Professor has odd Nobel link

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In 2003, Joseph-Désiré Otabela was in a bind. Through no fault of his own, his visa had expired, and he had become an illegal immigrant.

A 33-year-old Cameroonian student living and studying in Madrid, Spain, Otabela had been working on his doctoral dissertation for four years. Two years earlier, the Spanish government had inexplicably canceled scholarships for a group of foreign students including Otabela. Most of them had gone home without finishing their studies, but Otabela's university had agreed to cover his expenses while he completed his 460-page dissertation.

But in May 2003, after he presented the paper to faculty members, his time at school was officially over and his visa expired. He was flat broke, and because he was an illegal immigrant, he had no way of earning money.

He went to the Cameroon Embassy to ask if they could help arrange a plane ticket home, but a swift "no" came back from the ambassador. He called up friends and nongovernmental organizations to see if anyone could scrape together the $600 he needed but had no luck. The prospect of being arrested and deported was very real.

But then Otabela heard of another option: A friend told him about a foundation that specialized in outreach to Latin American students studying in Europe. He decided to visit the foundation on the slim chance it might make a one-time exception to help a needy African.

The attorney for the foundation said that, unfortunately, they couldn't make an exception. But out of curiosity, the man asked Otabela what his studies had been about.

Otabela answered that he had written a comparative literature study on the work of famed Peruvian author Mario Vargas Llosa.

"His first comment was ... 'I don't usually read what people write about me or my novels, but this one I read,'" Otabela recalled. "And he said, 'I'm wondering how a Cameroonian can write such good Spanish.'"

After sipping espresso and discussing literature, Vargas Llosa dropped a bombshell. He said he'd pay for Otabela's ticket home. "He was a good person," Otabela said. "A famous person — they're not usually like that."

Otabela has published two books since and is an assistant teaching professor of Spanish at the University of Missouri. Thursday, he was again in Spain for a conference when he got word that Vargas Llosa had won literature's highest honor, the Nobel Prize. "I was so excited," he said.

Michael Ugarte, a professor of romance languages at MU, said the story sheds new light on Vargas Llosa's personality. The author is perhaps best known in his public life for a run for the presidency of Peru in 1990. He is also known for a prickly personality exemplified by a dispute with fellow Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez that culminated in Vargas Llosa punching Marquez in the face.

"Here's a side of him that I was surprised to hear about," Ugarte said. "That he had the generosity to finance Joseph's trip back to Cameroon when he was stuck there — that puts Mario Vargas Llosa on a pedestal way higher than I had him before."

Otabela said over the years he has tried to contact Vargas Llosa and thank him for his gesture. He has never received a response.