



From Honduras to Hillier

The story of how a group of St. Andrew's alumni, an innovative NGO called BECA and a homegrown school in a small Honduran town worked together to help a high potential student realize his big dreams.

by Jean Garnett

When Hilary Hammell '00 called St. Andrew's Assistant Director of Admissions Morgan Scoville '00 to ask about admitting her Honduran student, Kervin Zamora, two months had been enough to convince her that Kervin and St. Andrew's were positively made for each other. "I loved St. Andrew's because I loved being challenged to think in new ways," Hilary explained in a letter of recommendation for Kervin's application. "I loved the fact that I, a smart-mouthed, skinny, attention-starved teenager, could walk into a room and sit at a round table and be taken seriously. In fact, I think St. Andrew's eventually formed me into a person who really did deserve to be taken seriously. Kervin Zamora, having just turned 15, already deserves to be taken seriously."

Hilary's moment of realization had occurred during a class discussion on current events. Asked how President Mel Zelaya might help the poor, one student offered, "Give them money." Kervin replied immediately and urgently, jumping up from his chair: "No! No! Not money! Give them... opportunity!" Skeptical that perhaps this vociferous student was simply parroting a soundbite, Hilary pressed him farther, and discovered that he knew exactly what he meant. "It is not enough to give money," he explained, "you have to give education, and you have to have jobs, and you have to build roads so that people can get to the jobs, and you have to have rehabilitation for people who are addicted to the drugs and alcohol..." Hilary recalls the flash of realization that followed this moment: "It was so clear to me that he had an innate grasp of complex causality that would be criminal to waste in a poor education system; that a 15-year-old who already saw how interconnected the world was deserved nothing less than a rigorous liberal arts education, and I was not going to let him graduate from ninth grade at San Jeronimo without my having done everything in my power to get him set up for the best high school education possible. Which, in my mind, meant St. Andrew's."

The story of how Kervin came to be a St. Andrew's student is interwoven with the story of several alumni and their participation in a grassroots organization called BECA (Bilingual Education for Central America). Created in 2001, BECA aimed to offer opportunity to the children and families of the small Honduran town of Cofradia. By 2004, BECA found an appropriate venue in the San Jeronimo Bilingual School, where today over 185 students, Pre-K through ninth grade, receive bilingual education from a multicultural teaching staff.

In keeping with the organization's grassroots origins, the BECA community has been shaped in large part by personal connections between caring and interested individuals. Both Sallie Graves '00 and Anna Hickman '02 found out about BECA from former St. Andrew's faculty member and BECA board member Mel Bride. "She was my Spanish teacher and field hockey and lacrosse coach while I was at St. Andrew's," Anna recalls. "When I graduated from Davidson in 2006, Mel told

me about the work BECA was doing in Honduras and I was immediately interested... teaching at San Jeronimo Bilingual School in Honduras seemed like a perfect fit."

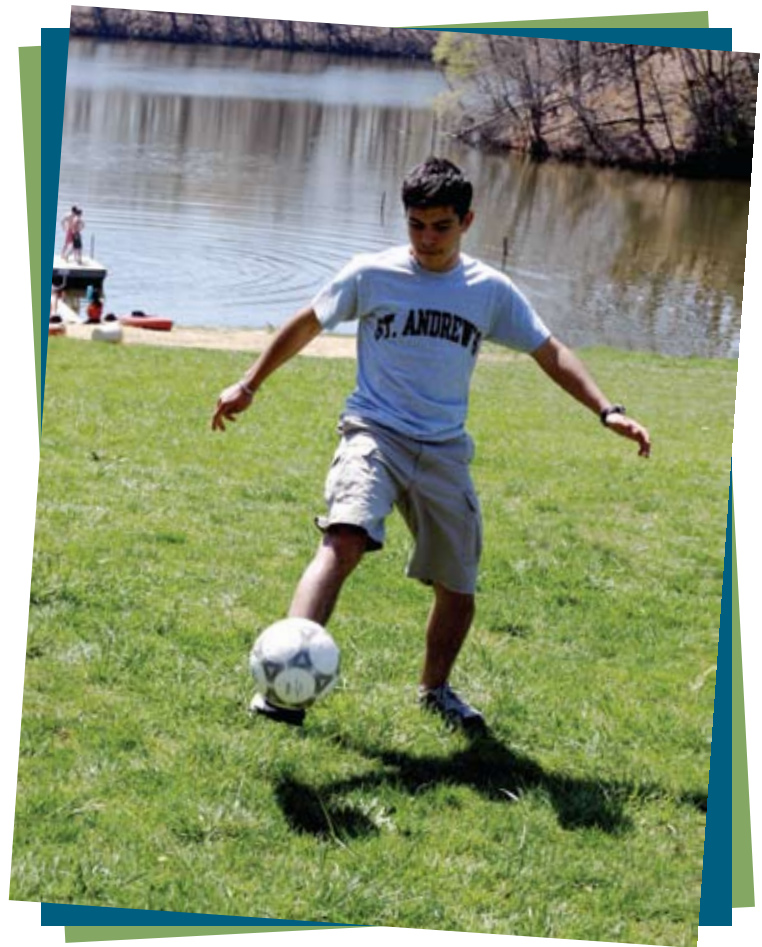
Laurence Birdsey '00 also heard about BECA via the St. Andrew's grapevine: "My initiation into the BECA volunteer corps came at the urging of fellow St. Andrew Hilary Hammell," Laurence writes. "She knew I felt burnt out after nearly three years of working for a hedge fund in Manhattan, so when a position at San Jeronimo opened up, she doggedly suggested I quit my job and devote some of my time and savings to non-profit work. No matter that I had neither a teaching background nor experience with little kids. Never mind that my Spanish was rusty and my understanding of third-world living non-existent. But Hilary's persistence paid off and a few weeks later I was thrown into two classes of unruly 4- and 5-year-olds with a mandate to not only contain them, but to simultaneously foist the English language upon them."

While living and teaching in Cofradia meant something different to each of these alumni, all were powerfully affected, and even changed, by the experience. "It was an incredible learning experience for me," says Anna, "and I continue to do a lot of work with BECA and with the school."

For Laurence, "The five months of time I shared with those children represents some of the most daunting work I have undertaken, yet I relished the challenge." Sallie described her BECA experience in the Fall 2006 issue of *St. Andrew's Magazine*, and her piece tracks her own learning in and out of the classroom as she relied on intuition and improvisation to negotiate new and foreign challenges.

As these St. Andrew's alums discovered, the beauty of BECA is its creation of a mutually beneficial experiential exchange. Honduran children, whose educational options are rendered dismally narrow by a dysfunctional school system, receive quality education from an international group of volunteer teachers who, in turn, receive a rich and fulfilling immersion experience, in addition to the wisdom that the trials and errors of teaching invariably affords. Teachers teach students; students teach teachers; visitors teach locals and local culture teaches visitors. Everybody learns—about other people and about themselves.

So when Hilary presented a plan to help realize the hopes of one of her students, fellow BECA-St. Andrew's alumns were quick to rally behind her. Teaching San Jeronimo students had helped them find themselves, and now they had the chance to give one of these students an even more life-changing experience. Kervin had shared his community with them; now they would share their own, the St. Andrew's community that had contributed so meaningfully to their own development. Laurence and Hilary headed the mission, while the others offered support and assistance, involving their friends and families in the undertaking.



For Sallie, one anecdote stood out as paradigmatic of Kervin's personality and spirit. The scene was an afternoon soccer game between Hondurans and "gringo" teachers in a dusty lot behind San Jeronimo School:

"Despite an enthusiastic gringo effort, the Hondurans showed far superior talent and athleticism that Friday afternoon. When the whistle sounded at the end of the match, most of the eighth grade students (and some Honduran staff members) cheered at their victory and jeered at the gringo teachers. What happened next was one of the most powerful moments of that semester for me. It is a sort of snapshot—a moment that, for me, is somehow frozen in time, and that absolutely exemplifies the strength of Kervin's character. Just seconds after the victory whoops begun, Kervin left his teammates and approached his opponents, offering a 'good game,' a smile and a handshake to each of us. Though this would not have occurred to his classmates, they all followed suit within minutes—a testimony to their perception of and respect for Kervin."

Although she never had the pleasure of teaching him, Anna Hickman remembers first meeting Kervin: "During lunch one day, Kervin approached me and politely introduced himself to me, stating that he thought he should do so, since he did not yet know who I was. From that moment on, Kervin impressed me. Whether it was the stories about his intellectual discussions or the kind interactions I witnessed him have with other students, I could see his strong character

▲ *Kervin Zamora enjoys time spent on the front lawn.*

► *Sallie Graves '00 spent a year teaching at San Jeronimo Bilingual School in Honduras.*



and good heart. Kervin is one of those students you don't easily forget."

St. Andrew's Director of Admissions Louisa Zendt was ready to put her faith in Kervin based on the commendations of this team of alumni alone, and his personality, expressed in his application, further clarified his outstanding merit. In a careful but confident hand along a narrowly lined sheet of paper, the applicant had penned his condensed life story: "I am from Santa Barbara, Honduras, but when I was nine years old, I moved to Cofradia. The reason I moved there with my family was that Hurricane Mitch destroyed everything we had, so we had to move. Here is where my story begins." As a supplement to his "story," Kervin sent a video of himself to St. Andrew's. Watching this wise and eager-eyed boy, playing soccer with friends, engaging teachers in discussion, touring the viewer through the dusty streets and dilapidated houses of his village, Louisa saw a future St. Andrew's student.

From the moment Hilary set the option of a St. Andrew's scholarship on the table, Kervin attached his tenacious hopes to the idea, determined to translate it into a reality. "I knew immediately that I wanted to try for it," he recalls. "As I heard her speak, I just thought, 'Wow, that's me.' So I raised my hand.... Some other students said it would be too scary to go to another country and be away from their families. But I said, 'Scary? That's not a word for me.'"

The image of that raised hand—its reflexive and bold reach—perfectly captures the spirit of its owner. And it creates some questions too: How could a young man—a child, really—make a life-changing decision so fast, with none of the pro-and-con-weighing, family-and-friend-consulting and other methods of prolonged vacillation that most of us require in such cases? Why doesn't the word "scary" factor into Kervin's decision-making apparatus?

He has clear answers to these questions—he has encountered them before—which he now articulates in English much improved since his arrival on campus: "If I want to be somebody in this life, I have to work for it. And no matter where it is, or how it is, I have to do it. I don't

have a choice; I have to do it, and I love to do it too." It is this willful conflation of "I have to" with "I love to" that has allowed Kervin to stay focused even when the going has gotten rough. "After I decided to try for the scholarship, I was working from six in the morning until six in the evening every day," he reports with a smile. "I had three more hours of work than the other students, because I had to improve my English. It was tiring, but I knew that I had to do it. So I just kept trying hard, and now I'm here!"

A moment from this spring—already a legend in campus lore—helps to encapsulate Kervin's approach to "scary" things. In a dining hall packed with classmates, teachers and senior relatives (St. Andrew's was celebrating Grandparents' Day), Kervin, clutching a bunch of flowers, stood up and walked to the center of the room. Once there, he broke the curious silence, inviting a III Form girl to join him. She approached; Kervin knelt before her and asked her to go to the prom with him; and the whole room exploded into cheering applause. Such chivalry is hardly the norm on campus, especially among underformers. It was not that Kervin wasn't scared, but being scared seemed irrelevant to the task at hand. "I was shaking in that moment," he confesses, "but I didn't really care. I thought, 'She deserves it,' so that's what I did." On prom night, Kervin brought his date to Mr. Miller's apartment and cooked Honduran food for her.

In 2005 Kervin's mother, Olga, went to live with her family in San Pedro Sula, while Kervin and his sister, Greysi, remained in Cofradia to continue attending San Jeronimo, moving between the houses of friends and paid host families. Even in this unsettled environment, Kervin managed to remain determinedly optimistic and focused, juggling schoolwork with the daily tasks of feeding himself, washing his uniform and tending his sister. "It is difficult to live alone without family and it makes me sad," he wrote in his personal statement, "but this experience of living alone has helped me to be strong and capable with my own problems and responsibilities.... I am hopeful that at St. Andrew's I could be surrounded with new friends and it could be like my new

family." At the end of his III Form year, Kervin's hope has been realized, and he now feels fully immersed and engaged in the community he worked so hard to join: "One of the reasons I hate going on break is that I have to go away from here. I feel this is home and I don't want to leave."

Perhaps Kervin's most striking feature is the clarity and frankness with which he refers to his future, even when the present is difficult and uncertain. His ambition is indelibly carved into his conception of himself. His personal statement to St. Andrew's was signed, "Sincerely, Kervin (a boy with dreams!)" In an interview, he described himself as someone who likes to "dream big." Where many in his age group shy away from professions of hope that might make them vulnerable to disappointment, Kervin owns his ambition openly and fearlessly.

This characteristic derives in part from circumstance; long-term thinking has been an imperative for Kervin. Largely self-reliant since childhood, he has had to create a map for himself, and doing so has afforded him a perspective—on himself and on his place in the world—that is extremely rare among his contemporaries. "I think of myself as a light for my family," he says, "because we don't have that much opportunity in my country. Education is not that great. The government doesn't really care about improving the way people live. And even if they want to, there's no way to do it. I want to be a different kind. I want to try to do something different to help people."

Kervin hasn't always been in the habit of "dreaming big." It was his enrollment in San Jeronimo Bilingual School, and his interface with BECA, that changed life as he knew it irrevocably. "When I was in second grade, I thought that I would probably be a policeman or something—everybody thinks that. But when I went to [San Jeronimo], I could see I was born to achieve goals in this life." In a nurturing environment, with teachers who believed in his potential, Kervin began to define and articulate these goals. "I want to help my mom. I want to help my country, my family and myself." This year, in Mr. Speers' English class, Kervin read Fitzgerald's great novel and immediately identified with its protagonist. "I always believed that I could do more [for my country] than what other people have done, but before, when that thought came to my mind, I was like Gatsby. He was described as nobody from nowhere. I was like him. I didn't have the chances or opportunities to think in that way, but going to bilingual school opened my mind."

Kervin's III Form year has further opened his mind and broadened his already expansive horizons. "Being here at St. Andrew's makes me think I could do something bigger than what I was planning to do," he says, a characteristic smile in his eyes. "I want to graduate from college here and try somehow to get to the UN and to work there to help not just Honduras, but other countries too. After a couple years of working there, I would go back to my country to do

what I have been planning to do there. Maybe I could run for president in Honduras—you never know—and work against the corruption in the government. I can help the people there, not just by being president, but just by being a good person."

Just as BECA offered an intercultural exchange that enriched all participants, Kervin's presence at St. Andrew's has touched many lives and broadened many horizons. With his characteristically shining countenance—there is a brightly inquisitive and faintly challenging smile in his eyes that arrests interlocutors—his willingness to work and his gung-ho energy, Kervin has brought his special brand of vitality, humor and wisdom to the St. Andrew's community.

"I have achieved what I wanted to achieve for my freshman year," he says, "which was to convince [the School] to expand my scholarship from one year to all four years. Now that my English has improved, I want to raise my grades. But my main goal... I just want to become better. To become a better person and to learn how to treat people."

As for more specific goals, Kervin hopes to create a club next year. He has already settled on a name: "It would be called, 'The Honduran Appreciation Society,' and it would teach people about where I am from." Kervin's desire to teach his classmates about Honduran culture stems in part from an urge to be more fully known himself: "I don't want people to just think of me as 'that Honduran kid'; I want them to have words to describe me." The teaching he has in mind doesn't involve a blackboard. Rather, he envisions group activities in which he can share his pastimes from one home with his new neighbors in another. "One of my ideas is to cook Honduran food for them, and to teach them how to do it themselves. I want to talk to them about the politics of my country, and play them our most popular music."

Although he hasn't had time to pursue his drum-playing at St. Andrew's, music is very important to Kervin. "In Honduras, we all have to learn how to play a musical instrument in order to participate in Independence Day [September 15], when every single high school, college, school and kindergarten—everybody in Honduras—goes to the street to play music the entire day. All the streets are so crowded you can't even walk, and there are fireworks. It's a Honduran party, a family party for the entire country. It's pretty amazing"

Would his Honduran Appreciation Society campaign for an Independence Day party at St. Andrew's? He doubts the administration would jump at the prospect of a 12-hour music festival on a school day. "Maybe an announcement at School meeting," he suggests, with characteristic diplomacy. When it comes to dreaming big, this kid knows how to pick his battles.

Learn more about BECA at www.becaschools.org. ❖

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