

AMERICA'S FINEST STORIES

Some people view gangs, poverty, violence, homelessness, and refugee camps as obstacles, but Reality Changers students use such surrounding circumstances as the

INSPIRATION

to become first generation college students.

See how INSIDE!

BUILDING FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS SINCE 2001

Why do some people call us
"AT-RISK" STUDENTS?

Is it because of where we were born?
Or where we live?

What did I do to get such a label?

Perhaps better words to describe me
and my fellow Reality Changers
are resilient,
filled with inspiration,
and college-bound.

After reading our stories on the
following pages,
I'LL LET YOU DECIDE.



A LETTER FROM OUR ALUMNI ON STAFF

This publication is much more than just a typical annual report.
It is a collection of OUR STORIES. These stories define us.

As graduates of the Reality Changers program and current employees of the organization, we are living proof of how Reality Changers builds leaders. While some of us come from far-off lands and others come from families who have spent a century living in nearby neighborhoods, Reality Changers has united us in seeking and fulfilling a single common goal: becoming first generation college students.

While items such as Reality Changers' organizational history, financial statements, and program data can be conveniently accessed at www.RealityChangers.org, the following pages are devoted solely to Reality Changers graduates seeking to positively change the realities of their families and communities.

As you read these stories of triumph – all of which are passages adapted from real college-application essays over the past ten years – please remember: **you are the co-author of these stories.**
Your support is what makes Reality Changers possible.

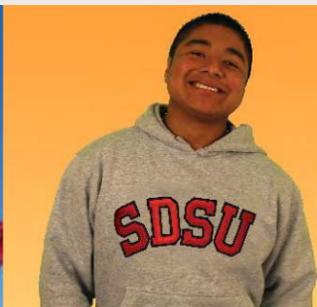
And now that Reality Changers has a proven formula with measurable results, one must wonder...
How many more success stories can we write together?



"Good writers often say that the key to writing is 'putting the readers in your shoes.' However, growing up in a small impoverished town in Ethiopia, I did not have any shoes in which to put the reader until I was eleven years old."

GENEMO ALI

RC '11, Assistant Program Manager



"Everybody believed that I'd end up dropping out of school or end up dead because I hung out with the wrong people. Soon enough, though, I got tired of hearing the surprising gasps that my so-called friends made when they saw my good grades. I told each of them that there is a difference between me and you... I actually do care."

EDUARDO CORONA

RC '10, Director of Academic Performance



"After having had perfect attendance in Reality Changers for three years as a student, I came to the conclusion that it is best to ask not what Reality Changers can do for you, ask what you can do for Reality Changers."

JONATHAN VILLAFUERTE

RC '05, Dean of Students



"Being diagnosed with Endometriosis further strengthened my desire to work with youth. That diagnosis led me to decide that I would give all my strength, effort, love, and dedication to my future students and treat and care for them as if they were children of my very own."

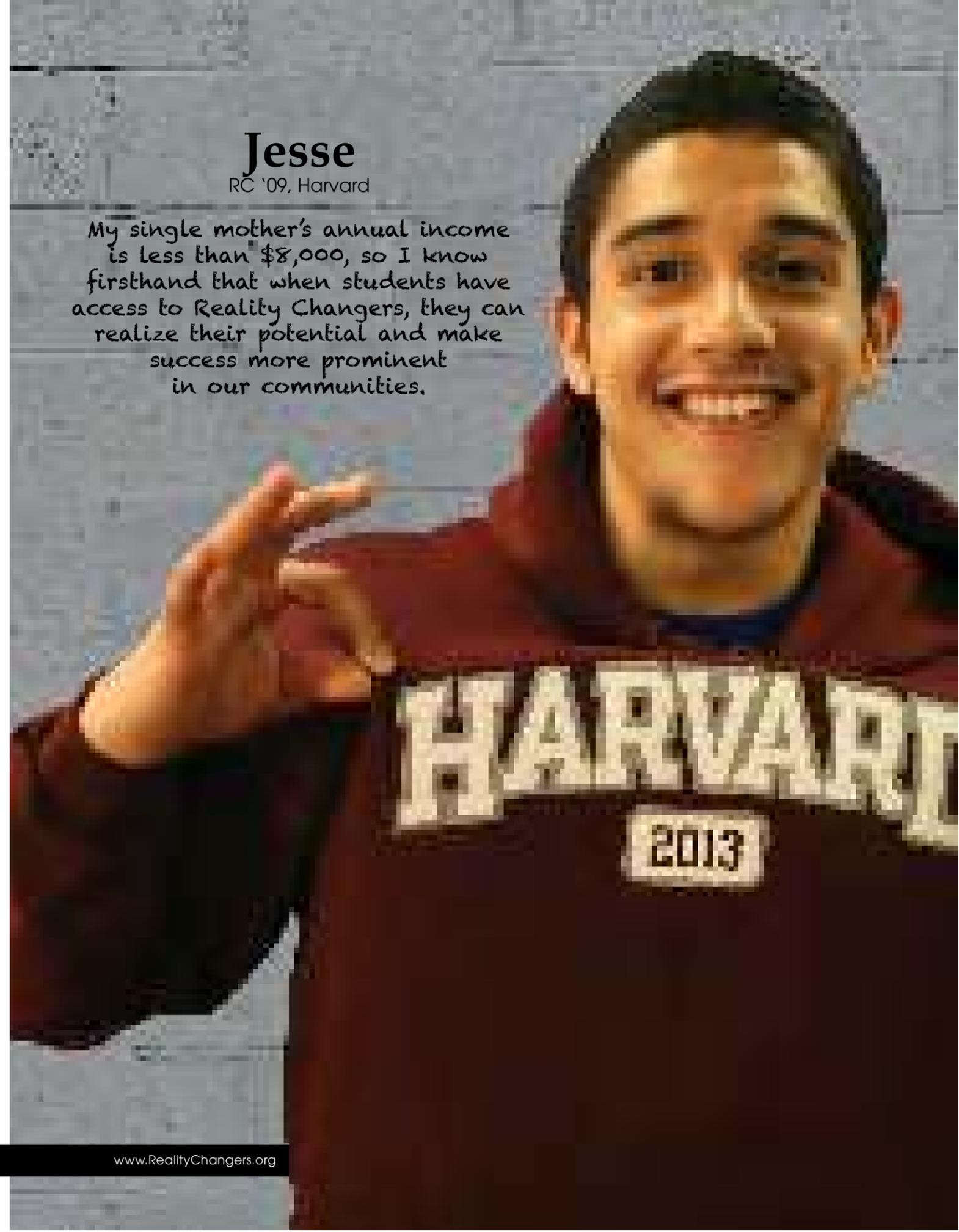
CECELIA VILLEGAS

RC '07, Director of Academic Performance

OUR MISSION

The mission of Reality Changers is to provide inner-city youth from disadvantaged backgrounds with the resources to become first generation college students by providing academic support, financial assistance, and leadership training.

Federal Tax ID #26-3757305

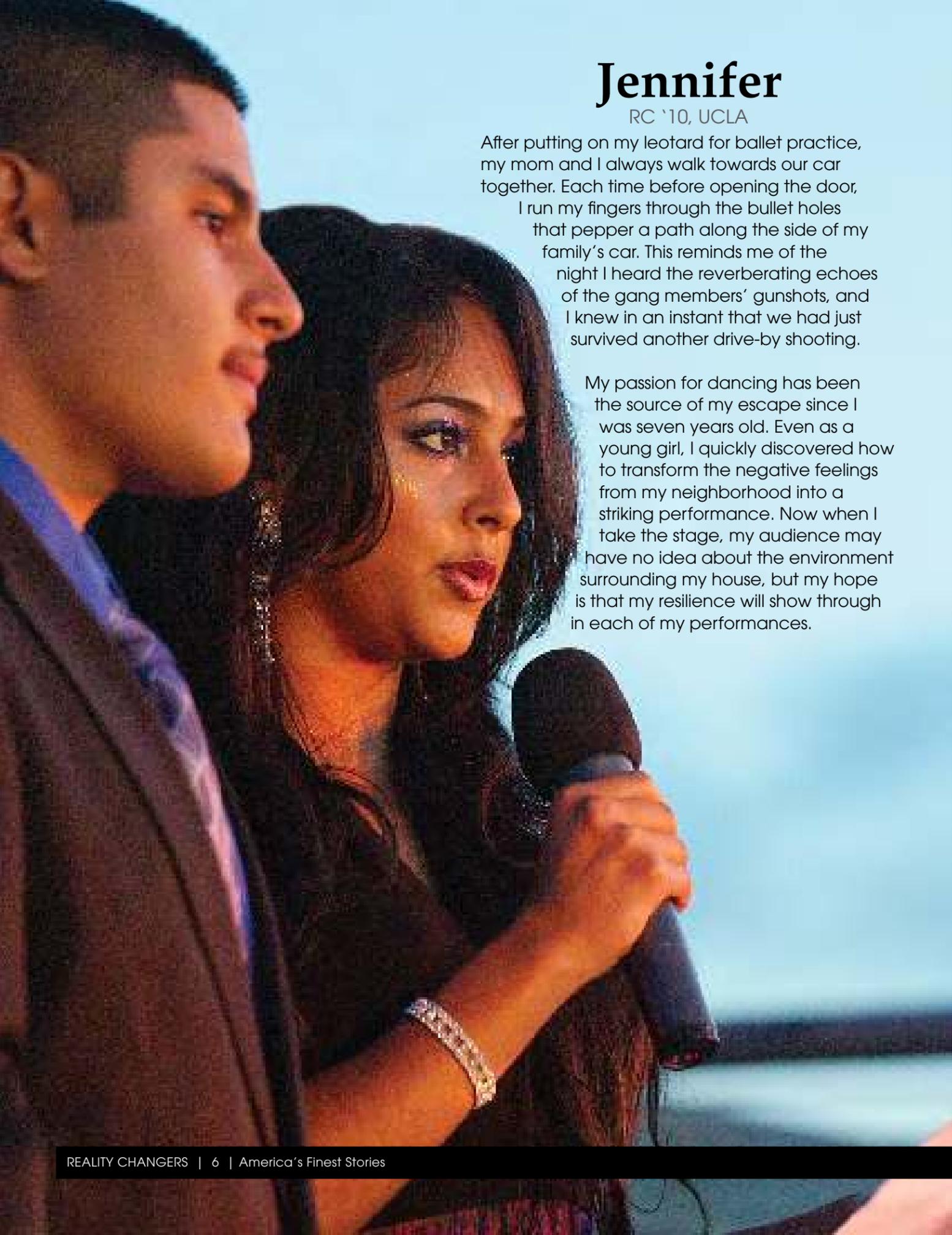


Jesse

RC '09, Harvard

My single mother's annual income is less than \$8,000, so I know firsthand that when students have access to Reality Changers, they can realize their potential and make success more prominent in our communities.

HARVARD
2013



Jennifer

RC '10, UCLA

After putting on my leotard for ballet practice, my mom and I always walk towards our car together. Each time before opening the door, I run my fingers through the bullet holes that pepper a path along the side of my family's car. This reminds me of the night I heard the reverberating echoes of the gang members' gunshots, and I knew in an instant that we had just survived another drive-by shooting.

My passion for dancing has been the source of my escape since I was seven years old. Even as a young girl, I quickly discovered how to transform the negative feelings from my neighborhood into a striking performance. Now when I take the stage, my audience may have no idea about the environment surrounding my house, but my hope is that my resilience will show through in each of my performances.

Will

RC '07, UC San Diego

In the midst of a neighborhood masked with high crime lies the community of Reality Changers. The moment I walk in, I see a mural of graduating college students and I am continually reminded of the goals that my peers and I aspire to accomplish. During my college years, I plan to incorporate myself into organizations that serve and support disadvantaged students who will benefit as much as I did from Reality Changers.

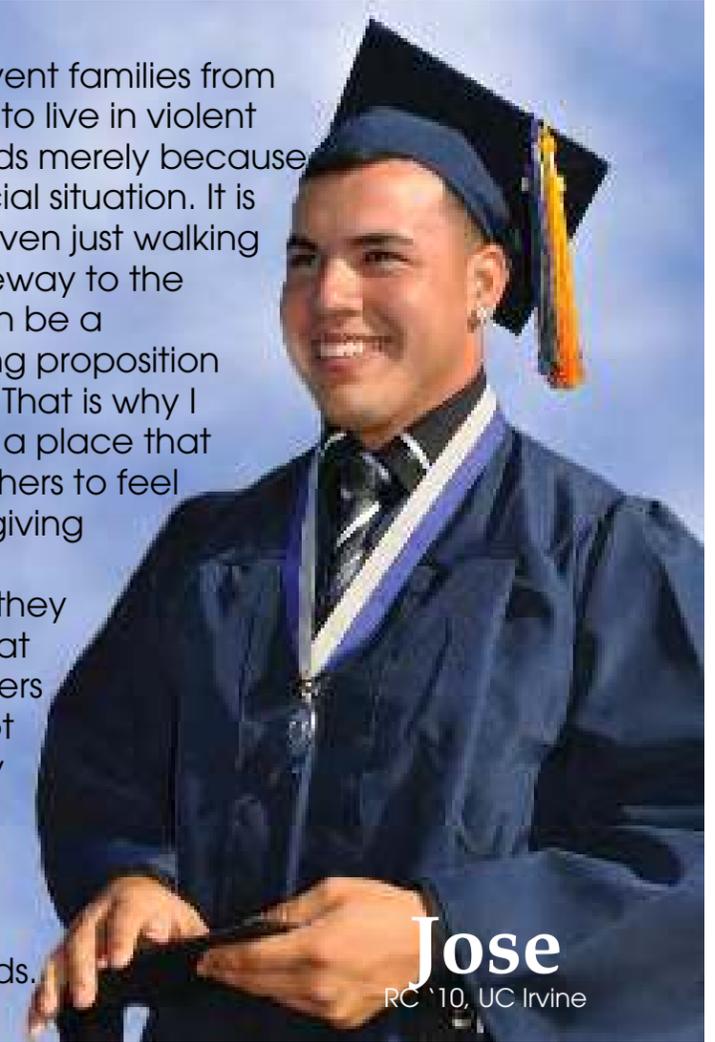


Miriam

RC '10, UC Riverside

I see myself as a trailblazer in a neighborhood that seemingly has no roads out. When I was ten years old, my neighbor stuck a shiny silver pistol in my face. She placed the gun against my head and my eyes grew as big as the barrel. Despite living in such constant danger, I earned a 4.13 GPA, became the only person to work at the local swap meet from before sunrise until after sunset, and helped run my stepfather's business by taking care of his deli's advertisements and regularly advising him on how to administer the family's expenses. Instead of my life being shaped by gangs, drugs, or dropping out of school, I want to become a businesswoman so that I can provide further and newfound stability for my family.

I want to prevent families from being forced to live in violent neighborhoods merely because of their financial situation. It is not fair that even just walking from the driveway to the front door can be a life-threatening proposition for my family. That is why I want to build a place that will allow mothers to feel like they are giving their children the lives that they deserve so that future engineers like me will not have to worry about their little brothers surviving dangerous neighborhoods.



Jose
RC '10, UC Irvine

Yvonne

RC '10, San Jose State University

My neighborhood is filled with liquor stores, low-flying helicopters at night and a high school full of gangs and low-tech equipment. This world of instability was not for me so I joined Reality Changers, a program that builds first generation college students. Here, I have received \$12,000 in scholarships to attend a UCSD summer residential program for three summers where I learned how to construct bridges, build computer programs, and consider how world events impact people's spending habits. I hope to use this new knowledge to help strengthen the infrastructure of my neighborhood and its surrounding schools.



Judd at Forest Home Summer Camp

The first time that I walked to Reality Changers was for a reception that they had for students on the waiting list like me. Two program graduates, Jesse (p.5) and Robert (p.13), greeted me with open arms. The impression was immediate; these two guys were confident, diligent, honest, and the first members in their families to attend college. I knew that I wanted exactly what they had.

Judd

RC '11, Point Loma Nazarene University

The news quickly spread: three beheaded bodies were found, including a 17-year-old teen named Jose, my cousin. When I heard the news, I began to remember how, as kids, my cousin and I used to always play soccer in the street or bet candy on our favorite soccer teams, but time passed and soon Jose wanted to only hang out with his back-alley friends.

Looking back, I sometimes wonder how two similar kids turned out so differently and it truly was in the eighth grade when our wildly different dreams and aspirations began to take shape. While Jose joined a group of gang members and drugs dealers, I joined Reality Changers, a group which helped me learn to value my education. Instead of experiencing a similar fate as my cousin, the program motivated me to take AP courses, give back to the community, and perhaps most importantly, seek out positive role models as mentors.

Gerardo

RC '11, San Diego State University



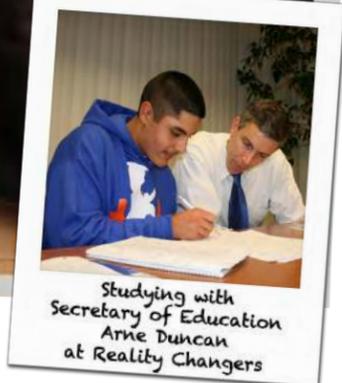
Abel

RC '10, USC

"Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore!"

I was raised in a world where no one I knew had ever attended college. However, as a sophomore in high school, I was swept away from my black-and-white world of low expectations and introduced to a brand new Technicolor experience of hopes and dreams by being accepted to Reality Changers. If getting my college diploma is like going down the Yellow Brick Road in The Wizard of Oz, then my scarecrow, tin man, and lion are my mother, my brother, and my father. Each of these three family members needs something that I can provide only if I earn a college education. My mother needs an operation that will improve her respiration, my younger brother needs a pacemaker to control his heartbeat, and my courageous father requires lumbar vertebrae surgery due to his permanent back disability. As I neared the end of my time in high school and drew closer to the end of the Yellow Brick Road to college,

I overcame my own hardships in three different ways: I splashed the Wicked Witch with water by ending my relationships with gang-affiliated cousins, I subdued the poppy fields by working my way up to college-level calculus, and I controlled the Winged Monkeys by seeking every scholarship available to ease the financial burdens of my family. I know that when I receive my college diploma, it will be better than meeting the actual Wizard of Oz because that small piece of paper wields greater power than what the diminutive wizard ever exercised over the great Land of Oz. Furthermore, with this diploma I will be assured of returning back to "Kansas" to ensure that my mother gets a fresh breath of life, my brother gets a renewed heart, and my father gets a rejuvenated spine to continue supporting our family. Dorothy might have thought that there is no place like home, but as I pursue my educational dreams and aspirations, I believe that there is no place like the University of Southern California.



Studying with Secretary of Education Arne Duncan at Reality Changers



Michael

RC '10, UCLA

Ever since I can remember, I have been a slave of the world. I have been whipped and punished every time a glimmer of light shone through my horizons. Why? Because from June 1998 through July 2009, my family was oppressed by homelessness.

Before I was emancipated, I slept next to the people that you see aimlessly wandering the city and I ate beside the same people you see sleeping on the sidewalk under the lonely night sky. Yet when I see those people now, I see myself. We were laughed at together. We were persecuted together. We cried together. Looking back, I have realized that these tears were my constrained ambition leaking through my eyes.

Mine eyes have seen freedom deprived as childhood friends have been gunned down. Both my father and my grandfather were sentenced to life in prison, and my great grandfather was violently murdered. They call us "at-risk" youth and with each generation the "risk" becomes even greater. But where does the risk stop? It stops with me.

In fact, as my family traveled across the United States along our own underground railroad, I have discovered that seeking higher education has always been my Harriet Tubman. I have stayed at her side by always keeping my overall GPA above a 3.0 even while completing all of my homework from the back seat of a broken-down car.

Although I had to eat in that car, sleep in that car, and bathe in that car, these experiences (plus my internships at the Monarch School and the Workforce Partnership) have been essential for me to learn how to become an entrepreneur and one day help the battle to abolish homelessness. And while it may be true that I was born "at risk" under extreme bondage with homelessness as my oppressor, I am determined to march to college next year as a free man.

Roberto

RC '09, Dartmouth

I am one of the fifty-seven Hispanic students on the school bus that goes back and forth from a tough part of town to La Jolla High, a wealthy school that would have a nearly all-white student population without us.

At school, I am seen as a rare specimen within my classes, a mutation within the outsider population that does not drive a fancy car to school. I have good grades, I have taken Advanced Placement classes, and I have passed six AP exams. My consistency each year has qualified me for the school Honor Roll and, along with my performance in swimming as the national champion in the Lifeguard Rescue Relay, the San Diego Union-Tribune named me to the newspaper's All-Academic team.

For a long time, I felt alone on many of those laps across the pool and across the city - until I found Reality Changers. This program helps inner-city teens like me become first generation college students and it has introduced me to other low-income students who have learned to not just survive in the deep end of the water, but to break through the crashing waves of the city and strive for higher education.

Javier

RC '10, UC San Diego

After my school bus flipped over on Interstate 5, I was barely able to generate enough strength to stand up and climb through one of the emergency exits. As soon as I was out of the bus, I collapsed in the middle of the freeway. At Children's Hospital, I was informed that I had fractured part of my spinal cord as well as my left clavicle. For three months, I was unable to leave my hospital bed and had a metal contraption that was shaped like a life vest strapped around my chest. However, now that I am older, more mature, and fully recovered, I have decided that giving up will never be an option for me.

Ximena

RC '08, Beloit

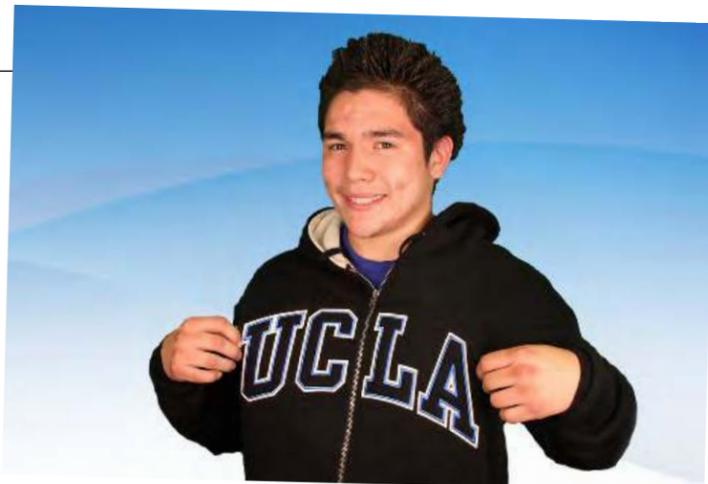
As my school bus merges onto a notorious boulevard near my home, I see exposed skin and flirtatious eyes making mental notes of the black-and-white patrolling vehicles. I am a daily commuter, traversing the zip code lines between the classy and innovative La Jolla community where my school is located, and the stark contrast of the run-down, inner-city streets of my City Heights home. My educational goal is to form a foundation that will expose all of the disenfranchised in my neighborhood to educational opportunities that will help them to overcome their academic and financial barriers.



Joe

RC '10, UC San Diego

Paramedics pronounced me clinically dead at the scene at 6:03pm. My life was robbed - temporarily, at least - by an oncoming car that struck me at 50 miles per hour and dragged me for at least one hundred feet. For five days, I was in a medically-induced coma, teetering on the balance of life and death. When I suddenly opened my eyes, I saw doctors working diligently around me, desperately striving to keep me alive. As my stay in the hospital progressed, I slowly began to grow fascinated by the medical field. Although my injuries caused my chances to graduate to temporarily plummet, the fact that doctors help so selflessly and seek out up to ten years of additional education became the inspiration I desperately needed to get back on track at school. I wanted to reach a level in which I would be able to benefit people in such a manner that those doctors did for me on a daily basis.



Johnny

RC '11, UCLA

I was doing terrible back in middle school and getting a 0.0 GPA, but I put all of my focus on studying during freshman year of high school and achieved my very first 4.0 GPA, proving to myself the importance of finishing strong. As my wrestling coach says, "It is not how you start a wrestling match; it all depends on how you end it."

In eighth grade, I would usually ditch school during first period and not come back until fourth or fifth period. This would be a constant habit that I followed throughout the year until one Friday when I was returning to school and Mr. Yanov caught me. He asked if I had a hall pass. I told him, "No, I just got back from a doctor's appointment."

He looked at me straight in the eyes and said, "So you're telling me that you've been going to the doctor's office every morning for five days straight?" I froze in shock because he knew that I had been ditching! I already knew my fate, so I just stood quiet and waited for him to talk. But something miraculous happened. He made a deal with me by asking if I wanted to be in his new program. I asked him why he was trying to help me and he

said that I was a match just waiting to be lit. The biggest and most important decision of my life was made that day. I joined this new program (that together we would later name "Reality Changers") without knowing that it would change my life forever. From that day on, my grades went up and school became my number one priority.

Jorge

RC '05, UC San Diego

www.RealityChangers.org

Robert

RC '09, CSU Los Angeles

As I walked into the school district courtroom, I looked down to my sneakers and thought, "What have I gotten myself into?"

In my freshman year of high school, I earned a 2.2 GPA along with countless referrals that had little impact on me. Suspensions for ditching just meant another day off. I felt that my teachers saw me as a failure and, at the end of my sophomore year, I was recommended for expulsion because of some horseplay that went a little too far. When I finally had to confront my behavior with three school district judges, I realized that it was time to put an end to such frequent negative choices.

During the hearing of my recommendation for expulsion, the Executive Director of Reality Changers said, "One hundred percent of all students who have been in Reality Changers for four years have been accepted to a four-year college. What percentage of students who are sent to a continuation school can say the same?"

Upon hearing these words, the members of the school district panel looked at each other as I looked inside myself and thought, "Why is the Executive Director helping me, if I have done nothing in his program for the past two years?" I thought about the opportunities the program had tried to offer me, but to which I was oblivious. I could have twice attended UCSD's Academic Connections, taken college courses, lived on a college campus, and earned college credit. I realized that everything I needed to succeed was being offered to me by Reality Changers, but I was not yet using my leadership to the best of my abilities.

It took getting recommended for expulsion for me to see the importance of education. That day changed my life because the panel of judges became the individuals who helped me decide on becoming a positive leader. They withdrew my expulsion because they saw the spark of hope that Reality Changers had seen in me. Together, they gave me a reason to believe that I should see hope in myself and, finally, my dreams of becoming a positive leader had officially begun.

Not only did I want to do better, but I wanted to give back to Reality Changers, as well. At the same time, my mother was beginning her (victorious) battle with breast cancer. This inspired me even more to serve, so I asked to become the Community Service Coordinator for the program where my peers and I performed more than seven hundred hours of community service to revitalize the community over the following school year. I also earned a 3.89 GPA and qualified to attend UCSD's Academic Connections for the first time. I wondered if my old high school's administrators would have ever thought that the kid that they tried to expel as a sophomore would earn an A in a college course before becoming a senior. Now, with my positive leadership abilities being put to use on a daily basis, my dreams and aspirations are to become an entrepreneur and establish a business that will create better opportunities for students who would like to volunteer and care for the world around them.



Our family's YouTube channel has over 50 million hits!

Angel

RC '05, Solar Windmill Engineer

I spent two summers at UCSD's Academic Connections studying hard, having fun, and making new friends from around the world. During my first stay, my mother came to visit and she told the program director that she was very upset because she saw how much I liked being at college and how hard I was willing to work to get there. She realized for the first time that I would be leaving her after the next two years of high school. I tried to comfort her by saying that this realization would only make us appreciate the time we have together even more before I go to college. All that changed when...

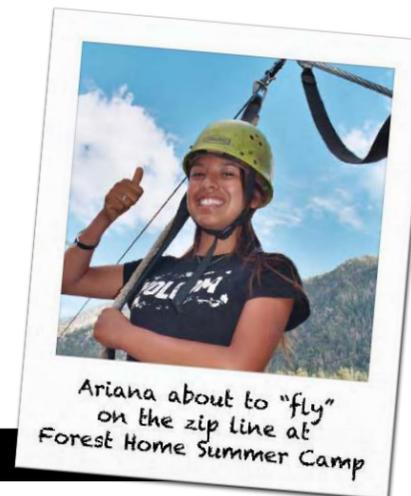
(continued on the next page with my sister's story)



Ariana

RC '07, Southwestern

...On July 26, 2005, my life was completely changed by a moment that I never imagined could happen. My father shot and killed my mother and then committed suicide. Suddenly, I was no longer just a regular sixteen-year-old girl. I had to live in four other homes and I realized that school had been the only source of love that was being given to me. Flying above turmoil was not a talent or characteristic that I ever sought or desired, but this experience has strengthened my leadership skills, my self-taught independence, and my determination to succeed despite the circumstances.



Ariana about to "fly" on the zip line at Forest Home Summer Camp

Da'rell

RC '10, Duke

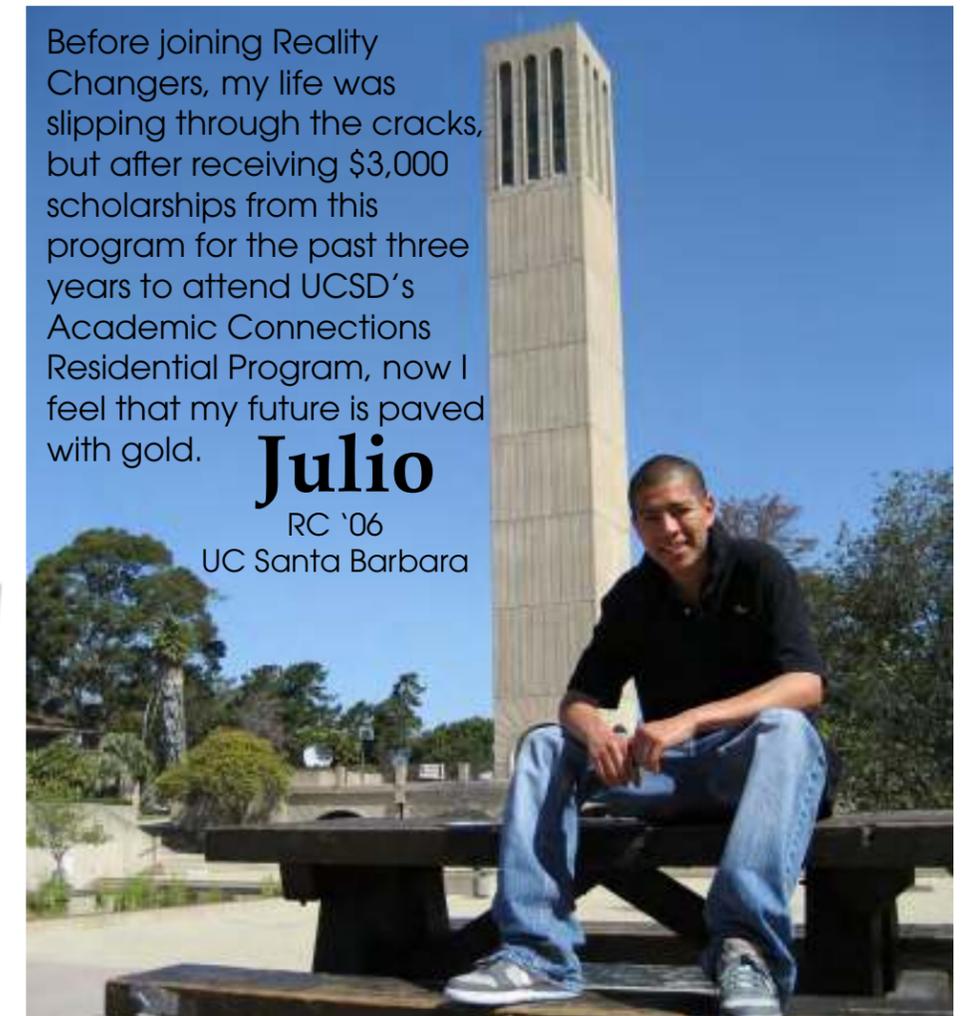
After two summers at UCSD's Academic Connections, my father wanted me to have a different summer college experience. At Hampton University, a historically black college, I was in a class with college freshmen and the workload required me to stay up all night to finish my homework. Because I now have been part of two university experiences where I was once a member of the minority and once a member of the majority, I have realized some key points about each. When I was in the minority I had a sense of individuality, but had a hard time relating to others until I passively participated in their comfort zones. Ironically, when in the majority, I felt that I had lost that sense of individuality but I enjoyed the opportunity to relate to experiences with other African-Americans. Now I have learned that I can thrive in either comfort zone and I am equally contented in both.



Before joining Reality Changers, my life was slipping through the cracks, but after receiving \$3,000 scholarships from this program for the past three years to attend UCSD's Academic Connections Residential Program, now I feel that my future is paved with gold.

Julio

RC '06
UC Santa Barbara



Reality Changers Students Work Twice As Hard!

Instructional hours needed
to graduate from high school
in California:

3,209

50-minute classes x 87.5 days x 44 classes

(Based on classroom time set forth by the
California Department of Education - cde.ca.gov -
and a school year with 175 days.)

Total program hours offered
to Reality Changers students
(8th-12th grade):

3,431

Reality Changers Programs

	# of hours
Weekly Tutoring & Leadership Programs	738
UCSD'S Academic Connections	1,020
Forest Home Summer Camp	440
Bonus Night (Study Hall)	555
Community Service	237
College Essay Writing	200
Special Events	100
College Forums (with Admissions Reps)	80
Princeton Review SAT Prep	46
Speech Tournaments	15



*A detailed "cost-per-student-per-activity" analysis can be found
in the "Donor's Corner" section of www.RealityChangers.org

So...

What's the difference

between an

"AT-RISK STUDENT"

and a resilient,

filled-with-inspiration,

FIRST GENERATION

COLLEGE STUDENT?

The difference is

YOU!

Help create more successful stories
at Reality Changers by using
the enclosed envelope.



*or go to www.RealityChangers.org

Gates Millenium Scholars

The Gates Millenium Scholarship is awarded each year to an average of 20 students per state and pays for their bachelor's degree, master's degree and Ph.D at any university of the student's choice. The following Reality Changers students have received this prestigious award:



Suzy RC '05, UC San Diego, University of Michigan
Daniela RC '10, University of San Diego
Theresa RC '10, UC Riverside



Karla RC '11, Purdue University
Evelyn RC '11, University of Redlands
Karina RC '11, Duke University

A hot-dog stand, a catering truck, an auto garage. My résumé is practically as long as my transcript. At a very young age, my parents instilled in me the importance of being a hard worker. I remember doing my homework on the counter of the hot-dog stand or in the back of that steaming catering truck every day. I remember that during vacation my hands would never be completely clean from working all day with oily engine parts.

Construction, merchandise delivery, the local taco shop. I still remember the construction boss asking me, "How old are you? ... 13? ... all right, get a shovel and start digging." Then, I went to work with my dad, delivering pallets of food to restaurants and carrying 100 lbs bags of rice on my shoulders. At the taco shop, in between cooking dozens of quesadillas and burritos, I found it hard to believe that nearly all of my tattooed co-workers were just coming from prison while I was making plans about going to college.

Hauling composite waste, delivering newspapers, packaging corporate gifts. I still remember those sweaty days of landscaping wealthy people's backyards. And now on weekends, I deliver 1,600 heavy Sunday newspapers by 5am before heading off to load and unload heavy boxes into warehouses. My academic record may not show my calloused hands, my throbbing legs, or my weary back, but my résumé reveals the same persistent work ethic that I bring to the classroom.

Erik

RC '06, UC Riverside

Kimetria

RC '11, UCLA

Throughout my life, I have always had to find the ability to turn negative situations into positive solutions. I now understand that I am in control of my future and if I do not take it seriously, then no one else will. My family has inspired my dreams and aspirations; because of them I am eager to go to college and pursue a career as a high school history teacher so I can give academic support and encouragement to teens that lack support at home. I am determined to venture out from the cycle that has haunted my family for generations.



Yaritza

RC '11, Point Loma Nazarene University

As one of 68 Congressional Pages during the spring of 2010, sometimes I stopped to think about how a girl with my background had found her way to President Obama's first State of the Union Address.

While some of my old friends were probably counting down the days until they would be released from prison and my own mother was probably counting down the hours until she finished cleaning somebody else's home, here I was in the United States Capitol awaiting history to be made.

Finally, the moment had arrived. When the first African-American President of the United States walked onto the floor of the House of Representatives, he was within just an arm's reach of me and suddenly I realized how fortunate I was to be present at this historic occasion.

How was it possible that I was standing on the same floor where so many of the founders and leaders of our nation had all met years before?



Stephanie

RC '11, Mesa Community College

"Keep going, don't give up, I am proud of you." My brothers' encouraging words continue to repeat in the back of my mind ever since May 30th of 2009 when my brother was taken from me, shot and killed less than a block away from our home.

The horrific tragedy of losing my brother helped me to reshape my dreams and aspirations and has motivated me to pursue a college education.

To achieve this, I joined Reality Changers, a program that assists first generation college students. Through the support of Reality Changers, I have become a very active member in my community by participating in community service events, such as breast cancer research walks, cleaning up my community, feeding the homeless, and providing companionship and healthy snacks to senior citizens.

To further strengthen my community, I plan on continuing my education. After my brother's death, I made a promise to him that I would continue to work hard in school. With that mentality, I know that every time I step foot onto a college campus, I will hear my brother pushing me to achieve my dreams as he whispers to me once again, "Keep going, don't give up, I am proud of you."



Miguel

RC '05, Harvard

"I am nobody but myself. But first I had to discover that I am an invisible man." -Ralph Ellison, [Invisible Man](#)

On January 26, 2004, I was rushed to the emergency room with a bacterial infection called salmonella. Moments away from death, the illness rapidly spread, causing a domino effect throughout my body: rising fevers led to loss of liquids, weakening my defense mechanisms and propelling me in and out of consciousness for hours on end. Doctors raced to stabilize my blood pressure as my temperature was nearing 106 degrees, and I fought to maintain consciousness. I was unsure that if I closed my eyes I would ever have the chance to open them again.

I quickly saw the parallel between the quote cited above and my current situation. Only by nearly becoming that invisible man was I able to discover my life's true objective: Even in times of crisis, my purpose is to demonstrate an understanding that everything I do - from academics to overcoming life's obstacles - has a significant impact on my family.

Discovering "myself," as Ellison would describe, cost me eight days of hospitalization, but I realized that my decisions have a great effect on others. Also, I now more fully understand the mutual impact that attending an Ivy League school will have on my family. This means that if I succeed, they will succeed as well, and I am willing to shoulder this responsibility.

Indeed, by overcoming and reflecting on my near-death experience, I no longer feel invisible because I hold myself more accountable for my actions and am cognizant of how visible an impact I have on those around me.

Freddy

RC '06, ITT Tech

When I was five years old, my father accidentally shot and killed himself, leaving me as the oldest male in our tiny, one-room home with no electricity or running water (except for what leaked through our roof). At the time, I had never known anyone who graduated from even middle school, let alone someone who had left Mexico in search of a better life. Tired of seeing my mother suffer and dreading the idea of spending my entire life working the land, I begged her to start a new life. Although I was born in the United States, my family moved to Mexico when I was a few months old. If we moved back, I felt that we would have a promising life and a chance to accomplish the "American Dream." Even though neither of my parents finished the fourth grade, I wanted to continue my education and explore career opportunities that would not remind me of my seemingly hopeless beginnings.

On September 11, 2001, my aunt passed away in our nation's most horrifying terrorist attack. She worked on top of the world, was the only person in my family to have graduated from high school, and would often give me advice about how to become the first person in our family to go to college. I can still hear my mother's sobs, and the death of my aunt forever changed my perspective.

Just before her death, I told her about Reality Changers. "This is a really good opportunity for you," she said. "Never let go of that rope and make me proud." Now, I want to attend a university because my aunt can no longer accomplish this goal herself and I am proud to say that I will make my aunt's dreams for my future become a reality.



Fernando at Forest Home Summer Camp

Fernando

RC '09, San Diego City College

Only two weeks into my freshmen year, my family was notified of a tragedy. My older cousin had been confronted by authorities and killed a police officer. At seventeen years old, he faced a fifty-year sentence for a reckless act of violence. Furthermore, only one year after this incident, my younger cousin attained a similar fortune. Upon becoming seventeen as well, this cousin took part in a shootout against another gang and accidentally killed an innocent fifteen-year-old girl. In two ephemeral moments, both of my cousins threw away their futures just as expeditiously as they fired their guns. And now that I am seventeen years old myself, I know that I cannot bring that police officer back to life or give that young girl back her future, but by aspiring to be a surgeon, I can prevent further killings and sew back together the communities that have been torn apart by gang violence.

Rigoberto

RC '10, UC Berkeley



Linda

RC '10, CSU San Marcos

While given the name of someone who portrayed a superhero, I was not born with vast knowledge or super powers, but my achievements with Reality Changers have finally convinced me that I have the ability and passion to fight for my dreams.



has inspired me to give troubled teenagers the motivation to become headline news for their accomplishments, rather than for their mistakes.

Gerardo

RC '08, UC San Diego

www.RealityChangers.org



Perla

RC '06, UC Riverside

I've learned the importance of public speaking at Reality Changers, and I use my communications skills to motivate large crowds by providing them with positive messages and concrete solutions.

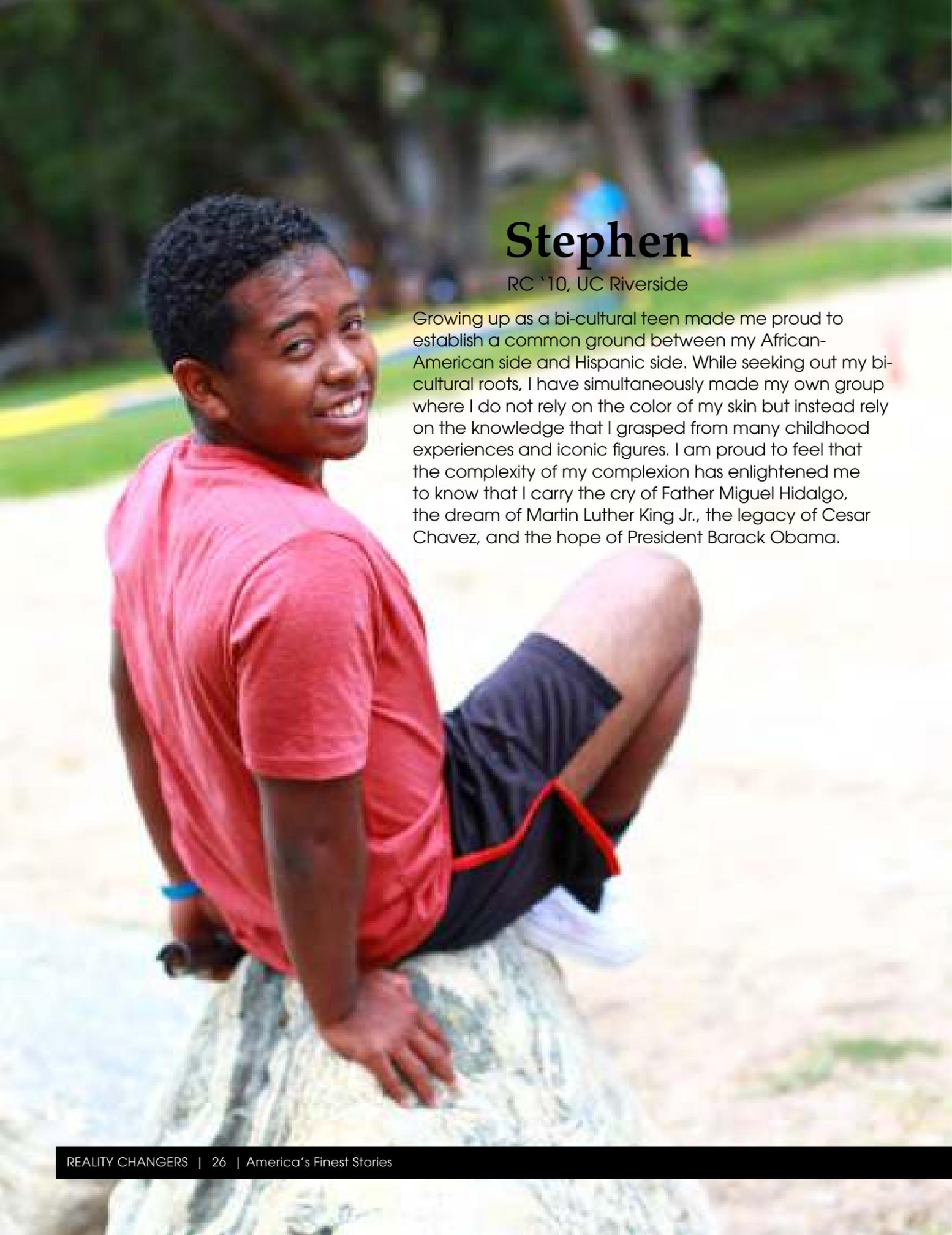
I can hear some of the major influences in my life during the still of the night when helicopters, sirens and gunshots echo through the crackling darkness that surrounds my house. The shadows lurking outside use spray cans and bullets to make their mark to be noticed by others. Although I, too, wish to be recognized for my actions, I have also been taught that performing positive deeds in life are more powerful than succumbing to negative ones. Indeed, my neighborhood



Karla

RC '08, CSU San Marcos

In Reality Changers, we are encouraged to be heroes for our community. We are often encouraged to participate in service projects and make the world a better place, such as volunteering at the Ronald McDonald House, breast cancer walks, and community restoration projects in our neighborhoods.



Stephen

RC '10, UC Riverside

Growing up as a bi-cultural teen made me proud to establish a common ground between my African-American side and Hispanic side. While seeking out my bi-cultural roots, I have simultaneously made my own group where I do not rely on the color of my skin but instead rely on the knowledge that I grasped from many childhood experiences and iconic figures. I am proud to feel that the complexity of my complexion has enlightened me to know that I carry the cry of Father Miguel Hidalgo, the dream of Martin Luther King Jr., the legacy of Cesar Chavez, and the hope of President Barack Obama.

Enrique

RC '11,
San Diego State University

Growing up in southern Mexico, the first house in which I remember living had four walls made of cardboard. Each morning, I would get out of my bed, which consisted of just two buckets propping up a wooden board to shield me from the cold ground.

After moving to the United States, one can imagine my excitement when I raised my grades to a 4.0 GPA during my freshman year and qualified to attend UC San Diego's Academic Connections, a summer college residential program where I was able to sleep in my own bed for the very first time. Stepping into an empty dorm room with my own bed made me feel very accomplished.

But nothing made me more proud than showing my dad my first college scholarship check for \$3,500. Tears filled his eyes when he said, "I never imagined that I would hold this much money with my own two hands." Then, I made everyone else in the entire house hold onto the check... I even made the babies touch the check because I wanted them to truly feel what it was like to go to college. And even though they aren't old enough to communicate yet, I told them, "Work hard and this can happen to you, too."

A defining moment that shaped my life forever was the day that my father received his acceptance letter to San Diego State University. He was forty years old and that day made me realize that dreams do indeed come true. Now, each night before going to bed, I hear the clinking sound of my father's keys opening our front door after another long day at work. I kiss him goodnight, walk back to my room and see out of the corner of my eye that he is taking out a book for his Social Work 489A class. I know that he has a lot to study before going to bed and I hope he does not fall asleep.

My father taught me that the key to success is to be persistent and to pursue my goals no matter how long it takes. Now I can make my dream of going to college a reality of my own and I want to be able to make my father proud by getting admitted to a four-year university that can offer me an outstanding education. At this moment, an exciting question arises: which one of us will realize our dream of graduating from college first?

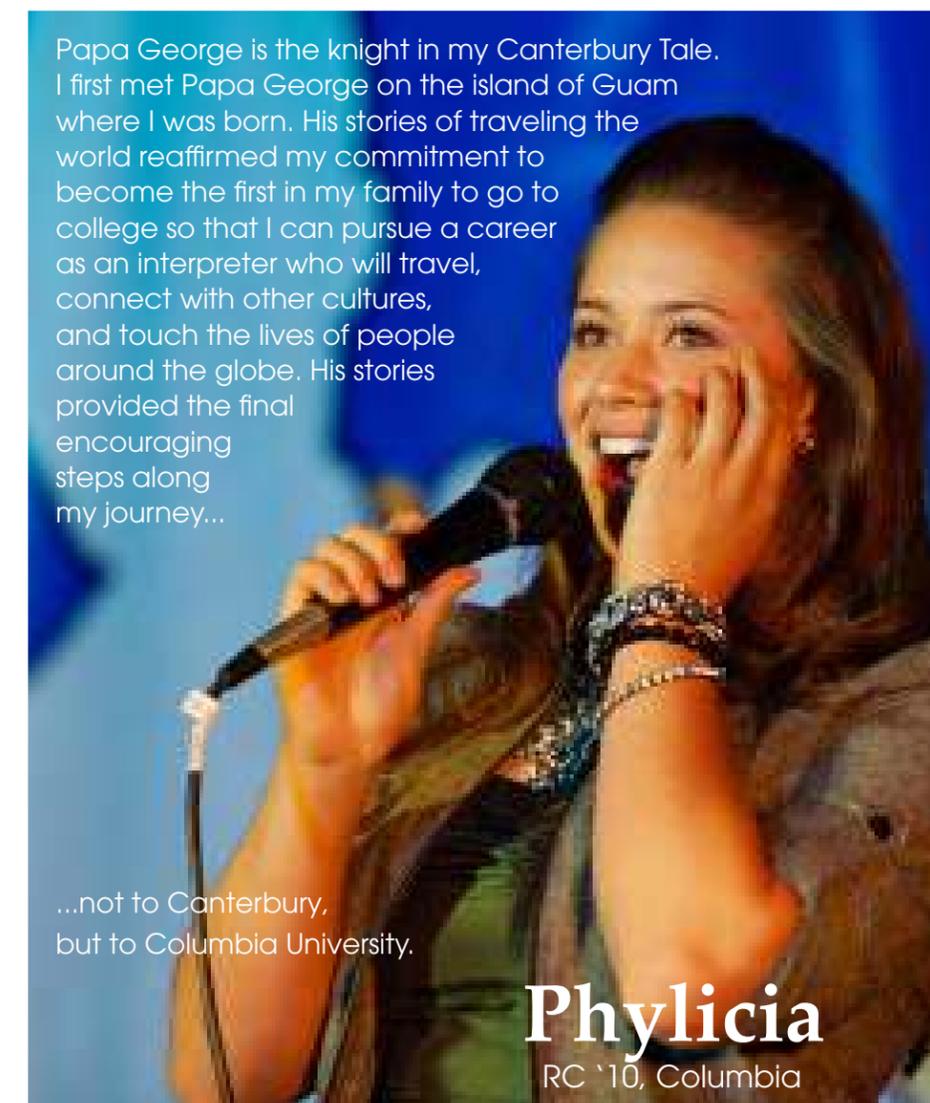


Duceani

RC '08, San Diego State University

Papa George is the knight in my Canterbury Tale. I first met Papa George on the island of Guam where I was born. His stories of traveling the world reaffirmed my commitment to become the first in my family to go to college so that I can pursue a career as an interpreter who will travel, connect with other cultures, and touch the lives of people around the globe. His stories provided the final encouraging steps along my journey...

...not to Canterbury,
but to Columbia University.



Phylicia

RC '10, Columbia

Anna

RC '05, Associated Technical College

Every girl wants to be daddy's little girl and I'm no exception. But my dream was shattered when I was six years old and my dad went to prison. When this happened, I began to think of him and of myself differently. With each subsequent time that my father was incarcerated, I began to understand that I could not count on him to fulfill the traditional role of a father and now I have come to accept that I must take actions to take care of myself and create my own destiny. Although I lost my illusion of being daddy's little girl, I know that I have become a woman that would make any father proud.



Alicia

RC '11, Harvard

For nearly two years, my mother and I moved around Southern California, checking in and out of homeless shelters. I can remember counting bathroom tiles with my brother for fun. I read anything I could find: newspaper clippings, nutrition facts, and billboards. We walked everywhere because we did not have a car. Some days we could not afford any food at all.

During this time, I found refuge in my schoolwork, encouragement from my teachers and counselors, and hope by reaching for higher goals, all of which only intensified my wish to make a more meaningful contribution to society.



As I began yet another long journey on foot to the public library, the sights and sounds of the city provided a temporary reprieve from my looming eight-page essay. The fact that I could not even afford a round-trip bus ticket placed my focus on my family's current economic status. My mother's meager annual income - less than \$18,000 - was hardly enough money to keep food on the table, let alone grant me the access to the essential tools for academic success and, as school buses passed me by, I was reminded of how all through grade school I thought that my only purpose in life was to merely find a job as soon as possible to aid my family economically.

As I approached downtown, I observed middle-aged women dressed in attractive business suits and my thoughts shifted to my mother's working conditions. Every night she returned home in her white work uniform that was stained from an extensive workday of scrubbing restrooms and lifting colossal bags of waste. While my mother's minimum wage paycheck was all that ensured

shelter for me and my three siblings in our one-bedroom apartment, I was not going to use my family's economic status as an excuse for accepting failure.

As I waited at a stoplight, a silver Mercedes Benz pulled up next to me. This car reminded me that a good education often leads to economic stability, but how could I get one without the other? If I wanted my future family to enjoy the tools that I lacked, I knew that my long walk to the library had a much greater purpose than just finishing an eight-page essay.

When I finally arrived at my destination, I realized that I had just a couple of hours to complete my assignment before the library closed. I worked on my essay until the librarian started to turn off the lights in the computer lab and, just as my walk to the library had proven to be a reflection on my past, the walk home allowed me to envision what my future would entail. Although on that day I could not afford a ticket for the bus, I am now a step closer to obtaining a ticket to college, searching for the school that will give me the best education instead of looking for the job that would have given me the quickest paycheck. The following years of my life are going to be spent walking on the grounds of a university and acquiring a degree will allow my mother to exchange her stained work uniform for her own attractive business suit as she sits proudly in the passenger seat of my Mercedes Benz.

Carlos

RC '06, UCLA

Daniel

RC '11, San Diego City College

As long as I can remember, there were always gunshots knocking at my front door or policemen ringing the door bell as the rumbling freeways near my home served as a constant reminder of the tumultuousness of my neighborhood. If my life were to be transposed into a piece of music, it would start in D-flat minor, but with God as my Louis Armstrong, it will resolve to the harmonious sound of my deserving mother smiling again and my hard-working father finally getting the rest he deserves. Just as jazz was born out the slaves of New Orleans, I was born under the shadows of the highways, and I am determined to change these sorrowful blues into a soulful melody.



Eduardo

RC '10, San Diego State University

I thought that my Reality Changers story would be complete when I graduated from high school, but little did I know that my story was just beginning.

Back in ninth grade, just a month after I joined Reality Changers, I found myself in trouble with the law and was facing six years of juvenile incarceration. The judge told me, "I'll give you one month to prove to me that you are the man inside this Reality Changers yearbook instead of the kid that the cops arrested." During that month, I doubled my GPA to a 3.8 and qualified for UCSD's Academic Connections. Furthermore, within that same year, I earned the top two design prizes in a mechanical engineering class at UCSD and was honored on the floor of the United States Congress.

Before enrolling in college though, Reality Changers made me an offer: would you like to become the site director of your own program? After accepting this opportunity to improve my neighborhood, I went to my old middle school and asked the principal if I could host an assembly for 8th graders who were struggling in school and just needed a little inspiration to transform their lives.

Sure enough, my students are now getting the best grades of their lives. Better yet, their confidence beams so brightly now that they are convinced that they, too, are bound for greatness. They make me realize that Reality Changers has evolved into a program where first generation college students are now building even more first generation college students.

Looking forward, the year that I graduate from college will be the same year that my students graduate from high school... and I can't wait for the day that my students are wearing college sweatshirts of their very own.



Kasim

RC '11, University of Philadelphia

I should be a child soldier right now.

After being born on an airplane overlooking the northeastern African Plains, my father and I lived peacefully in Aswan, Egypt. When I was six years old, however, my grandfather living in Somalia was diagnosed with a life-threatening illness and we traveled to see him. During our stay, my father and I were shopping in a nearby marketplace when an Al Qaeda-sponsored militia began shooting many people, including my father. Within the next three days, after a brave battle to heal from his five bullets wounds, my father passed away just a few hours after my grandfather succumbed to his illness. In an instant, I went from living in a beautiful fishing town to being lost and orphaned in a country overrun with poverty, famine, and terrorism.

Fatherless, my six-year-old mind and body set out to achieve the unthinkable: travel 2,000 miles back home to Egypt by bus and on foot. During that journey, I was kidnapped by rebels to serve them as a child soldier, escaped, and eventually made it back to Egypt two years after I had originally departed.

I was overjoyed to return to my native country, but being home meant living all by myself in my deceased father's empty mud-block house at the age of eight. At age 10, I was reunited with my mother and we moved to the United States, yet I soon found myself in a similar situation: homeless and on my own again at age 15. I could have easily broken down and dropped out of school, joined a gang, done drugs, or been thrown in jail. Instead, I chose the road not often taken and never desired: I started living in teen shelters and in the homes of close friends for weeks or months at a time. I also started to work and buy food and a bus pass to go to school. Throughout this hardship, I stayed in school and maintained a 3.67 GPA.

Today, I am no longer illiterate, but fluent in three cultures from three different corners of the world. I have experienced physical and emotional pain, hard work, perseverance, honor, and respect before I learned the ABC's. No, I am not a child soldier; instead I graduated from high school in just three years and am a soldier for education.

Looking forward, I am my own father, I am my own mother, and I am my own grandfather. I am no longer in the land of my forefathers that dictated what happened to me. Instead, I am in the United States of America where one day I will be able to shape the bright futures of my children and grandchildren.





A PICTURE MAY BE WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS,
BUT THIS PICTURE IS WORTH OVER \$4,000,000 IN SCHOLARSHIPS!

What's Next?

What could possibly be better than the stories that you just read? Creating even more such stories!

At Reality Changers, we're committed to expanding our programs locally and sharing our strategies globally. (I'm pictured here during a recent trip to Guanajuato, Mexico.) To do so, we have three long-term goals:

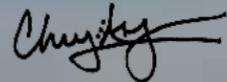
First, expanding our social enterprise will strengthen our ability to prepare more inner-city students for college. Just as the Princeton Review offers guidance sessions for the SAT exam, CollegeAppsAcademy.com helps students seeking guidance for the college application process. The Academy is up to 80% tax deductible and open to ALL high school students. Better yet, through Reality Changers' exclusive partnership with UC San Diego Extension, students receive college-prep credit upon completion of the course!

Second, securing a long-term facility will accommodate the program's exponential growth. We now produce nearly as many graduates on an annual basis than we did during our first ten years combined! Hundreds of low-income youth want to get off the streets and into our college-readiness programs... where will we put these students as the demand for our services continues to grow?

Third, knowing that our program's greatest strength is the students themselves, we strive to have at least 50% of our employees be Reality Changers graduates. These young adults provide incomparable organizational knowledge, unsurpassed expertise on becoming first generation college students, and undeniable proof that Reality Changers produces community-minded leaders ready to change the world.

Yet the closing credits of this publication truly belong to you. You are the co-author of these inspirational stories by providing the resources necessary for building first generation college students. And just as these pages began with a question, we'll end with another: How many more of "America's Finest Stories" can we write together?

Sincerely,



Christopher Yanov
Founder & President



With your support, this sampling of Reality Changers graduates earned the following estimated scholarship amounts from their universities and other private sources:



Visit us at:

www.RealityChangers.org

* Gates Scholar amounts estimated over 10 years.
See more information on p.20.



Reality Changers
3910 University Avenue
Suite 300-RC
San Diego, CA 92105

(619) 516-2222
info@realitychangers.org

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