support system. You may be surprised how open people can be in giving you effective guidance. A favorite teacher, professor, friend, and family members are just a few examples of people you can add to your network of support. Even more support can be found for example through the Math Alliance (mathalliance.org), which has a vast database of professors who are ready and willing to mentor students interested in the mathematical and statistical sciences. With a solid support system at your disposal you will be able to be inspired and encouraged to carry on even in the darkest hour. And carry on you must for one day it may very well be you who takes up the role as a mentor!

Credits
Figure 4 is courtesy of Dr. Ralph R. Gomez. Illustration of Dr. Ralph R. Gomez was created by Ana Valle.

Dr. Stephan Ramon Garcia

As a child of Cuban and Japanese immigrants, Dr. Stephan Garcia’s testimonio resonates with anyone searching for a sense of belonging. He grew up with one side of his family fleeing war while the other side was running away from an oppressive government. His mathematical talents were evident from a very young age, but, like many, he lacked good mentorship and focus. Despite this, and thanks to what he attributes to good luck, Dr. Garcia is now an incredibly accomplished mathematician.

Graduate Education
I was accepted by every graduate program to which I applied, although that is hardly an accomplishment since I applied only to a handful of schools in California. I had some satisfaction in rejecting Stanford’s offer; they had rejected me as an undergraduate. In retrospect, I might have benefited from their smaller program. However, at the time the mathematics PhD program at Berkeley was tied for number one in the nation, so I did not seriously contemplate leaving for slightly lower-ranked Stanford. After all, Berkeley was familiar and Stanford seemed so distant.

There were ten of us assigned to two adjoining offices in the windowless corridors of Evans Hall. Of these, I think only two or three of us completed the program; at least five quit or were kicked out. There were a few other Latinx graduate students in the department, but they all seemed to have been the top students in their countries and many had experience in the International Mathematical Olympiad.

Because I already had a circle of friends in the Bay Area, I did not hang out in the math department. Consequently, I did not learn useful tips from other graduate students or from postdocs and professors. Since I did not understand the titles or abstracts, I did not attend colloquia or seminars. I failed to integrate myself into the social side of mathematics. I simply had no idea how mathematicians socialized or learned. The department at Berkeley was large, and it was possible to disappear completely, which I did. Nobody told me what I needed to be doing, and I got lost.

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Figure 5. With my thesis advisor, Donald Sarason, at my graduation from the PhD program (2003).

Because I had an NSF Fellowship, I did not need to teach. However, I asked if I could teach one course per semester. It seemed like a good idea to have teaching experience since, I imagined, teaching was an important part of being a professor. I went on to win several teaching awards at UC Berkeley, which opened a few doors.

The transition from taking classes to doing research was left largely unexplained. Since I liked analysis and had just taken complex analysis with Donald Sarason, I asked him to be my advisor. He agreed without hesitation. Because of my lackluster performance in the program and my sparse attendance at department events, I suspect that many other potential advisors would have politely excused themselves.

Sarason, then nearing seventy years old, was kind and patient, but unusually quiet. His advisor, Paul Halmos, said “[he] is a quiet man; he never uses eight words when seven will do.” Perhaps a more astute career move would have been to attach myself to an up-and-coming star, swimming in grant money and fresh off an International Congress of Mathematicians (ICM) lecture or major prize. However, the preening roosters and showoffs were attracted to such
advisors, and it is not clear that I could have flourished in such a competitive environment. Somehow things worked out for the best.

My qualifying examination committee consisted of Sarason, Michael Christ, and Vera Serganova, along with an engineering professor who admitted sheepishly that he was just there as an outside observer. Although I answered the first few questions well enough, things turned for the worse. Christ is a tall, imposing man with a deep voice, and I felt somewhat intimidated when I fumbled one question. Serganova asked a few algebra questions in a kindly fashion, perhaps taking pity upon me, or possibly just throwing out softballs since algebra was the minor topic on my examination. After a long several minutes in the hallway, I was informed that I had passed, although I certainly felt that I hadn’t or shouldn’t.

My fifth year of graduate school rolled around, and I had accomplished relatively little. Without formal coursework or well-defined goals, I had spent most of my time in graduate school on non-academic endeavors, although I had apparently done just enough to convince the department that I was worth keeping around. Probably I could have used a swift kick in the rear or stern words from some authority figure.

I had no idea how to be a mathematician, no idea how to do research. I had never been to a conference, nor had I met key players in my field. By some stroke of luck or inspiration, I managed to put together a decent thesis. Although my dissertation solved a problem from an old Bulletin of the AMS article, it was written so abstrusely and tersely that it gained little traction. I briefly met one of the authors of the Bulletin article at my advisor’s seventieth-birthday conference. However, I could not succinctly express my ideas: I was a poor mathematical communicator. The professor appeared impatient with my rambling, and I received a cool and critical response. Clearly, I had no idea how to give an elevator pitch.

Sheldon Axler probably saved my professional career. As a clueless graduate student just about to hit the academic job market, I needed letters of recommendation. But I didn’t know anyone! Sarason reached out to his former student, who was, fortunately, willing to meet with me. I traveled to San Francisco State University, where Axler had relocated as department chair after a distinguished career in Michigan State. Fortunately, he entertained my rambling and incoherent explanations long enough to see that there was something worthwhile behind the nonsense. He wrote a letter for me which, I can only assume, was a decent one.

I had survived graduate school, if only barely. A last-minute thesis breakthrough and my advisor’s connections had saved the day. What next?

Looking Forward; Some Advice

As a Cuban-Japanese person from New Jersey, my life story is hardly universal. Nevertheless, I think that we can still identify some counterproductive behaviors, unfortunate incidents, and repeated mistakes from which we can extrapolate some useful general recommendations.

First of all, don’t let other people limit your options. Don’t let people tell you what you are capable of, set your limits, or deny you opportunities. You can be your own best advocate: if you don’t believe in yourself, others are unlikely to step up and go to bat for you.

Second, get your head out of the sand. Meet people and socialize: mathematics is a social endeavor. Don’t be afraid to ask questions; if you don’t ask, you won’t find out the answer. Learn from other people and network, network, network! There are lots of things that “everyone knows,” but nobody tells you. If you isolate yourself, then you won’t learn the ropes and you’ll get left behind.

Lastly, focus and work hard. The first stages of one’s mathematical career are difficult and stressful; for someone swimming upstream doubly so. Whatever you do, put in 111% (since you’ll have to outwork those 110% folks). Sometimes you will have to do more work for less recognition. You’ll eventually earn your place at the big table and then you can pay it forward and lift up the people behind you.

Although I’ve done a bunch of things over the years, I believe that my biggest impact has been in the classroom. Students look to you as a role model and mentor, but more importantly they look to you as the one-stop shop for part-time jobs in the department, research opportunities, graduate school advice, letters of recommendation, and emotional support. You are the one who needs to tell them the things that “everyone knows.” You are the one who needs to ensure that they don’t make the same mistakes that you did. Once you figure something out about how the world works, make sure your students know!

I mentioned times when teachers thought lower of me because of my background or when professors, perhaps inadvertently, dissuaded me from pursuing opportunities. I still occasionally find myself in settings that are unwelcoming, in which people view me as necessary decoration, a nod to diversity. You just have to prove people wrong. Once you...
get to the big table, don’t be afraid to stand up for yourself or voice your opinions. Most importantly, find like-minded individuals and mentors. Others have been there before you, so make sure to draw upon their collective wisdom!

Although my “success” was not pre-ordained, I did have some lucky breaks. I was fortunate to have parents who valued education and a stable home environment. Both of my parents overcame poverty and suffering; I benefited from the opportunities they struggled to give me. The Berkeley stamps on my diplomas carried significant weight at crucial moments. My advisor’s connections gave me a last-minute reprieve when I needed another letter of reference. At UCSB, I found exactly the right mentor at the right time. Moreover, the global economy cooperated with our job searches.

Even though I now have many of the trappings of “success,” my journey was neither inevitable nor without difficulty. There were moments of indecision, self-doubt, and discouragement. I hope that students reading this will realize that even those who seem to know what they are doing may have once been lost themselves.

The Early Years
I am not sure when, but part of my family came to the south of Chile from Germany as a nineteenth-century immigration policy by the Chilean government. What I do know is that in the 1950s it was an established tradition in medical schools in Chile that upon graduation, doctors would serve in small towns before applying for jobs in Santiago and other large cities. My father, Victor Hugo Moll Strassburger, graduated in 1955, married Ema Lucy Becker Correa, his girlfriend since his first year of medical school, and took his first job in Cabildo, a small mining town north of the capital. In Chile you start medical school right after high school, so they dated for a long time. He was the only doctor serving several small villages.

I am the oldest of three. My sister Ana Maria, my brother Ricardo Antonio, and I were all born in Santiago, since the capital had hospitals with better facilities. My parents’ families all lived in Santiago, so we often visited them. The few memories I have from that time always involve relatives coming to spend time with us, with my grandmother Clara Moll Strassburger directing the group. Those visits by relatives always involved lots of cooking and among my favorite sweets were calzones rotos, which is a deep fried cookie full of powdered sugar. After my father’s untimely death in 1963, my mother and the three of us stayed in Cabildo for one more year.

So I spent my early years in Cabildo, starting my formal education in Escuela de Hombres, Número 5. This was a typical elementary school in a small town, probably with students of different ages in the same room. My teachers were Angelina Guzmán and Maria Eugenia Palacios. Figure 8 shows my fourth-grade class, I am the fifth from right to left in the middle row. Through social media, I have been able to reconnect with some of my classmates and with my teacher Ms. Palacios who sent the picture.

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Dr. Victor H. Moll
In his testimonio, Dr. Victor H. Moll shares how after the early death of his father, mathematics became his refuge. Taking us from his early education to the 1973 Chilean coup d’état, he shares how his years as an undergraduate meant he learned mathematics living through a military regime with imposed curfews. This period of transition in Chile meant few PhD mathematicians lived in the country, but luckily Dr. Moll found a mentor who encouraged him to attend graduate school in the US, helping shape the rest of his career.

Dr. Stephan Ramon Garcia

Credits
Figure 5 is courtesy of Dr. Stephan Ramon Garcia. Figure 6 is courtesy of the American Mathematical Society. Illustration of Dr. Stephan Ramon Garcia was created by Ana Valle.

Figure 7. My parents, 1954.

1In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Chile established immigration policies that encouraged European immigration.

2This literally translates to “ripped underwear.”