



How This 17-Year-Old Is Fighting Stereotypes About Homeless Youth

Learn how 17-year-old Rosemary Rodriguez is opening up about formerly being homeless and advocating for homeless youth in New York City.

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Rosemary Rodriguez is 17, and a recipient of the 2017 [Children's Defense Fund-New York's "Beat the Odds"](#) college scholarship, which recognizes New York City teens who have overcome adversity in their personal lives. For over two years, Rosemary lived in a Brownsville, Brooklyn homeless shelter with her mother and three siblings. She will graduate this June from Rachel Carson High School for Coastal Studies and plans to pursue a career as an FBI agent.

When my family was living in a homeless shelter, I would get stopped by the police a lot. I never did anything wrong, but because they always saw me walking near the shelter, the officers would assume that I was up to trouble. One time, when I was late for school, a couple of police officers stopped me near the shelter and asked where I was going. "School," I said, but because I was late, they didn't believe me. Instead of letting me go, they brought me to a bus of kids being questioned for truancy. When the officers asked me if it was my first time being stopped, I told them it was. The look on their faces told me they didn't believe me, and they asked for my ID as they looked through my records.

This was just one painful example of how I was judged by others while living in the homeless shelter. During the two years I was homeless, I became more aware of the stereotypes associated with it, and how judgmental people could be about my circumstances. People assumed that I was a troublemaker, or I didn't want to go to college. I was so embarrassed to be there — I felt out of place and alone. At school, I never told anyone where I lived. I was too ashamed.

It took over a year to get my life back on track. As a society, we should work to combat these stereotypes that make homeless youth feel like they're not good enough, and have no future. Yes, I lived in a homeless shelter, but I'll be graduating from high school in June. I plan to go to college to study criminal justice with a focus in psychology so I can pursue a career as an FBI agent.

My interest in criminal justice started at an early age. When I was growing up in the Bronx, I saw crimes happen in my neighborhood. There were police sirens going off outside my bedroom all night. I wanted to help people who found themselves in bad situations.

Life changed for my family when my mother, my siblings and I moved in with my mother's new boyfriend in Brooklyn. But she and her boyfriend broke up before my freshman year of high school. Suddenly, my mom couldn't keep up with the bills, and we were forced to move out of our apartment. Once we got evicted, we had no choice but move into a homeless shelter.

Moving into the shelter took a toll on my mental health. Never in my life did I think I would be homeless. I always thought homeless meant living in the streets. I would always think about people who were asking for money on the trains, not me and my family. Living at the shelter, I felt like I was stripped of my freedom and forced to live under someone else's rules — because of the sign-in policy and the strict 9:00 p.m. curfew, I felt like I couldn't live my own life. Not to mention, the shelter was very different from the five-bedroom apartment where we used to live. At the shelter, our space wasn't called an apartment; it was a "unit." It was a single room, with the beds on one side and the kitchen on the other. There was a bathroom near the kitchen space, and we all shared a closet. This room was split between my mother, my three siblings and me, so it was very cramped. When we moved there, I also had to change my lifestyle. This was very jarring at first. Instead of getting up at 6:30 a.m., I needed to wake up at 5:00 a.m. to be at school on time. Changes like that really affected me.

At school, I felt embarrassed by my situation and I didn't want to tell anyone. A month into sophomore year, I wasn't working hard at school, didn't do my homework, and only wanted to go out with friends. I didn't want to be at school at all. But I was paying a price. The lowest point of the year was when I started to hide my report card from my mom. On it were all failing grades, and all the latenesses and absences I had. I had never hid something like that from my mom. This is when I first realized how badly I was messing up. At the end of sophomore year, I reconnected with an old friend who made me realize how far behind I had fallen. She told me if I didn't earn all my credits, I wouldn't graduate with the rest of my friends. That was an eye opener for me. I had never considered the possibility that I wouldn't graduate. Following that conversation, I started asking teachers if I could make up work and do extra credit — I was willing to do anything it took to pass those classes.

I also decided it was time for me to work hard outside of the classroom. In 2016, I was selected to join the Center for Court Innovation's Youth Justice Board, which works to provide public policy recommendations to New York City regarding its homeless youth. We're really interested in creating resources to help homeless youth who are involved in the criminal justice system. When they get out of jail, it's often difficult for them to get jobs. I also am a part of the Children's Defense Fund-New York's Beat the Odds program, which is really like a family. Everyone is so welcoming, and offers me a lot of guidance making sure I stay on track. On a personal level, whenever I am stressed or want to give up, I could go to my mentors there, and they keep me going.

My family and I moved out of the shelter in September, into a room in an apartment in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. Living at the shelter really changed my perspective. I never knew how many families were homeless, and the fact that mine was one of them made me think a lot about what I value. Now, I understand that we shouldn't define ourselves by what we have or don't have. When I was first homeless, I let it define who I was. But over time, I realized that I am so much more than my circumstances. So is every other teen living without a home.

I also built a support system for myself through the Beat the Odds program. To other teens who may be dealing with homelessness, I'd suggest getting involved in community programs like these — there's always some type of help available if you look for it, and it's so important to find mentors you can trust. But perhaps the biggest takeaway from my experience was learning not to judge people. You never know what's going on behind closed doors. The last thing I wanted was to be treated differently because of my living situation.