



Hispanic Community Corrections Officers Are First Generation College Grads – Podcast Transcript

Narrator: The number of Hispanic students enrolling in college has reached an all-time high in recent years. In fact, they comprise about a quarter of all 18 to 24 year olds at two-year colleges. But they trail other racial groups in the number of Bachelor's degrees they earn.

Poverty, pressure to join gangs, the need to support a family, and the nomadic nature of migrant field work are all barriers Hispanic students can face on the quest for higher education.

But one current and one former Hispanic DOC community corrections officer beat the odds. They became the first in their families to graduate college and enter the field of law enforcement. This is their story.

Cristina and Arturo Santana grew up in Sunnyside, a rural agriculturally-fueled city in eastern Washington rife with gang violence and high-rates of poverty. Their families immigrated from Mexico to the U.S. to find work.

Cristina remembers waking in the pre-dawn hours to work in the asparagus fields with her parents and seven siblings. When asparagus wasn't in season, her family moved between Skagit County and rural farms in Texas to find work. The constant moving made learning nearly impossible.

Christina Santana: I would miss a lot of school because I was working and we would be moving so much. By the time we would get to school, we were like, ten chapters behind.

Cristina Santana: I really didn't have anybody I could say, "Oh this is a role model I had who really encouraged me to go to school."

Narrator: Farm labor was the only career Cristina knew. Her parents often said it was more important to work than go to college.

Christina Santana: When we came to the U.S my dad's goal was to work and make money and live the American Dream and education was never a priority.

Narrator: One day, her high school had a career fair. She learned about college admissions and financial aid. She applied and got accepted into a dental assistant program in Texas. But her family still resisted.

Christina Santana: I didn't have that. I think my whole entire senior year, I would cry every day, come home from work and tell my dad I wanted to go to school, I wanted to go to college. It was really hard to break that cycle because it was something that I my father could not understand.

One day, just before school started, Cristina's mother gave in and handed her a hundred-dollar-bill for bus fare. The ticket and meals for the three-day trip left her broke.

Christina Santana: I didn't know what to do. I'm here. School starts Monday. I have no car. I have no food. I have no clothes. I didn't have a plan.

Narrator: Her first days in Texas were spent trying to survive. She begged strangers for food. She slept alone in the family home by borrowing a key from the neighbor. And she borrowed an old pickup truck from her grandfather in the nearby town of Alamo.

When she arrived at school, she was embarrassed. She had no books or uniforms. At the end of the day, she went to the dean's office, filled out some forms and got a modest scholarship for tuition and books. And the local United Farmworkers Association gave her a food stipend.

A year later she completed the program. By then she wanted to get a degree in social work. So she returned to Washington state to attend Eastern Washington University. She was reunited with Arturo, whom she had dated in high school and later married.

Arturo says many of his high school friends joined gangs, got arrested and sent to jail. The reason he didn't wind up like they did was because his parents were highly involved in his life.

Arturo Santana: My barriers and obstacles were my surroundings. Because we lived in poverty we lived in areas of town where we were surrounded by people living in the same circumstances, which also included gangs, drugs and that type of environment...whereas when I got older, the pressure was always there to get caught up with those types of things. A lot of my friends grew up having single mothers or had stepfathers who came in and out of the picture, but nobody had a true father figure in their home. What separated me from everybody else around me was that I had two parents.

Narrator: The Santanas both earned Bachelor's degrees in social work. Arturo worked at the DOC's field offices in Pasco and Sunnyside before becoming a federal probation officer in Yakima in 2014. Cristina worked at various drug and alcohol treatment facilities in Eastern Washington before becoming a DOC community corrections officer last year.

Improving public safety in the communities they grew up in, is meaningful for both of them.

Arturo Santana: Being involved in the community is very important because at times, the population we serve and the community we live in, the relationship they have with law enforcement may have been bad in the past. They may have had bad experiences. By showing another side of what we do, it helps alleviate that. It lets them know that we are also the same people, just like you.

Cristina Santana: I think it's just being able to make an impact in people's lives, people that you come in contact with on a daily basis and their families. You can have the potential to make a difference in their lives.

Narrator: Rachel Friederich, DOC Communications