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SANDERS: A mother's choices and guidance, a son's achievement

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A young mother with two children is forced to choose.

Which one will she keep with her — and which one will she leave behind?

Those familiar with the film *Sophie's Choice* may be thinking this is another horrific Nazi/Jewish story with all the pain and agony that comes with it. For the moment, forget about Hitler's Germany and its atrocities.

This story began about 23 years ago in Zacapuato, a small town in the state of Guerrero in southern Mexico, when Maria Aida Callado decided to make the long trek across her country and into the United States.

Maria had two sons, ages 4 and 2. Believing that she could make the trip with only one of them, especially while crossing the Rio Grande, she had to decide which boy to take.

"She knew it was a dangerous trip, so she picked me because I was lighter," Jorge Callado said as we talked last week near the University of Texas at Arlington.

"Lighter?" I asked with a puzzled look on my face.

Callado, now 25, explained that he was the younger son and weighed less, so his mother assumed he would be easier to carry. She took him, leaving his older brother with family in Mexico.

When the young mother got to the river separating Texas and Mexico, a young man put her son on her shoulders, and she carried him across the border. When she realized the water was shallower than she thought it would be, she regretted even more not having brought both children.

They would settle in Pasadena, a large suburb near Houston, and the mother eventually would marry a man who Jorge Callado said was abusive. He said his stepfather "drank quite a bit; would come home and pick fights with my mom. He'd go to jail. . . . He'd beat my mom, and she decided we had to get out of there."

A friend of his mother contacted a church in Cleburne that would help the family, and when Jorge was in about the sixth grade, he and his mother left their home in the middle of the night, headed for North Texas.

Jorge loved the rural nature of Cleburne — a place where he saw his first cow — partly because it was far from the urban scene where more and more youngsters, in order to survive, felt they had to become part of the hip-hop gang lifestyle.

Everything went well for him and his mother for a few years. His mom worked her factory job and started a business, buying wholesale clothes and reselling them. Jorge was doing well in school until he became a sophomore and began hanging with the kind of kids he thought he'd left behind in Pasadena.

He started skipping school and getting into trouble and eventually was expelled for a year when he was a junior. His mother made him work that year, painting and remodeling the house.

It was also a year of reflection, especially that summer when he worked at a Boy Scout camp and met high school and college students who began to influence him.

"All the people there were genuinely nice, respectful, well-behaved and just great people," he said. "I realized they were the ones I should be associated with."

Jorge then enrolled in a Cleburne school program that allowed students to work at their own pace. He graduated quickly and decided to attend Hill College, where he ignored advice to take 12 hours and signed up for 18.

"I have a good, healthy thirst for knowledge, thankfully," he said.

It showed.

From Hill, he signed up at UTA, taking honors business courses and still working 36 hours a week at the Wal-Mart logistics plant in Cleburne. He also became active on campus. Two years ago, he became a U.S. citizen.

Jorge said he got only one B in his entire college career — in a Hill College English course — and he felt he deserved an A in that class.

Last weekend, he graduated from UTA with a 4.0 grade point average and an honors bachelor's degree in business administration in finance. He was also chosen to be the student speaker at the university's graduation celebration.

"The road was pretty tough," he told his fellow graduates. "As someone with very little formal education and who initially didn't know the language, my mother had to work extra hard to put food on the table and save up for college. That she did extremely well, and I am in the position I am today because of her diligence and perseverance."

Next month, Jorge will take his family to Disney World. Among the 10 people on that joyous trip will be his older brother, who came to North Texas when he was 18 and now lives in Dallas with his wife and three children.

In July, the young graduate reports for a job with Microsoft in Seattle, and he's already talking about how he can help young Hispanics and other minorities realize their dreams. His goal is to establish a scholarship at UTA, he said.

Because he's been blessed, he wants to be a blessing to others. I have no doubt that he already is.