

For Homeless Students, 'Education Was the Only Way Out'

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Julia Robinson for The Chronicle

Mirka Mendez is studying petroleum engineering at the U. of Texas at Austin. "I would like to be seen as someone who is striving for something better," she says, "instead of someone to feel sorry for."

As the cost of college has risen, so has the number of students who are struggling to meet their basic needs. In one recent survey, more than one in five students said they had gone hungry in the past month. Close to one in 10 said they had been homeless at some point in the past year.

Three rising juniors describe how they made it to college despite lacking steady housing, regular meals, and the tools to complete their high-school assignments.

And many homeless students aren't even making it to college. Because they tend to move frequently, they're typically at an academic disadvantage to their peers. Many lack reliable access to the internet — making it hard to complete homework assignments — and some still struggle to qualify for financial aid, despite recent improvements to the process.

Once on campus, homeless students often wrestle with feelings of self-doubt and loneliness, hiding their situation from their peers. Some advocates refer to them as an "invisible population" on college campuses.

But some current and formerly homeless students are succeeding in college despite the odds. *The Chronicle* spoke with three of them this month, when they visited Washington to share their stories with policy makers and to push for changes that could help more homeless students complete college.

They are: Asher Parvu, a rising junior studying pre-med at the University of Arkansas at Fort Smith; Hannah Johnson, a rising junior majoring in elementary education and history at Virginia Commonwealth University; and Mirka Mendez, a rising junior majoring in petroleum engineering at the University of Texas at Austin. The following interview has been edited and condensed.

Q. When did you first experience homelessness?

Asher Parvu is studying pre-med at the U. of Arkansas at Fort Smith.

Asher: When I was young and slept in trucks and cars. It became chronic when I was a junior in high school.

We moved from Tahlequah, Okla. to Fort Smith, Ark., and within a month of moving, my parents kicked me out, and I was on the streets. I was an avid tennis player, so I slept on tennis courts. The concrete held heat so it was warmer at night.

I also slept on the roofs of churches, so no one could see me. In Fort Smith it's illegal to be homeless, so I had to go where police couldn't find me.

Hannah: I was 16 or 17. My mother and I had lived off Social Security benefits from my father's death since I was 7. When I turned 16, it got cut in half, and we couldn't survive on \$1,200 a month. So for a while we kept bouncing around to different rental places, and eventually we were evicted.

We lived in a motel, with family members, then back to the motel. We moved at least 10 times my junior and senior year.

Mirka: I moved to the U.S. from Mexico when I turned 15. I came to live with a cousin that I'd never seen before. She was never supportive. She just agreed to have me.

After one year of living there, I couldn't afford it anymore, because she decided to raise the rent. I told her I could not pay, and she said OK. But I didn't want to be a burden, so I left. I stayed outside the library three days until, in desperation, I asked for help.

Q. How did it affect your schooling?

Asher: I went to four high schools in three states. I had to learn stuff that they'd learned in the previous semester. I stayed after school as much as I could to catch up.

In Fort Smith, I went to school in the middle of town, and I had to walk four miles from the outskirts. I got to school at 6:30, when it opened, so I could start doing my homework in the light.

"Not having air conditioning, hand-washing your clothes in the bathtub ... you get used to that stuff, but you never get used to the stigma."

Hannah: I had teachers who, when I told them I didn't have the means to do assignments online, would tell me to go to the library. It was a 30-minute drive to the public library, and we didn't have a car. It just wasn't possible.

Mirka: Completing assignments was really hard. I didn't have a computer or an electronic device. Every day after school I would run to the public library, because I knew they closed at 6, so I only had a certain amount of time to do



work.

Q. Were you ever hungry, or not sure where your next meal would come from?

Asher: I did three sports — cross country, wrestling, and tennis — so I needed a lot of food, and what the school was providing wasn't enough. I wouldn't eat lunch, because I used that time to study. I went to the library, where I could find peace and access to the internet. I had to give up my lunch as a means of securing a better future. Not eating was an investment in having something better.

But I was hungry all the time. I tried to eat as little as possible, just so I could make my money stretch as far as possible.

Hannah: My mother has bipolar disorder. She was a drug addict and had a variety of health issues. So \$400 of our budget went to paying for methadone. We relied on food stamps and food banks. There would be churches that would go to motels and hand out bagged lunch. You end up eating lots of carbs, lots of fat.

One time my mom was with her cousin, and a Walmart truck crashed. They're not allowed to sell the food, so for a while we lived off that, because they were giving it out.

Mirka: If I was really hungry, I would go to the dollar store and buy canned soup, because it was 80 cents. I convinced myself that it was psychological, that I wasn't really hungry.

Q. Did the other students and teachers know you were homeless?

Asher: They had no idea. I didn't want them to know. I didn't want people to feel sorry for me. I didn't want to be given opportunities that I didn't deserve. I wanted to be given opportunities based on my qualifications. I didn't want to be a charity case.



Hannah Johnson is majoring in elementary education and history at Virginia Commonwealth U.

Hannah: I told my teachers when I first moved into a motel, because I wasn't going to school. I don't know if I was

ever officially identified as homeless. Some teachers were helpful, some weren't. With students, I didn't tell them unless we were really close.

I told my boyfriend and told my best friend. It got awkward when the end of the year came around and I had to ask someone to drive me to Advanced Placement tests.

When some of my peers found out, they were quite surprised. I took mainly AP and International Baccalaureate courses and did well in them, so most people assumed I lived a normal life. No one really talked about it. For some, it was because what I was doing compromised their beliefs of how the impoverished behave. For others, they were simply apathetic. There were very few people I thought truly cared about my situation.

Mirka: Nobody was aware. I didn't talk to anyone, and I started to isolate myself, because I felt really bad about myself. Not even my family knew, because I never told them that.

Q. What was the hardest part?

Asher: Just people not understanding that not all students have the same opportunities. I took AP classes, which meant I had to find internet, and lighting, to do my work.

Hannah: Just getting used to everything, to not having air conditioning, or hand-washing your clothes in the bathtub with dish soap. You get used to that stuff, but you never get used to the stigma. There was a lot of shame and self-doubt for something that was out of my control. I came from a really conservative area with lot of upper-middle-class people. I would be in AP and IB classes, and I would hear about how awful people on welfare were, how they were losers. It was hard to hear.

Mirka: The worst thing is the uncertainty. You don't know what is going to happen to you the next day — and trying to complete your responsibilities as a student. Dealing with all those issues while still trying to get good grades.

Q. And yet you did well in high school. How did you manage to succeed?

Asher: I graduated with a 4.1 weighted GPA, the top 5 percent of my class. I graduated with honors. I don't know how I got them. The extracurricular activities — I knew that when they look at your application for scholarships and jobs, they ask what you do in free time. I didn't want to be the person who said, "I'm homeless, so wasn't able to do anything." I saw getting involved in clubs as a necessity.

Hannah: I've always wanted to be a teacher, and you need a college degree to get a teaching license. I had teachers supporting me who were instrumental. Now, when I go home for breaks, I live with teachers from high school. I don't have anyone else.

I finished with a 3.94 GPA, but I always feel like I could have done better. I'm a little bit of a perfectionist. My senior year, I managed to get a 4.0.

Mirka: I always knew education was the only way out. Finished with a 3.79 — top 7 percent of my class.

"I wanted to be given opportunities based on my qualifications. I didn't want to be a charity case."

I don't consider myself smart, I consider myself a hard worker. I know that people are able to take away my money, my belongings, even my security, but something they cannot take away is my success and my education.

When got into the University of Texas at Austin, it was my No. 1 school, and No. 1 in the country for my major. That was when I realized I would have a future.

Q. What about now? What are the challenges in college?

Asher: The biggest issue is finding balance. I'm living in a house with six kids, including two of my sisters. I have

Wi-Fi now, but I don't have a door on my room, so I can't study there. I tend to study at the college, or go to a fast-food place and buy something small so they don't think I'm just there for the Wi-Fi.

Hannah: You just don't have the support of having parents to talk to when your day is bad. I'm sure if I asked my foster family for something, they would give it to me, but I want to be self-reliant.

Then there's financial aid. They're constantly asking for documents that homeless kids can't provide. Freshman year, I filed to be independent, and they kept asking for my mother's taxes. She hasn't filed since 2004.

Mirka: I got a four-year scholarship from my university. I'm still very limited on what I can buy to eat. On groceries and food in general, I spend \$35 a month. I've applied several times for food stamps, but college scholarships give you everything in one check. They've always told me I have too much money in my bank account — but it's for tuition. I've been trying to explain it.

Q. What don't people understand about homelessness?

Asher: That when you don't have the basic necessities, it's very hard to study.

Hannah: I think people mainly misunderstand what homelessness is. It's not just a middle-aged alcoholic stumbling around the city. Homelessness exists in motels, parks, cars, and more places than I can think of.

What I want people to know is that homeless youth want more from their lives than what they've always known. I want to teach, and I know homeless youth who have plans to become doctors and lawyers. We're ambitious, and we have the power to do amazing things in this world if someone gives us the opportunity.

Mirka: A misconception is that homeless people are always asking for money, that they don't have a desire to be more. I would like to be seen as someone who is striving for something better instead of someone to feel sorry for.

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