



Growing up without a dad,
Jose Contreras counted on
himself. The day he couldn't,
Mike Ross stepped in.

STAND BY ME

BY KENNETH MILLER
PHOTOGRAPHED BY TOM HUSSEY

"Mr. Ross has
gotten a lot of kids
off the streets," Jose
says of his scoutmaster.
"He's probably the
best thing we've had
in our lives."

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On his way to class one day, Jose Conteras, 13, saw a taped-up poster for a new Boy Scout troop. Jose had never met a Boy Scout. People in his part of Dallas thought Scouting was strictly for suburban kids with spare cash for camping equipment. Still, the image—a boy rappelling from a tower, in a uniform pinned with badges—caught his eye. That could be me, he thought.

Jose's father had left when he was a toddler, and his mother, Maria, had always juggled a variety of jobs, barely earning enough to pay the bills. When his half brother, David, was born, Jose looked after him when Maria was at work. He was just seven, but he was mature for his age, and she felt she had no choice. Still, a few months later, Maria sent him to live with her parents in Mexico. "She was afraid I was missing my childhood," he recalls.

Jose spent four years on his grandparents' farm and never attended a day of school. Then, at 11, he moved back home to live with his mother and little brother in the mostly Hispanic neighborhood of Oak Cliff. The school dropout rate in the community was high, and many of the boys joined gangs, sold drugs, did time. There were lots of kids from fatherless homes with no money. But Jose was different. Jose shone. He excelled in math and art and, to help his family, found jobs mowing lawns and delivering newspapers. His classmates considered him friendly and easygoing—even gang members gave him respect. "I'm a very social

person," he says by way of explanation. "I get along with everyone."

Oak Cliff is only five miles out of central Dallas, but as Mike Ross headed southwest across the Trinity River, he was entering unknown territory. His usual commute took him north to a comfortable suburb. Ross, 47, worked as a tax professional for a multinational accounting firm. His father, a salesman for a sign company, and his mother, a homemaker, had only completed high school, but they urged him to go to college. "I'm a very lucky person," he says. "My mom and dad busted their butts so that I could do what I do."

After college, he spent eight years in the Army, rising to captain, with postings in South Korea and Philadelphia. He got married. When his tour of duty was done, he earned a law degree, then an MBA, and landed a job with a prestigious Dallas firm. Still, he says, he felt an emptiness. He missed mentoring young soldiers in the Army and missed the feeling that he served something larger than himself.

So one day he called the Scouts. Scouting "was the single defining experience of my youth," says Ross, who, at 17, made Eagle, a rank achieved by just 3 percent of Boy Scouts. When he asked coordinators at the local chapter where they most needed help, they assigned him to a brand-new troop of Hispanic recruits in Oak Cliff.

"Where's the scoutmaster?" Ross asked the official who met him at the school where Troop 2012 was to have



Mike Ross (left) still leads Troop 2012, and Jose—now in college—helps out whenever he can.

his first meeting. "You're it," the man told him. Ross was shocked—he'd expected to assist the troop, not lead it—but there were three boys waiting for him in the cafeteria.

He gamely improvised a talk about campouts and badges and demonstrated knot tying with his shoelace. Two of the kids watched politely, but the third, a sturdy older boy named Jose, was riveted. When Ross wrapped up the meeting, Jose gave him a firm handshake. "I'm really glad I joined," the teenager said. "I think this is going to be good for me."

The troop's first outing was a camping trip to Possum Kingdom Lake. It rained all weekend, and a toxic bloom of algae sent dead fish floating to the surface. The boys had to chop wet

wood for a campfire, but Ross managed to roast three chickens on a branch and make smores for dessert. He told ghost stories, using a shovel for sound effects. "It was a horrible, cold mess," Jose recalls, "but we had fun. We made everything happen."

The growing troop met every Wednesday evening, learning how to give CPR, treat snake bites, and identify plants. Each boy had a task, and they learned to work together. They climbed at Camp Cherokee, went caving at Colorado Bend State Park, and attended the National Scout Jamboree in Virginia. Jose got to rappel from a tower, with the scoutmas-

ter cheering him on. Ross kept close to the kids, knew their struggles and aspirations, and quietly dug into his pocket when one of them needed a little extra. He led the troop with a gentle hand, coaxing when necessary but letting the boys find their own way forward. "He was a father figure

Jose was facing the end of all that he'd worked for. Ross

watching over me," says Jose. "The first time I felt it from someone besides my mom," Jose bounded up the Scouting ranks, earning boxfuls of merit badges.

He entered high school and kept his focus. He walked away when gang fights rolled across the schoolyard, parties erupted into shootouts, and corner dealers offered heroin and crack. Instead, he hung out at art galleries in the gentrifying section of Oak Cliff, aced his precalculus final, and set his sights on college. He envisioned a career as an architect or an industrial designer. But even for Jose, getting there was not a straight path.

At the start of his junior year, his family faced a crisis: Maria was struggling to find enough work to keep them from losing their apartment. Jose had always brought in extra income, from his newspaper route or jobs at restaurants and electronics outlets. Now he would have to earn serious wages. He took an afternoon job cleaning offices and one at night making microchips at a manufacturing plant. There was no time left for homework, little for

sleep. He missed classes, and for the first time, his grades slipped.

Ross sensed a change. "Why are you skipping meetings?" he asked, and Jose would only say he had too much work to do. Ross chose not to press.

Mid-semester, he made a big decision without fanfare: to transfer, with his mother's blessing, from Sunset High to Dallas Cant Academy, a charter school where potential dropouts could earn diplomas with minimal class time. Many of its graduates would be grateful for a factory job. "It's where gang members and girls with babbies go for their last chance," Jose says.

Ross only learned about the transfer when another Scout mentioned it in passing. The news shook him. Contemplating his role, he thought, This is a good-hearted kid with talent and drive. But if somebody doesn't push him, he isn't going to get where he needs to be. Jose had always called the shots for himself, making choices that would swell any parent's heart with pride. Now he was facing the end of all that he'd worked for. Ross felt it was his duty to talk to Jose. He asked him to lunch and spoke to him firmly: "You're going to ruin your chances of going to college."

Jose put up a strong front. "I thought switching schools was better than just quitting," he told Ross. But the scoutmaster had a better idea.

Though he knew Maria only a little, Ross arranged a meeting in the family apartment and proposed a deal: He would pay Maria \$400 a month to cover half the rent and some other expenses. "Let's call it Jose's allowance," he told her. In return, Jose would quit his job and transfer back to Sunset High. Ross would be designing his academic guardian, which ended with a handshake all around.

Ross worked out a plan with the school guidance counselors to give Jose an extra year to graduate. He tutored Jose in study skills, monitored his report cards, kept in touch with his teachers, and attended parents' night. Ross, who had divorced and remarried, was now stepfather to two teenage boys (both Scouts themselves). But he saw Jose as part of his larger family. "I wanted to help him reach

felt it was his duty to speak up.

down and find his strengths," he says. Jose responded to Ross's concern. His grades rebounded, along with his enthusiasm for Scouting. Just before his 19th birthday, in 2006, he stood on a stage at his old elementary school as his mother, fighting tears, pinned an Eagle Scout badge to his chest. "You're a marked man now," Ross said in the induction speech. "You have assumed a solemn obligation to do your duty to God, to country, to your fellow Scouts, and to mankind." Jose grinned as he stepped up to give his own speech. "This might be the best day of my life," he said.

Jose is the first person in his family to get a high school diploma. Today, he's a sophomore at the University of Texas at Arlington, studying engineering. And after nine years, he knows he can still count on Ross. "I'll call to tell him an idea or just to get something off my chest," says Jose. "He's always been there for me."

NOW BATTING FOR THE BOSTON LEAD SOX ...

After Japanese inventors announced that they had created robots that can throw strikes 90 percent of the time, the *Week* asked its readers to name the first all-robot baseball team. Their suggestions:

- The New York Clankers
- The Minnesota Tins
- The Oakland Ais
- BALL-E
- The Metsons
- The Boys of Spring(s)

From the *Week*

