

"I WAS ABLE TO BREATHE MUCH EASIER WHEN I GOT THE LETTER THAT I WOULD BE A FLORIDA OPPORTUNITY SCHOLAR. THAT LETTER MADE ALL THE DIFFERENCE."

— Haidee Cano,
children's advocate



OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

UF's Doors Swing Open for Machen Florida Opportunity Scholar Haidee Cano

Not long ago, in spring 2010, **Haidee Cano** wandered through her Hialeah neighborhood of green, pink, yellow and orange matchbox houses. She was desperate to leave, aching to be more than she was — and not sure how.

Life wasn't cooperating. She'd been an honors student at Hialeah High. The University of Florida wanted her, and she wanted to be a Gator. Yet as she walked past homes of families she'd known most her childhood, Cano (FABA 14) wrestled with the possibility of forever remaining in that knot of a neighborhood beside what is considered to be one of the city's most harried thoroughfares.

"Where I come from, students do not rise up from poverty," Cano says.

"I couldn't imagine being swamped with student loans when my parents could barely make ends meet at home."

The University of Florida, for her, seemed little more than a fairy tale, a silly wish. In the lowest of times, when UF seemed so far away and discouragement so hard to shake, she'd think about a favorite musical, "In the Heights," and its main character a Latina named Nina.


"Nina is trying to reconcile between her dreams of leaving her neighborhood or staying true to her roots and family," Cano says. "I saw myself in her songs and words. 'Nina, just breathe,' says my favorite song. That reassured me to take a breath and know that it would all work out."

She was right. It did, in the end, work out.

"I was able to breathe much easier when I got the letter that I would be a

Florida Opportunity Scholar," she says. "That letter made all the difference. It liberated me from financial burden, shame, and it was the ultimate sign that I had to do this for myself and, ultimately, for my family. Even if they didn't see it then."

The Florida Opportunity Scholarship, as it was called then, had been former UF President **Bernie Machen's*** idea. According to Machen, Florida's preeminent university didn't reflect the people of the state. He wanted a scholarship for students underrepresented on campus — students whose families grapple with whether to repair the car or pay the rent, visit the doctor or fix a tooth. Machen then took it a step further by determining that Florida Opportunity Scholars would be first-generation college students.



“YOU’RE MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN NOT JUST INDIVIDUAL LIVES, BUT IN WHOLE COMMUNITIES.”

— Bernie Machen

Haidee Cano (left) talks with a worker. Cano currently works with the Alachua Multi-County Migrant Education Program.

The scholarship, in Machen’s vision, would be like none other at the University of Florida. It would be designed to swing the university’s doors wide to talented young people like Cano — students who might otherwise be on the outside looking in.

That was 2006. In the decade since, there have been almost 4,000 Machen Florida Opportunity Scholars, and 2,123 of them have earned UF degrees so far. It’s an exceptional group: Students have gone on to be teachers, police officers, entrepreneurs and engineers. Hundreds have advanced to graduate school at UF and other prestigious universities from coast to coast: NYU, Harvard, Northwestern, Michigan and Stanford among them. Some spent gap months after graduation as volunteers, giving back in gratitude of being chosen Opportunity Scholars.

“These people have something special about them. Everybody has problems in life, but compared to the normal student, these young people have already overcome such great

barriers. These are the people who are going to be the community leaders, the people who are going to make a difference wherever they end up,” Machen says.

“The proof of this scholarship is the people who receive it,” he adds. “You realize the kind of young people we attract to this program, and you watch them four years later graduate, go to graduate school, get jobs and start families. And you realize you’re making a difference in not just individual lives, but in whole communities.”

To understand Machen’s meaning, consider Cano.

Almost immediately after her UF graduation in 2014, she went to work for AmeriCorps, often referred to as America’s domestic Peace Corps. Her assignment sent her to Austin, Texas, to teach social studies and civil rights to middle school students.

Cano returned to Gainesville a year later on a similar mission: this time with the Alachua Multi-County Migrant Education program. Her job is

to tutor and advocate for children in 12 North Central Florida counties. She delivers bread, clothes and donated shoes to farmworkers in the field; gives English lessons; translates at teacher conferences and doctor’s visits; helps parents apply for food stamps and connect with food banks; and does whatever else is necessary to make sure their children are able to someday pursue their dreams.

Now, consider what might have been for Cano.

She’s the daughter of Cuban refugees — neither with a high school education or proficient in English. The down payment on their house in Hialeah was made with \$20, \$10 and \$5 bills saved from Cano’s father’s job as a box boy at a Carol City Publix. It’s a house so small that Cano, as a girl, shared a room and bed with her mother. Bunk beds in a second bedroom were for her brother and father. That didn’t change until the end of Cano’s sixth-grade year, when a homemade wall was built to split the already cramped dining area to

make a closet-sized room for her older brother.

Growing up, there were no family vacations or summer camps, but Cano says there was warmth and care and love in her neighborhood. School, however, wasn't a priority. Homework, school projects and studying for tests were hers to do, or not do, on her own. Not even Cano's high school graduation earned much notice. Despite the honor sashes and pins she was so proud to wear on her graduation gown, her parents did not attend the ceremony and couldn't comprehend why their daughter yearned for college.

"Culturally, in Hialeah, you stay. You find a job, you get married, and you have a family. College is second to all that," Cano says. "When college decisions came around, it was very difficult for my parents to understand my intentions for wanting to move away. A part of them felt betrayed; another, proud. College was such an alien experience for them. And me."

But once at UF, Opportunity Scholars tend to outperform their classmates. According to university data, they graduate sooner and re-enroll at a higher rate. And while annual incomes for families of UF students average more than \$100,000, it's less than \$19,000 for Opportunity Scholars.

"Hunger is the only thing I can come up with to describe these kids because they are so ready. They're smart, but their life experiences have been difficult. Now, they're shining in every way – in the classroom, in their coursework; they're volunteering; they're running for office," says **Chris Machen***, UF's former first lady and one of the Machen Florida Opportunity Scholars program's greatest champions.

That was true for Cano. Even with all the obstacles and whispers to just accept her fate, Cano shined when the opportunity came. And when it was finally time for Cano to walk across the

stage to receive her UF degree, her father stayed in Hialeah, not wanting to miss a day's salary, but her mother didn't.

"My mother actually took the bus when I graduated. She cried a lot. She was so proud and smitten that day," Cano recalls. "She apologized to me for not being supportive. I told her everything I do, I do for her and Papi, and it's because of all their sacrifices that I am able to be here, graduating."

Weeks later, Cano discovered that her father had her University of Florida diploma professionally framed and had hung it prominently in the family's house.

Cano doesn't like to think about what her life might have been if not for her Machen Florida Opportunity Scholarship. "I cannot fathom my life without it because it's a little scary, to be honest," she says.

And Bernie Machen, likewise, doesn't like to think about the University of Florida without Cano and her fellow Opportunity Scholars.

"My generation has not solved all the problems that are here. And the only hope is for education and for young people who will step up and assume roles in leadership," he says. "That's what these scholars are. They're leaders in their generation, and they're the ones who are going to solve the problems that my generation didn't solve." ●

"THE PROOF OF THIS SCHOLARSHIP IS THE PEOPLE WHO RECEIVE IT!"

— Bernie Machen

EDITOR'S NOTE: In July, Cano was accepted to Saint Leo University to earn a master's in social work. Her plan? "Working with low-income kids the rest of my life," she says. "They need to be told that they're valued and worthy."

Leading the Next Generation

OVER THE PAST 10 YEARS, the Machen Florida Opportunity Scholars program has graduated some of the best and the brightest. Here are just a few of the successful alumni:



Jerome Graham
(BA 11, JD 15), Attorney, analyst with Deutsche Bank, Jacksonville



Winnie Ng
(BSN 16), Nurse at Memorial Hermann Health System, Houston



Kelly Holleran
(BSADV 14), Marketing Director at Walsh & Associates, Sarasota



Larry Dorilus
(BSCE 14, ME 16), Traffic Operations Specialist for Albeck Gerken Inc, Tampa



Kelly Mejia*
(BA 12), Senior Project Engineer at Balfour Beatty, Ft. Lauderdale