

Philanthropic Gardener Helps Kids Pay for College

by Richard Gonzales

Catalino Tapia wanted to do something to help the less-fortunate children in his San Francisco area community. His son suggested Tapia start a foundation.

Bay Area Gardeners Foundation founder Catalino Tapia trims a tree at a client's home in an affluent suburb of San Francisco. Tapia's long-time clients donated money to the foundation, which gives college scholarships to students, regardless of their immigrant status.

Paying for College

Morning Edition, November 19, 2007 · Catalino Tapia crossed the border from Mexico into the United States 40 years ago with a sixth-grade education and only \$6 in his pocket. He became a legal resident and raised a family by working in a donut shop, a machine shop and then plant nurseries, before starting his own gardening business.

But Tapia, 63, always had his eyes on the future, especially for his children's education. Even before his first child was born, he says he was saving money for them to go to school.

Tapia's youngest son attended UCLA and then went onto to the University of California - Berkeley Law School. He's now a lawyer in Los Angeles.

But Tapia wanted to do something to help the less-fortunate children in his community in Redwood City, south of San Francisco. His son suggested Tapia start a foundation that would give scholarships to students.

It took a year and a half to prepare the legal documents, but then the Bay Area Gardeners Foundation was born.

Tapia sent letters to his clients asking for donations. To his surprise, he raised \$10,000 in two weeks. And the donations kept coming in, with \$75,000 raised so far.

But the foundation also needed startup money, so Tapia approached the Silicon Valley Community Foundation. Program Officer Manuel Santamaria says his foundation was impressed with Tapia's approach.

"We live in a region where everybody is so busy, everybody's got two jobs, child care, school," Santamaria says. "You're so stressed that to actually pause and think about, hey, how do I fit within the neighborhood that I'm working in and build community."

So with seed money from the Silicon Valley Community Foundation and donations from his clients, the Bay Area Gardeners Foundation began giving scholarships in 2006, starting with five students. The scholarships themselves are like seed money, \$1,500 each.

"But for these kind of kids," Tapia says, "it means the whole world, because it pays for the books, transportation — and they don't have to worry about that extra work that they have to do for those things. To me, that's a blessing because you've got to see the faces of these kids when they receive the money."

The Gardeners Foundation also does not ask if a student is documented. Four out of its nine scholarship recipients are undocumented. The foundation nearly doubled the number of scholarships this year.

The board, made up of other immigrant gardeners and community members, discussed this strategy at a recent meeting. Tammie Pereira, an insurance agent and board member, says everyone was in agreement that "no matter what, they're going to have their education. So even though they don't have their papers and even though they might not be able to get a job with their Social Security number, no one will be able to take away their education."

Noel Chavez, a student at Canada College, was one of the foundation's first recipients.

Chavez was struggling in his third semester at the Redwood City community college trying to secure transportation to and from college.

"When I heard about the Bay Area Gardeners Foundation was when I needed it the most," Chavez says. "I was more amazed of who was giving it and their purpose than even thinking about if I was going to get it. Isn't that amazing that someone who's working and struggling out there, someone who has no education and having to give something back to their community. It's amazing."

Chavez, who is in the process of becoming a permanent resident, talks to high school students in the Bay area about their college options.

Margie Carrington, the financial aid director at Canada College, says she doesn't see a lot of outside scholarships rolling in to support students.

The Gardeners Foundation is "an option that helps students that don't really have access to other resources to pay for school," she says. "... More people in our community [should] take that same kind of initiative and give back."

Tapia, the man who started it all, knows that not everyone believes undocumented students deserve an education, but he has plenty of supporters. After a recent news article about his efforts, the foundation was flooded with e-mails, donations and inquiries from students.

Meanwhile Tapia says he is hoping to pursue his own dreams.

"When I retire, I'm going to go to school and get a high school diploma," he says. But that's not all. "I'm also taking guitar lessons. And I told my wife, when I learn how to play the guitar, I'm going to sing you a *serenata*."