

Keeping up with the Gateses

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ALMOST NEVER do I think of myself in the same sentence (or universe) as multibillionaires Bill and Melinda Gates. But it turns out we do have one thing in common:

Jorge Avellan.

Now 20 and a junior at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Fla., Jorge is getting help with his hefty college tuition from the Gateses, me and nine of my fellow, middle-class, ink-stained wretches. Bill and Melinda are kicking in via their colossal Gates Millennium Scholars program. We journalists are doing our bit through a slightly more modest effort called Meritus College Fund.

The divine inspiration of San Francisco endocrinologist Henry Safrit and five of his friends, Meritus began in 1996 with a single four-year scholarship.

To date, more than 100 kids from San Francisco's public high schools -- students who'd normally have to scramble to pay for a few units at City College -- have received four-year Meritus scholarships.

Jorge Avellan's little sister, Nydia, is one of 28 from the Class of 2002. Like her brother, she graduated from Thurgood Marshall High School and comes from a set of parents -- Maria and Jorge Sr. -- who work harder than almost anyone I know to make sure their three children get a first-class education. Their eldest, Thesla, just graduated from San Francisco State and is on track to receive her teaching certificate.

Nydia, already deep into orientation at UCLA, wants to study business. Jorge chose the pricey University of Miami (tuition this year is \$36,000) because it is just about the best place on Earth for a broadcasting major -- especially one who is fluent in Spanish.

If all goes well, Jorge could end up interning this year with Univision Network, the largest Spanish-language broadcasting company in the country.

Unlike most scholarships, which are either one-time grants or restricted to specific universities, Meritus guarantees a kid funding at any college for four years. (The Palo Alto-based Pursuit of Excellence awards work the same way.) All a

student must do is maintain passing grades and stay in school. Aimed exclusively at San Francisco public high schools, the Meritus fund also differs from many scholarships by drawing from a pool of good students, but not necessarily straight-A ones with astronomical SAT scores.

"It's wonderful that way because it offers opportunities to students who are motivated and will work hard," said Anna Maria Zelaya, the college and career counselor at Thurgood Marshall who steered Jorge, his sister and -- this year alone -- 200 Marshall kids in successful quests for all kinds of scholarships.

"I make sure to tell every one of the students I counsel that it doesn't hurt to try," said Zelaya. "Because the worst thing isn't if they (funders) say 'no.' The worst thing is if you don't give yourself the opportunity to say 'yes.'"

All of the Meritus kids need every dime and ounce of support they can get. One of this year's winners has spent most of her childhood and teenage years as a ward of the court. Another worked in her family's business while racking up great grades and serving as senior class president. Another saved money by working part-time as a movie theater manager and another juggled high school with child-care duties for her two little cousins.

Although the scholars come from every city high school and are headed for universities as diverse as Pennsylvania and Bowdoin, their collective philosophy is perhaps best summed up by Yan Qing Wang of Raoul Wallenberg High.

A native of China who had to overcome not only a ferocious language barrier at age 9 but a near-fatal illness, Wang is on his way to UC-Davis to study international finance. He invoked Friedrich Nietzsche when he told the Meritus board: "Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

If that resonates with you (and you're willing to do your own annual hat passing and paperwork), you and nine pals can have what my co-workers and I get for \$300 apiece each year: The knowledge that we are helping a good, smart kid get a college education and that -- just in case we run into Bill and Melinda Gates -- we'll have no trouble keeping up our end of the conversation.

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