



# High school student: Don't give up on me

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There has been a lot of discussion about high dropout rates in Milwaukee, particularly for students of color. It doesn't have to be that way.

I am 17 years old. I come from a poor community in Milwaukee - the kind where you're expected to join a gang or deal drugs by the time you're my age. The future wasn't something I thought a lot about. College was a distant dream that was so unrealistic I didn't even think about it.

Then I met my mentor, Raymond, at the United Community Center and joined the Quantum Opportunities Program. I learned that Quantum was developed by the Eisenhower Foundation and funded by the U.S. Department of Justice.

My mentor has been a lifeline. He helped me understand that I can dare to dream. I saw possibility when before I just saw impossibility. I knew that I didn't want to die or waste my life doing nothing. Most important, I knew that I didn't have to and that there was another road for me. I knew I wanted a career.

My story is similar to the stories of many of my friends and those who grew up around me. My parents are immigrants. They came here from Mexico 17 years ago. English was not my first language. My parents never married, and there was a lot of fighting.

While my mom was close to us and tried her best, my dad was distant. After they split up, I only saw or heard from him on my birthdays. A lot of my friends struggled, too, and they saw drugs at the park and other friends smoking and shooting up. The road etched out for me was grim.

My brother was my role model. He was 14 when I was 6. Sometimes he'd skip school, and I'd meet up with him and the tough crowd he hung around with. Our friends, most with rough home situations of their own, made us feel welcome and special.

My life changed in high school, when I joined Quantum. At Quantum, I got to give back to kids who were just like me. I worked with fourth-graders.

I remember one kid in particular, who was always by himself and had been made fun of and bullied. It was one of the greatest moments in my life when he finally began to talk to people and come out of his shell.

Now, I will be going to college, thanks to a lifeline thrown to me by a strong after-school program and a few special teachers at Veritas High School, who made learning fun and made me believe in myself. The staff at my school and my mentor at UCC and the Quantum program encouraged me when life got me down. It has taught me to be more resilient to overcome my challenges.

My mentor guided me on how to apply for different programs and find a pathway to a career. I earned money for college. I also participated in an apprenticeship at the Urban Ecology Center, where I taught children about nature and the environment. This program has shown me the road to college, which is the road to improve my life and help my family.

Last weekend, I took the ACT test after studying for months. It was just one of the first steps in what I know will be a hard journey, but a journey that will lead me away from the influences that threatened my future.

Unfortunately, many of my friends do not have the Quantum program. I do not think there are enough programs to make sure all students can focus on their future like I am doing. I am afraid some of my friends will be a part of the more than 30% of students who never graduate from high school in Milwaukee.

I have decided to major in criminology and military intelligence to focus on computers and airplane control. I plan to enroll in ROTC.

My two younger brothers are learning from me that life can be filled with possibilities and wonder. My older brother is working now.

So my message to others: Don't give up on young men like me. See our potential. Don't stereotype us and assume we have no future. Invest in programs such as Quantum, where doors can be opened, where we can work, where we can learn to believe in our own future.

Who knows? I might be flying an airplane one day that you are on or may even become president of the United States. Why not dream big? I can dare to do that now.