

Jesus Medrano's Story

Everyone needs to know what happened to Jesus Medrano. Every teacher who gives up on students simply because of where they come from, and every policymaker who fails to understand we're losing huge segments of our youth population to a future of poverty, unemployment, crime, and despair because of simple—and avoidable—neglect: they especially need to hear what happened to Jesus Medrano.

For if they listened to his story, they would never again look at young Hispanic youth—or any minority youth—in the same way. They would have a much more difficult time turning their backs on those young people because they would always wonder, “Could these kids end up like Jesus?”

For the answer would be yes. What happened to Jesus is exactly what should happen to every youth who suffers from devastating low-esteem mixed with the equally destructive low expectations of too many in our schools and society.

Jesus' story started like that of so many who are raised in a world most Americans only learn about through newspaper and TV reports. He lived in one of the toughest neighborhoods of San Ysidro, California, just a couple of miles from the U.S.-Mexico border. He was surrounded by danger.

Jesus remembers a night when bursts of gunfire outside his family's home sent everyone ducking for cover. He recalls his mother and grandmother becoming hysterical. Gang members looking for revenge had shot up one of the family cars, making it look like “Swiss cheese.” No one was hurt, but for Jesus it was a defining moment. Even at age 16, he knew he had to somehow escape a world that threatened his life, let alone his future.

The problem was that Jesus was trapped, literally. The violence that was epidemic in his community forced him to spend most of his time hiding in his house, where he watched TV to pass the endless hours. It was even dangerous in the daytime.

Jesus was afraid to look people in the eye. If he did, they sometimes beat him simply for looking at them.

At school, Jesus faced a different kind of danger, but one that could just as surely destroy his future. Jesus' memories are of a terrible environment where expectations of poor Hispanic kids were so low, no one cared about learning. If someone tried to do well, they were ridiculed by the other students who wanted to bring them down to their level. Amazingly, good students often let their grades slip just so they wouldn't be teased.

Worse, many teachers in Jesus' school didn't seem to care about the kids. Those who didn't think the minority students were worth the effort virtually ignored them; those

who cared didn't have the skills to help students trapped in a flawed system. As a consequence, a bright freshman like Jesus who believed he was capable and wanted to learn was stuck in low-performing classes where he was bored and unmotivated. It was no surprise he barely maintained a "C" average.

Jesus didn't know it at the time, but the odds were overwhelmingly against his surviving that negative environment to make something of himself: Of the 800 students in his high school freshman class, less than half graduated and barely one in 10 went to college. Those who didn't ended up in low-paying jobs at best; some ended up in prison or dead.

Jesus did not become one of those sad statistics because AVID entered his life and reversed his destiny. Once the school's AVID coordinators saw potential in Jesus and invited him to join, and once Jesus realized someone actually cared, a chain reaction was started that unleashed the potential in the young man and energized him to excel.

Realizing Jesus would benefit from a rigorous program, his AVID teacher encouraged him to enroll in advanced classes. The idea made Jesus nervous. He wasn't sure he was up to it. But because he trusted his teacher and because in his heart he knew he was capable, he took her advice.

With the skills AVID gave him, Jesus not only survived the classes, he aced them. Success made him hunger for greater challenges. He began to take honors classes and then every Advanced Placement course he could find. In his senior year, he was enrolled in no less than seven AP classes. His grade point average soared to 4.0.

AVID inspired Jesus so thoroughly, he believed he not only could go to college, but one of the best universities in the nation. He boldly applied to Caltech, Princeton, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Jesus vividly remembers the day he got word from MIT. His pride, his emotions, his dreams for a better life were all contained in that letter he was about to open. What it said was beyond even what Jesus had hoped for. MIT not only had accepted him, it was granting him a four-year scholarship that would pay for his entire education.

And that is what happened to Jesus Medrano. The challenge is to make sure it happens for all the Jesus Medranos of the world.

For more information about AVID, go to avid.org.