The World War II generation is up in years now -- in the late 70s and up. They have accomplished much; without them, our country would have been much the poorer. And one of the main reasons for their success comes from a simple government program, the GI Bill.

It opened the doors to educational opportunities 60 years ago. It was the GI Bill, in all its glorious optimism, that put a stubborn idea into their heads -- that they, too, could go to college or trade school.

Today, as community college students struggle with remedial classes and too often drop out, we would do well to recall this history. Not so long ago, the grandparents of today's young people also struggled to finish school. The GI Bill of Rights, signed into law by Franklin D. Roosevelt in June 1944, made the difference. With one stroke of a pen, and the efforts of colleges and universities to make it happen, an entire generation of men and women who might have otherwise given up on school was inspired to go on. And what a difference they have made.

The GI Bill was the best thing to happen to us, many of them say in interviews. It's difficult to argue with that conclusion. The bill did, indeed, transform America. College was no longer limited to the children of the affluent. According to the Historical Statistics of the United States, less than 10 percent of young Americans attended college before the war; by 1948, that proportion had grown to 15 percent. And the figures went up from there.

Returning veterans of all races and backgrounds grabbed that brass ring of education and hung on for dear life. They knew very well what it could represent: a better job, higher wages, a comfortable life for their families. They had seen the alternative. This generation grew up in the Great Depression. Hundreds of the 500 or so Latinos and Latinas we've interviewed for the U.S. Latino & Latina WWII Oral History Project recall working in the fields with their parents: cotton fields in West Texas, sugar beets in Saginaw Michigan, cherries and peaches in California.

Gonzalo Garza, of Georgetown, remembers working with his parents and nine siblings. When they arrived at a field, the foreman's first question was: "Cuantas manos tiene usted?" -- How many hands do you have? -- "because the number of hands would (determine) the number of crops that you could pick," he said in an interview in 1991. As children, they didn't realize they were poor: everyone was poor. No one had more than one pair of shoes, everyone ate beans and tortillas, sometimes for breakfast, lunch and dinner. And only the fortunate few Mexican Americans graduated from high school, let alone college. WWII and the GI Bill would change that.
Growing up in a migrant worker family, Garza didn't start school until he was 10 years old. He would always be one of the oldest in his class. "I was older than the rest of my peers, so I felt that I didn't fit in," he said this week. Not that he was short of confidence. "I thought I had the smarts to not only catch up, but I could do better," he said recently. "I was a competitor."

But at 17 in 1944, he was only in the 9th grade. He was itching for a change. The war was on, and he opted for the U.S. Marines, as part of the 2nd Marine Division, 7th Regiment, Company E. He would see action in Saipan, Tinian and Okinawa. Garza realized that as smart as he was, he had more to learn. He resolved to get an education when he came home.

He returned after the war, got his GED and eventually earned degrees in history and Spanish, taught sixth grade and then got a Ph.D. and worked as a principal. The Gonzalo Garza Independence High School in Austin is named for him. For him and many others, the GI Bill made all the difference. As he put it, "The GI Bill has been, I would say, a savior."

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