

The Power of Storytelling to Inspire Action

Teresa Watanabe | California Community Foundation

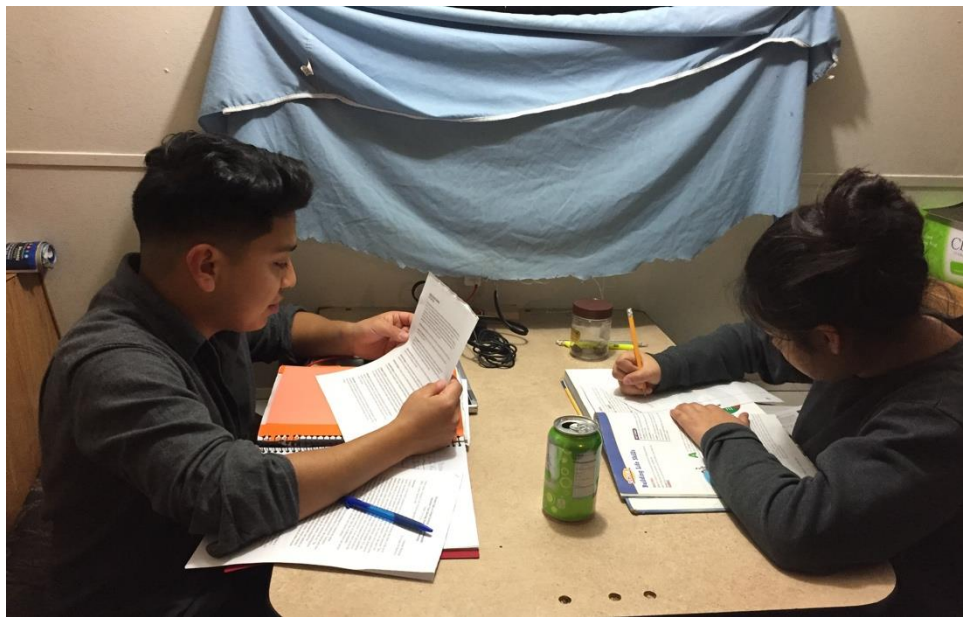
A UC Berkeley student. A van. Younger siblings.

UC Berkeley student making the grade without a home



Ismael Chamu was attending one of the nation's top public universities...

while living in a van and helping care for his younger siblings.





I wrote about him for the L.A. Times....

Sections

Los Angeles Times

CALIFORNIA

He attends elite UC Berkeley but lives in a trailer with no heat or sewer hookups. Soon, he'll be scrambling to find new shelter



Ismael Chamu, the son of a migrant worker from Mexico, attends UC Berkeley, the nation's top public research university. But he lives precariously in a small trailer with no heat or sewer hookups and will soon be evicted, sending him scrambling again.

By Teresa Watanabe
Staff Writer

March 11, 2018 6 AM PT

Ismael Chamu wakes up at sunrise, shivering in the drizzly morning's chill. He rises from the floor of a small trailer, where he sleeps wedged next to his younger brother and an arm's length from his two sisters, who share the only bed.

And something happened that I did not anticipate.



Readers gave Ismael and his family more than **\$100,000.**

One reader offered the Chamus her late father's **four-bedroom home** in Berkeley at an affordable rent.

The family finally had a **safe place to live.**

A high school student. A dream college acceptance. A daunting obstacle.

Jonathan Cornejo worked hard to earn top grades despite family financial struggles. He could not afford home Wi-Fi, a reliable laptop or a comfortable study space.

He was accepted to his dream school, **UC San Diego**.

But he faced a **daunting obstacle**.



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- Jonathan's financial aid package left a **\$4,000 funding gap** he could not fill with income from his part-time job as a Starbucks barista or his mother's two low-wage jobs as a cook.
 - He and his mother were fearful about the financial burdens of **taking out a loan.**
 - So he had decided to go to a **community college** instead of his dream UC school.

Issues get our attention.
Data tell us the scale. **Facts** matter.

- More than **10,000 of the state's lowest-income students** admitted to UC are choosing instead to attend California community colleges or California State University, in part due to financial shortfalls.
- Among the lowest-income students admitted to UC, the **number who selected CSU or community colleges doubled** in fall 2021 from 2015.
- Rising financial challenges like Jonathan's are deepening concerns throughout UC that some of the state's poorest students may be missing out on the system's top-notch education, which could propel them to the highest echelons of wage earners and fuel the future state economy.

But **people**
move people
to care -- and
take action.

CALIFORNIA

A 4.0 student beat all the odds. But he can't afford a UC campus



Students Emily Gramajo, left, and Jonathan Cornejo talk at West Adams Preparatory High School in Los Angeles. Both are opting to attend community college rather than a four-year university because of financial shortfalls. (Francine Orr / Los Angeles Times)

By Teresa Watanabe
Staff Writer

April 25, 2023 Updated 9:57 AM PT

CALIFORNIA

This 4.0 student needed \$4,000 to attend his dream UC school. Then Times readers stepped in



Jonathan Cornejo, left, and Emily Gramajo are low-income students at West Adams Preparatory High School who are able to commit to their dream universities thanks to donor support. (Francine Orr / Los Angeles Times)

By Teresa Watanabe
Staff Writer

April 27, 2023 11:56 AM PT

After the story ran, **offers of aid** poured in.

- One nonprofit started by the late Episcopal Bishop Jon Bruno, Hands in Healing, awarded Jonathan **a \$10,000 grant.**
- A GoFundMe set up by his high school and friends raised **\$44,388 from 307 donations.**
- **“There is something about that perseverance and tenacity that is inspiring,” one reader wrote. “Despite the setbacks he pushes on and perseveres. He is the type of person you want to root for in life.”**

Why do some stories move people?

- A person at the center — not an institution
- Specific details — that make a life real
- Stakes — something important can be gained or lost
- Agency — people are more than their hardship
- A larger truth — illuminated through one life

From journalism to philanthropy

The California Community Foundation recognized that philanthropy has powerful stories to tell—

if we start with people, not grants.

That's why CCF created a storytelling team and hired a senior storytelling officer.



California
COMMUNITY
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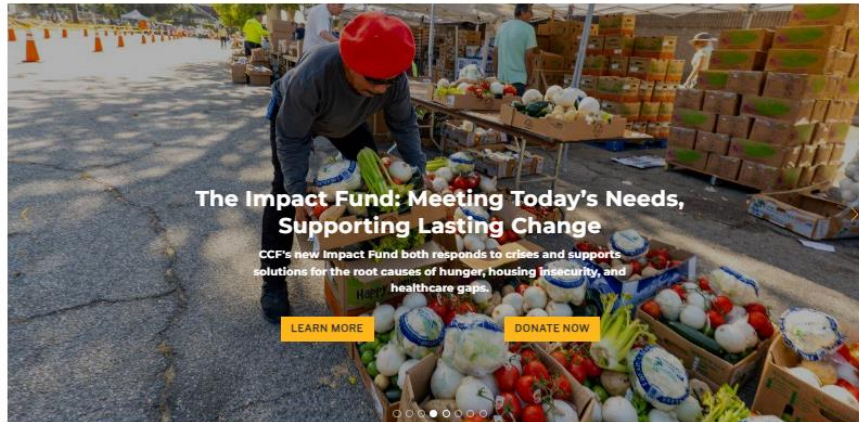
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A GOOD LIFE FOR ALL



The Impact Fund: Meeting Today's Needs, Supporting Lasting Change

CCF's new Impact Fund both responds to crises and supports solutions for the root causes of hunger, housing insecurity, and healthcare gaps.

LEARN MORE

DONATE NOW

110+

years of service

\$350 million

average awarded
in grants annually
since 2021

\$1.7 billion

in grants awarded
since 2021

10,000+

nonprofits granted

1,900+

funds currently overseen

CCF brings people together to strengthen Los Angeles.

The California Community Foundation is where donors, community, government and philanthropy come together to solve complex problems.

Whether it is wildfire recovery, supporting our immigrant communities, championing affordable housing, strengthening democracy or addressing uneven access to economic opportunity, CCF is leading the way.



**CCF is the oldest and largest
community foundation in Los
Angeles County.**

\$2.5 BILLION
in assets

\$350+ MILLION
in annual grantmaking

1,900+
charitable funds

BUT: CCF is “the best-kept secret in Los Angeles.”

Miguel A. Santana, president & CEO, set out to change that with a new approach.

“The best way of telling the true story of what CCF does is not by presenting graphs and charts but by actually **starting with a human being**, who but for our investment, their life would have been a little different, or a lot different in some cases.

“And then working backwards from there so that people understand how as a donor, **what their investment means to a real person**, to their fellow neighbor, fellow Angeleno. Or for a grantee to have their impact be amplified.

“It’s a different way of telling who we are without reading a budget or a graph. So storytelling is ultimately central to what we’re about, and we need to be able to **uplift the stories of the people** that we work with, because we are a place where Angelenos come together to solve our biggest problems.”



Newsroom Stories: CCF in Action

Systemic change happens through the combined efforts of dedicated people, strong partnerships and the bold determination to build something better. Explore the stories of how CCF and our partners are helping move Los Angeles County forward.



Planting New Life: Alma Backyard Farms
Cultivates Healing and Second Chances

[Creating Safe, Resilient and Connected Communities](#)
| September 8, 2026



Bound By a Gift: Pobjoy Scholarship Fund
Connects Two Lives

August 25, 2026



Healing After the Blaze Brings Hope and
Support to Boyle Heights

[Meeting Basic Needs](#)
[Supporting Healing and Renewal](#) | August 19, 2026



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What does fear look like?

Center people first. Then widen the lens.



Families terrified for their loved ones taken into immigration detention.

Workers afraid to go to their jobs.

People reluctant to shop for groceries.

Children scared they won't see their parents again.

ICE Detained Their Children, Siblings, Partners and Parents. Now, Families Are Building Power to Bring Them Home.



Jenifer's parents, both in their 50s, were detained after a court hearing, separated, and are in custody in Adelanto and Florence, Arizona.

Miriam and Edgar fled to Los Angeles last year, seeking protection from persecution they say they faced in their home country of Colombia. But when their asylum petition was denied at a court hearing in July, immigration agents were waiting outside to detain them.

The married couple in their 50s are being kept in separate detention facilities – Miriam in Adelanto and Edgar in Florence, Arizona. Their family is especially anxious about their frail health, as Miriam is a two-time cancer survivor and Edgar suffers from epilepsy, their daughter, Jenifer, said.

Other families have also received distressing messages from their loved ones who were picked up in the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids that began in Los Angeles in June. The detainees have described [meager diets](#), [humiliating treatment](#), illness and depression – which only heightened their families' anxiety, terror and fear over the raids. Some people have [shuttered themselves inside their homes](#), too frightened to go to work, school or other outside venues.

Then:

Who is helping?

What are they doing?

What makes that help possible?

Don't confuse promotion with storytelling

**Making the
organization
the hero**

**Leading with the grant
instead of the person**

**Foundation-speak:
“leveraging,”
“capacity,”
“transformative impact”**

**Reducing people
to their hardship**

Concrete beats abstract. Empowerment, not pity.

The gift isn't the story. What the gift makes possible is the story.

Bound By a Gift: Pobjoy Scholarship Fund Connects Two Lives



Photo of Kevin courtesy of Peter and Violeta Pobjoy. Photo of Megan by Wally Skali.

Kevin Pobjoy and Megan Ramos never knew each other. Yet their lives echo each other in remarkable ways:

A devotion to service – he served in the U.S. Marine Corps and California Army National Guard, she in her high school Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps. Immigrant roots – his parents are from Ireland and the Philippines, hers from Mexico. A fascination with human behavior and a compassionate heart to help others navigate challenges. A love of music – saxophone for him, drums for her.

Now they are bound together by a gift. Four years after Kevin passed, his parents, Peter and Violeta Pobjoy, established a scholarship fund in his name at the California Community Foundation, and Megan is the first recipient.

Universal Storytelling Tips

- Find interesting people
- Ask good questions
- Listen
- Look for scenes and telling details
- Provide context
- Don't exaggerate
- Let people be complex

Story → Connection → Action

Information can make people aware.

Stories can make people care.

And caring can move people to act.

Find the people. Listen to them. Tell their stories well.

EPILOGUE

JONATHAN



Jonathan is a third-year student at UC San Diego majoring in business economics and is active in the UCSD Associated Students Concerts and Events.

Jonathan (Koi) Cornejo ✓ · 3rd



Events and Digital Marketing | Creative Direction | Business Economics, B.S. Undergraduate at UC San Diego

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About

I'm a Business Economics student at UC San Diego with a passion for bringing people together through music, events, and creative experiences. From directing college concerts and assisting with large-scale university festivals, I thrive at the intersection of business, creativity, and community. With experience in event planning, budget management, and technical production, I enjoy turning ideas into memorable, high-impact experiences.

I'm especially interested in live entertainment, creative direction, and the business behind events that connect people. I am actively seeking new experiences and opportunities to apply my skills and make a meaningful impact. Let's connect and chat!



ISMAEL

Ismael graduated from UC Berkeley and works as a UX program manager at Google.

His siblings all went to college. Jocelyn followed her brother to UC Berkeley on scholarship and graduated last year in microbial biology.

Ismael finally got his own bedroom – with six pillows on his bed.



Ismael Chamu ✓ · 3rd

UX Program Manager at Google

San Francisco Bay Area · [Contact info](#)

500+ connections



Thank you!

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