An Undocumented Princetonian

By JOSEPH BERGER

In lyrical passages of “This Side of Paradise,” F. Scott Fitzgerald’s young alter ego, Amory Blaine, is awed by the “great dreaming spires” of Princeton and its “lazy beauty, its half-grasped significance, the wild moonlight revel of the rushes.” Three generations later, Harold Fernandez was no less awed by the castle-like dormitories, the teeming libraries, the hoary traditions.

But Harold Fernandez was different from most freshmen. Amory Blaine had been to prep school, and his mother, though not of the privileged class, had raised him to appreciate the treasures of Western culture. Harold had been raised in the streets of Medellín, Colombia, listening to tango and salsa lyrics that spoke of the harsh local realities of violence, drugs and prison. His American schooling was in a gritty factory town, West New York, N.J.

He also harbored a secret. He had entered Princeton using a fake green card and Social Security number that he had acquired in the immigrant black market, because he had been smuggled into Florida on a leaky boat crowded with illegal immigrants.

Relentless poverty had driven his parents to leave him and his younger brother Byron in Medellín as they scraped together a living in the United States. The parents missed their sons terribly and were desperate to have them escape what was then the world’s cocaine capital. The boys’ childhood neighborhood was lively with children kicking soccer balls, but Harold had twice witnessed young men being shot to death in drug wars; violence would ultimately claim six of his own relatives.

At age 13, he had not seen his father for four years or his mother for two. And so in October of 1978, he and Byron said goodbye at the Medellín airport to the two grandmothers who had cared for them. Even today, he can recall the sadness written on their faces; if the boys reached their destination, they might never see them again.

The boys made their way to the tiny island of North Bimini, where they and a dozen other migrants waited 12 days for the treacherous seas of the Bermuda Triangle to calm for their clandestine voyage.

Just before midnight one moonless night, the group clambered aboard a 25-foot wooden cabin cruiser that did not seem seaworthy enough to take them the 50 miles to the coast of Florida. As they huddled around the cabin table, the boat lurched and bounced over the waves. Harold remembers the terror in the grown-ups’ eyes. Soon almost everyone was seasick, dashing to the toilet to vomit. “Padre nuestro que estás en el cielo, santificado sea tu nombre,” they murmured, the Lord’s Prayer.

By daybreak the weary, battered travelers glimpsed the jagged skyline of Miami. When they disembarked, they staggered a few hundred yards to a public telephone, where they took turns calling relatives. The joyful
lilt of his mother’s voice when she learned her sons were safe is still clear in Harold Fernandez’s mind. Yet he sometimes considers what his reckless crossing cost: years as an outlaw, with the fear that each day would be his last in America.

With steady work and fierce ambition, the boy weathered West New York’s rough-and-tumble culture to become valedictorian of Memorial High School and gain admission to Princeton. Whatever his back story, he was now required to thrive on this side of paradise.

HAROLD FERNANDEZ arrived on campus in 1985, two weeks before most of the class, to take part in a program for poor and minority students or those from high schools without the array of Advanced Placement courses that Princeton freshmen usually had. Princeton wanted to introduce these students to its academic demands by giving them a taste of calculus, chemistry and writing. It was writing, Harold remembers, that was his biggest challenge, and his mangling of everyday English would haunt him throughout his college years.

For his first year, Harold was assigned a small room with a window overlooking a stately Gothic courtyard in the Hamilton Hall dorm in Mathey, one of Princeton’s residential colleges. He shared it with a Mexican immigrant from East Los Angeles who had a deceptively aristocratic bearing: he actually was paying his way by washing dishes in the cafeteria. The other Mathey students were daunting; they included the sons of lawyers, businessmen, even a Rockefeller. Once, in the cafeteria, Harold was slathering peanut butter and jelly on bread as a strikingly tall, attractive girl waited for him to finish. He realized it was Brooke Shields — the Brooke Shields. She was a junior. He pretended not to be starstruck, but he was. He felt, in Fitzgerald’s words, “stiff and awkward among these white flannelled, bareheaded youths” and he envied “the savoir-faire with which they strolled.”

At night, as he tried to fall asleep, he wondered about his West New York education. Could it match that of students who had gone to selective schools? He assumed his SAT scores were among the lowest in his class. He moved around campus feeling as if he were onstage and the other students were reviewing his performance and finding it wanting. Although he dressed neatly, he was painfully aware that his clothes were cut-rate. One classmate, the son of a physician, “went out shopping with his parents and came back with a pair of $200 shoes,” Harold recalls. “I had never spent more than $20 on a pair.”

The young immigrant ate all his meals in the cafeteria, whose food he considered “gourmet quality,” though most of his classmates knew better. He worked shifts washing dishes and he tutored the daughter of his Latin American literature professor in calculus.

Luckily, he says, his grandmothers had hammered self-respect into him. He was proud of the solitary women who had raised him, and proud of how hard his father and mother had worked to send money to Colombia to put food on the family table. Still, each time he uttered his awkward sentences, he was sure other students wondered what he was doing at Princeton.

In the classroom he was very quiet, he says. But as the year progressed, he showed a firm grasp of the course material on written tests. He would read a required chapter so many times he would memorize much of it. He was always ahead of the reading list by two weeks. He kept two notebooks for every course, one recording what the professor had said in class and the other containing more organized summaries.
supplemented with explanations and diagrams. To study, he found private niches where there were no distractions. He was particularly attached to the classrooms in Palmer Hall, where nearly half a century before Einstein had given some of his lectures.

“Just the idea of sitting in the same rooms where mankind’s greatest mind had worked was inspiring,” he says now. “I would read about a problem, solve it, and then step up to the blackboard and pretend that I was teaching it to someone else. I would do this routine in a loud voice. I found that if I could teach a concept to someone else, then I understood it. Besides, I figured that no one else would want to share a room with someone who was studying in such a nutty way.”

He received A’s his first semester, and at the start of spring semester, he received a personal letter from Nancy Kanach, then Mathey’s director of studies, which said that he was one of the college’s top freshmen. With tears in his eyes, he read the letter over many times. He was proving wrong those who had dismissed him as an undeserving beneficiary of affirmative action. He suspects that he was admitted as a result of such a policy. But Princeton’s admissions committee, he felt, had paid attention to the fact that his accomplishments were achieved after arriving in this country as a Spanish-speaking 13-year-old.

If he was beginning to feel he might be a legitimate part of this cherished American institution, that confidence would end one spring evening. Students would soon be going home for the break, and he was eagerly looking forward to again tasting his mother’s arepas — stuffed tortillas — and listening to his parents’ earthy Spanish wit. He ate dinner with the young woman he was dating, as he did most weeknights, and they returned to the dorm. At the mailboxes he spied an envelope.

It was a form letter from the adviser to foreign-born students, Janina M. Issawi. Those who were not citizens or permanent residents were asked to set up appointments and bring their documents to be photocopied. According to a Princeton spokeswoman, Emily Aronson, the university had to verify that these students were eligible for federal loans or work-study jobs. Harold had received a Pell grant and federal loans, both restricted to citizens or permanent residents. He was neither.

A copy of his green card had been submitted with his application; now Princeton was asking for the original. But the original was a crude forgery.

The dream that had begun at a Florida dock was about to shatter. His face must have telegraphed his shock, because his girlfriend asked him immediately what was wrong. “I can’t tell you now,” he remembers responding. “I need to go back to my room.”

She insisted on accompanying him, and in his room she reached into his coat pocket and grabbed the letter. He let her read it. He had never spoken about his immigration status to anyone on campus, but now he did. He revealed that he could be deported to Colombia overnight if immigration officials discovered the truth. At the least, Princeton would throw him out.

“Although we had been together for just a few months, we were falling in love,” he says. “So when the full weight of my predicament sank in, tears were welling in her eyes, I could see. Somehow her emotions showed me how much she cared and bolstered me for the troubled days ahead.”
He did not tell his parents. He knew it would tear them up to learn that he might be expelled, shorn of the opportunities they had worked so hard to give him. His father’s locker at the embroidery factory where he worked was plastered with local newspaper articles about his son’s accomplishments in the classroom and on the track and soccer teams. His father would buttonhole coworkers and his boss and show off the clippings. The boss might earn more money, but he did not have a son at Princeton.

Harold could not summon the nerve to show the adviser fake documents. A few years earlier, he had failed to obtain a genuine Social Security card (his father had acquired one years earlier; he says he was never asked for proof of immigration status). All Harold would have had to do was flash his fake green card at a government clerk in Long Branch, N.J. If a clerk could intimidate him, how much more would a Princeton official?

He decided he had to confess, but first he confided in someone he had come to trust — his professor in Latin American literature, Arcadio Díaz-Quiñones.

The professor closed the door to his office, and they sat down at a small table. Harold did not utter a word. The tensions that had built up spilled out. He dropped his head on the table and wept.

Professor Díaz put his hand on his shoulder consolingly. After a few minutes, Harold collected himself and unfolded his saga. Professor Díaz seemed to listen to the tale as if it were a picaresque novel. Professor Díaz, who still teaches at Princeton, recalls that when Harold was done, he advised him not to tell anyone and to keep at his schoolwork. He says he assured Harold that he would speak to Mrs. Issawi and to the university’s president, William G. Bowen.

A few days later, Harold was asked to meet with Ms. Kanach. He found her just as friendly in person as in her letter congratulating him on his record. Ms. Kanach, who is now senior associate dean of the college, remembers the encounter only vaguely. Harold says he remembers it clearly. He says she told him Princeton was proud to have him as a student but identified two formidable problems he had created for the university. First, he had broken Princeton’s honor code, which essentially affirms that students will not cheat or lie. Moreover, he had improperly received government money intended for American citizens or permanent residents.

“Just as I was feeling crushed by the gravity of these issues,” he remembers, “she went on to say: ‘But, Harold, both problems have solutions.’ ”

To address the first, he would have to write an essay explaining his understanding of the honor code, how he had broken it and why he deserved a pardon. To resolve the second, Princeton would change his status to that of a foreign student and furnish grants and loans with its own funds, laying out more than $16,000 a year. It was like having a full Princeton scholarship.

Ms. Aronson confirms that the university engaged in this practice for some foreign-born students, adding that since 2001, Princeton has replaced all need-based loans with grants, “regardless of national origin.” Also, the admissions office does not consider immigration status in making its decisions, she says, and “there are no laws that would require us to do so.”
Harold says, “I think the fact that I was doing so well in my courses and was playing on a school soccer team helped my case. Nevertheless, I was moved by the school’s generosity toward someone whom they could have shrugged off as an unscrupulous intruder.”

He left Ms. Kanach’s office feeling enormous relief, he says, but he was not in the clear. He was no longer an impostor at Princeton, but his family was illegally in the United States. Authorities could still send them back to Colombia. With that as well, Princeton would help.

Harold traveled home for a weekend to tell his parents what had happened, but in reverse order. Princeton had offered a meeting with a university lawyer who specialized in immigration so that his parents might legalize their status. And then he told them about his confession.

His mother sat next to him gently crying. Even today, she agonizes over the decision to immigrate illegally, and what it put her children through. She expressed appreciation to Princeton and said: “Harold, mi amor, you are doing great. Keep working hard and they will keep on helping you.”

EPILOGUE

The family attained legal residency, and among the arguments on their behalf was a letter from a Princeton alumnus then in the Senate, Bill Bradley. Harold Fernandez went on to graduate from Princeton magna cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa in 1989, and to train at Harvard Medical School and New York University Medical Center. Now 44, he is a cardiac surgeon affiliated with St. Francis Hospital in Roslyn, N.Y., where he performs bypass operations and valve replacements that allow his patients to live longer, more vigorous lives.

Joseph Berger, a metro reporter for The Times, is working with Harold Fernandez on a memoir. This article is adapted from the book.