

Francisco Cartagena – W. Edward Bohrer Jr. Memorial CHARACTER COUNTS! Scholarship Recipient, 2009

I received the [W. Edward Bohrer, Jr. Memorial] CHARACTER COUNTS! Scholarship in 2009 and I attended Montgomery College and Penn State University. I majored in Political Science with a minor in Cyber Security. I am preparing to take the LSAT, I want to study Law. I am not sure where yet but, but I do know I want to work in the legal field, becoming an Immigration Attorney.

I remember being first exposed to the concept of the program in the eighth grade. I attended Forest Oak Middle School and I remember the principal and staff were all about CHARACTER COUNTS! and the Pillars that make them. "Remember, the Choice is yours." I need to be honest, at the time I didn't think much of it, I was a regular eighth grader but I did have a lot of mentors along the way who kept highlighting the importance of the values behind the concept. It wasn't until I got to high school, probably around the end of freshman year, when I realized there was a scholarship available for students who could showcase some of the program's core values. It was then when I started working towards building up my extracurricular activities, community service and just overall engagement of my community. I think that's what really brought the six pillars of character to life for me.

My family and I migrated from El Salvador to the U.S. That's not a very easy thing to do. However, you do it, it's not easy; emotionally, financially and mentally. That's something that is important to mention because, despite the fact that I was raised by exceptional parents who taught my brothers and me good moral and social values, I believe the reinforcement of those values from home was consistent in school as a result of the program. Although the message was delivered in a different dialog and in my case in a different language, the essence of it was the same. Be somebody who is respectful, caring, trustworthy, fair, responsible and a good citizen.

Understanding the value of these characteristics has helped me overcome obstacles from a very early age. My father suffered a severe accident the year I was graduating from High School; his health has been declining since. I had to grow up faster than usual, life put me and my family in rough scenarios and being the oldest son, I took it upon myself to help and try to figure things out as much as I could. I think subconsciously these values and concepts that I had been hearing at home and in school all my life truly kicked in, and it's part of what has helped me get to where I am today. I am grateful for my experiences, good or bad. And I like to think that a mix of those values and the way I was brought up, helped me overcome them. Now that I think about it, they still help me today.

I like to think [I'm applying concepts of CHARACTER COUNTS! in my life], but it's a bit hard to set them apart from what my parents thought me, so they overlap but in a way, many of the concepts are now part of my life. Being fair is a big one for me, especially because as I got older I realized how unfair the real world is. I think if more people applied the Pillars of Character to their daily routines, the world would be a nicer place. It's a bit unrealistic, but it's a nice thought. I try to do my part. The idea of "treat people how you want to be treated" really stuck with me when I was

younger and the concept of CHARACTER COUNTS! is a good structured way to showcase that and reinforce it at school. As I grow older I realize it's harder to explain things to younger kids, and the concept of CHARACTER COUNTS! is a good model to create emphasis on the importance of those core values. I can speak from experience when I say that practicing a little bit of them can get you places.

Prior to diving into the world of law I had the privilege to volunteer and work for Identity, Inc. as a Youth Development Specialist. The organization does wonderful work for youth all over Montgomery County. They implement an amazing after school program in which students develop a number of skills and qualities, which in essence helps them become outstanding members of our community. I used the common ground that the model of the CHARACTER COUNTS! program creates to help me connect with kids. In my experience, this helped reinforce and demonstrate to students that all their peers wanted them to succeed and embrace the overall positive impact of the core values the program has. We all come from different homes and backgrounds and having something like the CHARACTER COUNTS! model is a good common ground to use in order to reinforce or introduce some of those very important values to youth.

I think it's important for local government to get involved in their community and more importantly, to create a bigger presence throughout the development of children's lives. This could be done by creating adequate after school programs or access to social services for those in need. Today more than ever, we have this disconnect between government and its constituency. Programs like CHARACTER COUNTS! help reinforce the core values all good people learn at home, reinforcing those values in school, contributing to the development of productive members of society. We tend to forget that although we are lucky enough to live in one of the best counties in the country, not everyone has a parent or guardian who teaches them these very important values.

I would like to thank the City of Gaithersburg and all those involved for having the ability to provide its citizens with programs such as this one. I am grateful for the scholarship I received in 2009. At the time, that was my only lifeline to be able to afford college. It made a world of a difference for me and my family to be able to have this scholarship. Thank you for giving kids a chance to pursue their college dreams while serving their community.