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THE NEEDIEST CASES

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After Easing Burden on Body and Mind, a Young Man Begins to Follow His Dream

By Daniel E. Slotnik



Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

Marcos Vargas is studying digital music production at Hostos Community College in the Bronx.

Not so long ago, Marcos Vargas was an overweight, depressed high school dropout who could not face what he called a hostile learning environment and troubles with a girlfriend. He spent most of his time wallowing in his mother's apartment in the Bronx, subsisting on a diet of fried chicken, pork chops and soda.

"I was just sitting there eating, watching TV," said Mr. Vargas, a soft-spoken 19-year-old with braces, a pierced lip and shaggy hair. "I had no purpose."

Mr. Vargas's 5-foot-6 frame ballooned to 180 pounds. He began seeing a therapist through the city's Administration for Children's Services and was prescribed [Prozac](#), but he could not shake his malaise.

Then, late one night, an infomercial for a book critical of the food and pharmaceutical industries began showing on the television. Through a haze of carbs, sugar and low self-esteem, Mr. Vargas felt a stirring of anger.

"I got mad because I thought I was being used," he said.

He bought the book and adopted a strict organic diet. It succeeded where therapy and medication had failed.

“I wasn’t depressed anymore,” Mr. Vargas said. “And something just made me want to do something.”

Because Mr. Vargas had dropped out of Harry S. Truman High School in the Bronx, his social worker suggested he register for [CUNY Prep](#), which helps teenagers earn their high school equivalency diploma and prepare for college. He began attending classes not far from his mother’s apartment in Bronx Park East during the summer of 2009. He made friends and flourished.

“It wasn’t like high school, where they don’t really care,” Mr. Vargas said. “They say they’ll give you the tools, but you have to use them.”

During the next year, his mind and his body grew lighter. His weight dropped to 137 pounds.

He received his general equivalency diploma in March 2010 and decided he wanted to study digital music production at [Hostos Community College](#) in the Bronx. Then, he said, his mother — who sells tamales and raspados, flavored shaved ice, from a cart — told him the family needed him to start paying rent.

He shared an apartment with his mother, her boyfriend, his sister, her husband and their three children, and the others contributed what they could. So Mr. Vargas began looking for work. He had already started classes at Hostos this past winter term with the help of financial aid, but a job never materialized.

Reluctantly, he gave up his room, finding shelter with his two aunts, his uncle and his two cousins in a three-bedroom basement apartment on Central Park North. He helps with chores around the house.

Mr. Vargas said his mother cried when he left, but if growing up meant moving out, he believed he did the responsible thing. “I don’t regret coming here,” he said. “I’m not a burden to her.”

Soon afterward, CUNY Prep helped him get a paid internship at the Lehman College Art Gallery. He must maintain satisfactory grades to keep the position, as a gallery assistant and teacher’s aide.

“I can’t mess up; I don’t even want to think about it,” he said.

Mr. Vargas makes about \$600 a month and receives \$200 in food stamps. But he struggled to come up with the money to travel to and from Lehman College, Hostos and his home. He turned to the [Community Service Society of New York](#), one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, and received a grant for a \$104 monthly unlimited [MetroCard](#) to use while in school.

“It really helped me,” he said, adding that he has even begun to save up a little money.

Now, he shares a small room with his uncle. It is cluttered with his own folded bed frame, his uncle’s bed, a small television, two bicycles and a guitar with rusty strings dangling from the wall. Here, Mr. Vargas spends his evenings hunched over a MacBook and a MIDI keyboard, [working on trance music](#), headphones turned up to drown out the blaring TV.

As for his girlfriend, he cut ties when his life took a positive turn. He visits his mother at least three times a week, to chat and help around the house. He hopes to graduate from Hostos in 2013 and continue making music at a four-year college. He also wants to expand his repertory.

“I’m planning on singing,” he said, sheepishly. “But I’ll need some Auto-Tune help, I think.”