Educational Development) course at La Guardia Community College; she has already registered me for the course.

With tears in my eyes, I asked her, "how can I ever pay you back, I'm barely making enough money to support my family in Mexico". I still remember the tears rolling down her face, and she said to me, "you don't have to pay me back the money, it's not about the money, you have suffered a lot and you deserve to pursue your dreams, I know that you're going to get your GED and do well in college. I only want you to help other individuals like yourself, to be able to reach their educational dreams".

Since then, "paying it forward" has been my motivation behind my community involvement and making sure that other students, especially children of recent immigrants, have the opportunity to reach their educational dreams and be the first in their families to go to college.

Can you talk a little more about MASA and what you do there?

In 2001, I helped create MASA—the Mexican-American Students Alliance. The organization was born in response to a sudden change after 9/11 to CUNY's in-state-tuition policy that had allowed undocumented students to pay college tuition as New York state residents. I helped organize students and I even did a three days hunger strike and along with thousands of students, we successfully lobbied for an in-state-tuition law in New York State that was passed in August 2011.

In 2004, MASA became more about promoting college awareness among immigrant students. Today MASA is a mentoring / tutoring after-school program to help Mexican students succeed in education and finish high school and go to college. We try to emphasize the value of education because we have an educational crisis: 41% of New York City's sixteen- to nineteen-year-olds of Mexican descent have not graduated from and are not in high school. That's the highest proportion of any major ethnic group in the city. Our network of dedicated volunteers helps us support the academic achievement of underserved students, especially those of Mexican descent. They also help MASA foster community engagement and leadership among our students and their families. We're trying to be the role models for the younger generation of Mexican and Mexican Americans in New York.

I am currently the President and Founder of the organization. I do many important things that support the organization's capacity for growth. I help the

organization with community strategic alliances, public relations, grant writing, operational management and program development. In 2011, I helped the organization write a proposal for an international competition for social change in Mexico, a national live-TV competition called "Iniciativa Mexico" (Mexican Initiatives) in which MASA won 1.5 Mexican million pesos as the best educational initiative that supports recent Mexican immigrants and their children in New York City.

What makes your students successful?

The success of our students reflects the outcomes of sharing the immigrant life story with our students. Our students have clear understanding of the many struggles of their parents, both to be able to reach the United States and to make the daily sacrifices necessary to provide the best opportunities for their kids (our students). In many cases, our students share their parents' immigrant dreams of a better life. The family plays an important role and inspiration to our students to succeed in school. For instance, parents participate in the learning process of their children by participating in the triangulation mentoring/tutoring approach where the student becomes a teacher to their parents while being mentored and tutored themselves. This process helps the student become both a recipient and a transmitter of information while working with their parents; the mentor provides the educational support to the student when it is needed.. This way, parents who may have limited or no formal education become academic role models to their children and work in conjunction with our mentors and coordinators to oversee and support the academic needs of our students.

Teaching parents to become engaged in the education of their children and to become their academic role models, is the key to MASA students' success in school. We are seeing the impact on the students and the parents as well. Students who at one point struggled in school, now are recipients of school awards for academic achievements; and parents who at one point were afraid to interact at schools are now advocates for their children.

What are some skills that have helped you during your life?

One of the most important tools that I gained as an immigrant teenager without parents in New York is that I learned to survive and to value every little gift of life. Most important, I learned to see life from a different perspective and use my tragedies and suffering to discover my passion and talent to help me grow spiritually and pursue my dreams of a college education. . I learned to keep my dreams alive. The worst thing that can happen to any of us is to stop dreaming. Dreams and aspirations are what provide us with the energy to reach our professional goals. Learning that I could go to school, and become a community leader, learn politics and most important learning about the process of policy making has provided me the skills to advocate for my community. I

have also developed great skills in non-profit management, public relations and community advocacy and many other areas that help me connect recent immigrants with government institutions regardless of their legal status. I am helping build trust among recent immigrants and government institutions. I think my life story in many ways reflects the dreams of many immigrants .

What advice can you give to young men in New York City?

In New York we have so many great opportunities that support our youth, from free educational services to free art programs, sport programs, civic and leadership programs and many other programs that will help our youth to grow personally and professionally. It is important to always be committed and work hard to reach our professional dreams. Sometimes, we are going to struggle and feel that we can no longer continue fighting for a better future. Take a deep breath and learn to trust in yourself that you are capable of reaching your dreams. If you fall once, stand up and continue your journey and never give up.

Remember that we all are capable of reaching our personal and professional goals in life. It is important to know that we are the designers of our own destiny. Destiny is our choice, and commitment and hard work help us rewrite and redirect our destiny. It is not something that will happen if we sit and wait ; it is a choice to make it happen and to take initiatives that helps us reach our dreams.

How do you deal with challenges in your life and career today?

I always make sure that I ask for help. I think that's very important for our youth not to be afraid to ask for support. We may be surprised by the wonderful people who always surround us and are willing to help us. In life, sometimes we make mistakes, but it is important to learn from our mistakes and make sure that we are determined to do better in our lives.