



FRANCISCO ZEPPONI

Tennis

Santa Clara University

Accounting

Nominated by: Valeri Quintero

To escape Nicaragua's civil war, Francisco Zepponi and his family moved to the United States. His mother fell ill after their arrival in Miami, and at the age of four, he was put on an airplane and sent to California to live with his great aunt and uncle. At first, he felt as if his mom had abandoned him, but he soon learned what she already knew, that he was being given the opportunity of a lifetime to live with Roy and Dolores Zepponi. Fortunately, his new found "parents" surrounded him with love and security, and eventually adoption made them his permanent family. He describes his parents as "the driving force in my life;

they had such great expectations for me in school and athletics, and I responded to those expectations." He was fortunate enough to be recruited by Santa Clara University, an institution that was within a short drive of his home, so his parents could continue to be an integral part of both his tennis career and his life. Life seemed full of unlimited possibilities.

During his freshman year at Santa Clara, his father fell ill. Francisco considered his father to be the driving force in his life, someone whose support provided him with strength and whose wisdom and guidance helped make him a tough competitor both on and off the court. His team was having a fantastic year, and his father continued to come to watch his matches in spite of the illness. Francisco made frequent trips home and learned that the treatments were not working as the medical team had hoped. His father was there to support Francisco as he competed in the conference tournament. The sight of his dad's deteriorating physical condition took its toll on Francisco though, and he was unable to focus on the competition. A short two weeks later, he lost his dad to pancreatic cancer—a death that crushed both him and his mother.

He wanted to serve as a source of strength for his mom, but he could barely manage his own grief and despair. As he entered his sophomore season, he realized that his mom was suffering from depression and that her judgment was impaired. The stress was taking its toll on him both in the classroom and on the court, and the final blow came when he made a surprise visit to his mom and discovered that she had attempted suicide. He had her rushed to the hospital, but two weeks later he found himself standing graveside of a parent once again. In his essay, he wrote that he had lost his hero in his dad and his best friend in his mom, but he knew he had to honor his father by fighting through whatever circumstances life threw at him without backing down.

He returned to Santa Clara and found the support that he needed to continue with his degree program and with the tennis team. He is expecting to graduate Fall 2005 and has already accepted a position with a private accounting firm in Palo Alto upon graduation. He finished his essay by writing "I owe my success to my parents, . . .but I owe my success in dealing with the loss of my parents to my family at Santa Clara University."