

Advancement Via Individual Determination is something I thought I would never embrace. All my life, I put myself in the position of being the stranger among my classmates because my skin was brown and I was the only student that had difficulty speaking English.

As a child from Mexico, my experiences with Anglos was limited – well, actually I didn't know anybody who was white. After my parents had moved our family here in my third grade year, I was surrounded by all Anglos – there was nobody like me. I was alone. More than that, I was the student who was getting bad grades. I was the student who was in depression because not one of his classmates would talk to him.

As time passed, I began telling myself that the only people who would accept me were Latinos. Sorrowfully, the only Latinos that I knew at school and in my neighborhood thought that they could be successful only by joining gangs.

There I was, a depressed student wanting to be part of a group. Sadly, the group that I joined was called Southside. They taught me that skipping school and getting into fights was the correct thing to do—I was a fool for following their suggestions. Before I knew it, I was in eighth grade with a record of being a bad student and with all F's. Some of my teachers in Greeley call Latino gang members thugs. My behavior matched the word. I would cuss at teachers, get into fights, leave class without permission. If my friends were getting into trouble, I wanted to get into trouble, too. As a clique, you needed to stick together. It was not just friends who influenced me in this direction. My brother was a Southsider as well. It seemed as if dark clouds were meant to follow me.

One day after school, I saw my mother crying. My brother had gotten hurt in his involvement with a gang. When I saw my mother crying, something flashed in my eyes. I hugged my mother, and the only thing she repeated was, "Don't make the same mistake." I, myself, crumbled into tears because I was petrified that I was already making the same mistake. That night I prayed to God, asking for a second chance. I knew I had to change, not only for me, but for my family. They had risked their lives by crossing the border. I had to pay them back. I asked God to bless me with a new beginning.

That new beginning started in the spring of my last year of middle school. My ESL teacher Mrs. Reed gave me an application for Greeley West's AVID program. I didn't want any

part of the application. “What’s AVID,” I asked. “Who cares?” I never told anybody this before, but I didn’t even fill out the application. Mrs. Reed did it for me. I slipped into the class without even applying! It was destiny.

My freshmen year of high school came, and my first class was AVID, or what I called “Binder Class.” In this class, to my surprise, I was surrounded by good students. Their language was better than mine, their clothing was not gang related, and they talked about college – something that I did not know about. What I know now is that my angel had arrived. David Falter, teacher at Greeley West High School, told me, “Ivan, I believe you can go to college.” Falter was the first person who believed in me academically. Falter was the person who taught me to believe in myself. Falter is my AVID instructor.

In my journey through AVID, I acquired a unique experience. The first thing that I understood was that we were a dysfunctional family. We all were from different backgrounds; as a result, many conflicts were exposed.

I remember the biggest argument— it came when we had binder check! We were competing to see which binder was the heaviest. The competition became so intense, that after the competition, the class formed their own cliques in the room. This went on for months. But when it was time to do homework, we were a family. You could hear people whisper “What’s the answer for question five?”

AVID has given me the second chance I wanted. I truly believe God put AVID in my path. I remember my freshmen year; I did not fail any of my classes and I even made the Honor Roll. Meanwhile, my friends were telling me, “You gotta get out of that Binder Class.” I was already choosing a different path.

When my mother saw my achievement, she shed tears but this time of happiness. I knew that I was going to fight for the impossible—I was going to be a successful student.

My sophomore year, I ended with a 3.7 GPA. I could not believe it. I remember that summer my determination for success showed. I was selected to travel to Washington D.C as one of the top 25 Law Leader Latinos of our nation.

I remember when I arrived, our instructor asked everyone, “What does your family do for a living?” Many replied, “Lawyers!” “Doctors!” “Teachers!” I responded, “I am a son of a

land worker.” I knew it was not correct to pretend to be a son of a lawyer because AVID showed me to be proud for who I am and where I come from.

My friends in AVID – Helly and Leyde in particular – showed me students from my background could be focused on achieving college. I could embrace my history and my family with a good education. I could be myself and be respected for it. Although the students in Washington laughed, in the end I, Ivan Ildefonso, won the award for “Most Determined” at the conference.

In my visit to Washington D.C., I was lucky enough to meet President George W. Bush. I visited the White House. The most memorable thing I did, however, was visit the Lincoln Memorial. I saw the Martin Luther King, Jr. “I Have a Dream” statue; I knew I wanted to fight with intelligence, humbleness, and loyalty because that’s what made Martin a “King,” and like him, I, too, have a dream.

My junior year, I strived for excellence. Against the advice of Mr. Falter, I loaded my schedule with four AP classes, joined soccer, track, and seven different clubs. It was so important to me to take four AP classes because I wanted to prove to myself that I could be an overachiever. At West, I saw students challenging themselves to the limit. I wanted to know how it felt.

At first, no one believed that I could do it! After all, I had been in ESL. I was worked everyday after school. I played three sports. The only thing that I desired was the need to test myself.

As I started the advance placement courses, my biggest fear was overcoming the name AP and the vocabulary spoken. My schedule would only give me time to do homework after midnight. I was only sleeping three to four hours per day.

Although I wanted to give up, I knew I could not. AVID was the answer. AVID helped me everyday during tutorials to understand the big words that they would say in my AP English class or to understand the Shakespeare book I was reading in my AP Literature class. AVID also helped me manage my time in my planner and to be organized in the binder.

Most importantly, due to AVID, I did not surrender in the moments of weakness. My junior year was difficult, but AVID always gave me support in the good moments but also in the moments I did not deserve it.

Today, I am a graduate of Greeley West High School, and I will be going to Colorado State University this fall— an achievement that many of my early teachers doubted I would reach. To their surprise, I was accepted to multiple four-year universities and had all my credits with a semester left.

I was named the captain of the varsity soccer team. I was involved with eight different clubs and president for three of those clubs. If that was not enough, I still am working every day after school to support my family.

All these truths prove that the kid who was in a depression has found the group that he was trying to fit in for so many years...and maybe be considered a leader. AVID has tamed me, taught me respect for education, given me a family. David Falter has become my second father because, to me, a father helps his son from beginning until the end. That's what David Falter did for me when he gave me Advancement Via Individual Determination. Thank you.