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Alumni Profile

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Mentor's help offers hope



José Gaitán '73, managing member of The Gaitán Group PLLC

College was not on young José Gaitán's radar while witnessing drug-dealing and murder in his central Seattle neighborhood. His career horizon expanded from bus driver (to see more of the city) to garbage collector (better union), before he decided on ferry deck hand as the perfect job.

His father, an undocumented worker from El Salvador, was deported when Gaitán was 5. His mother struggled to support José and his younger brother and sister. As a child he experienced homelessness and hunger.

Gaitán found his vision of a better future at Seattle First Baptist Church, where the late Walt Pulliam, a former Linfield trustee, was Christian education minister.

"Walt was just a phenomenal guy," Gaitán said. "He and [pastor] Bernie Turner and others at that church had a strong commitment to social justice and inclusion."

Pulliam started a neighborhood youth program where Gaitán played basketball after school. That led to his joining a Boy Scout troop and learning "the Scouting way," he said. "It had a very profound effect on me, and still does."

One day Pulliam asked if he'd thought about college. Gaitán had no money and mediocre grades. But with his mentor's encouragement, he obtained scholarships and a work-study position at Linfield. The college's quiet atmosphere was such a shock that he considered leaving, but Gaitán learned to appreciate having time to reflect

and think, in addition to abundant food.

"I had a wonderful academic experience there," he said. "It was a values-based education; values were woven into the curriculum. The professors had a genuine interest not only in their subject matter but also in helping young people grow."

He learned to study, graduating magna cum laude with a history major and political science minor.

Gaitán returned to Seattle and earned a law degree at the University of Washington. He now is managing member of The Gaitán Group, PLLC, a law firm specializing in corporate litigation. His clients include Walmart, Shell Oil, General Motors and Denny's. Chemical Bank hired his firm to represent its bondholders in the \$4.5 billion class-action lawsuit against Washington Public Power Supply System, 1983-96, then the largest bond default in history.

Gaitán has appeared on the cover of *Money* magazine. He has met world leaders, including former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, Presidents Clinton and George H.W. Bush, former Attorney General Janet Reno and former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. But the names Gaitán drops most are people he credits for his success.

"I believe I got to be a lawyer because of the hard work of so many other people," he said. "I believe there's no such thing as a self-made man or woman. Everyone that goes to any college, including Linfield, should recognize that others have made sacrifices for that institution to survive and deliver a good education. We need to give back, in time or in wealth if we have it."

Gaitán continues to give back. A former Linfield trustee, he received the 2000 Alumni Service Award. He mentors first-year law students at the University of Washington, where he has taught as an adjunct. He has served as president of the Hispanic National Bar Association and chaired the Washington State Commission on K-12 Accountability in Public Education (the A+ Commission). He chairs the Urban Enterprise Center, which promotes diversity in business. And he served as chairman of the board of the Safeco Field Public Facilities District, helping to get Seattle's Major League Baseball stadium built in 1999. These are only a few of his many civic and professional contributions – a list as lengthy as this entire article.

"I have known José a long time, and I have a very high regard for him," said Bernie Turner, a Linfield trustee. "His early life was very difficult, but he was able to make use of programs available through the church and community that gave him a leg up on life. He saw the possibilities and made tremendous use of the help offered and his college experience."

– Beth Rogers Thompson