

Published June 13th, 2018

Hurricane survivor to Campo grad

By Cathy Dausman



Patrick Turner and Campo grad John Alago are all smiles during final exams Photos Cathy Dausman

"It could always be worse." That's what John Alago, 16, told his high school counselor last fall.

Having survived one of Puerto Rico's worst hurricanes, he endured subsequent housing damage, power loss and near communication blackout, then left his parents and home to travel 3,600 miles to California. He wanted to finish high school. His Puerto Rico family told him it couldn't be done. He needed eight classes to graduate. He was unfamiliar with block scheduling, a closed campus, and mandatory attendance, let alone using a laptop. He lacked winter clothing. But it could always be worse.

His aunt and uncle welcomed Alago and two older cousins into their Lafayette home. "It was a no brainer for my husband and me," said Alago's aunt, Maria Brenner. By November, Alago was enrolled at Campolindo High School, where he met counselor Patrick Turner, himself new to the school. The new student and new counselor hit it off.

home rather than risk losing university grant money. "We figured John would go back in January," Brenner said. But he liked Campolindo and wanted to finish there.

Brenner said her nephew's Campolindo stay was to be temporary, "until electricity and water was restored [to Puerto Rico] and conditions were livable." His cousins found employment in Lamorinda but quickly returned

Alago took "only six" classes - economics, math, English, Spanish, art and PE, plus two more (biology and U.S. History) online - and his introduction to fourth year English was to memorize dialogue from Hamlet. It could always be worse. "The school was exceedingly welcoming," said Alago's cousin Jennifer Mitchell. Brenner credits an entire community for getting him "to this point [graduation]."

Brenner says her family received "overwhelming" help from neighbors for everything from donated winter clothing to transportation and support. "It takes a village," Brenner said, adding, "My heart is filled with gratitude."

Mitchell said Alago worked exceedingly hard this year. He joined the track team, took up shot put and discus, and earned Most Improved Athlete honors. He made friends and took a date to Senior Ball.

Initially Alago ate lunch with Turner, and the two became more than student and counselor. "He's the man," Alago said, "and he's still helping me."

"John has been a great addition to Campolindo's community," Turner said as they caught up in his office. They talk about Alago returning to Campolindo as a given and Turner wants to visit Puerto Rico as well. Alago's aunt, uncle and parents all attended the June 8 graduation and the next day he flew home to Puerto Rico. He'll attend the Universidad de Turabo, but wants "to return to the states" where he hopes to pursue a career in law enforcement or join the Coast Guard.

"For about the first week (at Campolindo) I was 'John from Puerto Rico,'" Alago said.

"And now you're 'John from California,'" Turner laughed.

It could always be worse.



Campolindo High counselor Patrick Turner holds the inspirational message from former student John Alago.

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