

Eight Questions...

...For Naiomi Gonzalez

Academic achievement is one of the keys to success. Children who dedicate themselves to learning and who manage to graduate from college have a greater chance at success than those who do not pursue higher education. Providing proof that low-income students can be as successful as their upper class counterparts, we introduce you to Naiomi Gonzalez. Naiomi is a senior-to-be at Moravian College. She grew up in Marvine, where her mother still lives. We asked Naiomi eight questions in an attempt to find out her keys to success.

- How old were you when you started to dedicate yourself to studies?

Ever since I was in elementary school I've loved being in school. School was a safe haven for me and it allowed me to escape whatever difficulties I may have been facing at that time. Except for a few years here and there, I looked forward to going to school every day.

- What motivated you to become a serious student?

I remember, even in elementary school knowing that college is where I needed to eventually get to. I credit my older sisters, Yvette and Lissette, who often told me I needed to go to college. Also, because I felt safe in school I wanted to do well.

- Who helped to provide motivations?

My sisters and my teachers. They believed in me even when I thought I was worthless and would never be able to do anything with my life. They also listened to me when I was going through personal problems. Not all of my teachers were compassionate, but I was very lucky and had numerous teachers who supported me.

- Did growing up in low-income housing hinder you? Did it help in some way?

I'm not sure if growing up low income housing in itself hindered me but the fact that I was low income and did not have a lot of money did in some ways hinder me. It didn't become obvious until high school. I got accepted to a private high school, Moravian Academy, and although I received a full scholarship my family had to pay for lunch which was over \$900 a year. That was a lot for someone who qualifies to live in low income housing. I also noticed the discrepancies between the resources I had and the resources my peers had. They were able to travel every summer, pay thousands of dollars for SAT prep classes, and for outside tutors. It was kind of discouraging because I felt I had to work twice as hard as my other peers. Even in college, which has become hard even for middle class families to afford without taking out loans, I still feel the added pressures of being from a low income family. I have to fight a lot harder for opportunities that some of my other peers take for granted. But because college is so expensive for almost everyone, I don't feel as economically disadvantaged compared to my peers as I did in high school.

Being low income helped me become more resilient. Since opportunities were not just handed to me I had to fight for them and I continue to fight to get the most out of life and my college experience. I have learned never to give up no matter what life throws my way. I am persistent sometimes to the point of annoying people, which I am working on, but sometimes you need to keep bothering people to get what you need/want. I learned to reject the belief that just because I grew up in low income housing that somehow I was worthless or wouldn't accomplish anything in life. That really is a myth that people use to keep themselves and others down.

- Did BHA help in any way?

Besides providing shelter -- no matter what people think about public housing in general, it provides a much needed service -- I also received a \$1,500 scholarship from BHA for my freshman year that helped me be able to attend college. BHA also provided job opportunities. Twice while in high school, I worked on murals. The summer between high school and college, I was hired to organize BHA's archives.

- What do you see yourself doing in the future? What career path are you on?

I am hoping to become a minister, more specifically a military chaplain. That is a tough career course that will require a lot of time, dedication, and perseverance. Becoming a minister chaplain in the Unitarian Universalist church requires years of graduate studies and will require me to articulate why I should be ordained as a minister. Additionally, military chaplains need to be physically fit and need to face the very real possibility of deploying to a war zone. If for some reason that career path doesn't pan out, I still want to be a pastor and I want to help veterans and military service members in some way.

- Who is your role model?

Anyone who has never let tough situations keep them from trying to fulfill their dreams. They were not always successful but the important thing is they tried and didn't give up.

- What advice do you have for a young resident of public housing?

Never give up. Sometimes you will have to be your own advocate. Others may not be there for you and you will have to work hard to succeed. When others tell you that you will never do anything with your life you will have to reject what they say and tell yourself that you will make something out of your life. It's not easy and you will face failure. Everyone does. But not everyone gets up after failing and keeps trying. Also, remember there are people out there who want to help you. It might not seem like it, but don't let your past keep you from recognizing those who can and will help you. If I had shut myself off from people, I would not be where I am today. Both inner strength and outside help is necessary.