

# Grad Who Beat The Odds Asks, Why Not The Others?

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Heard on Morning Edition



by Claudio Sanchez



Juan Carlos Reyes is studying for his master's degree. The son of poor Dominican parents, Reyes is convinced his success is an aberration and wonders about the kids from his neighborhood who were left behind.

*Claudio Sanchez/NPR*

Fewer than 5 percent of Americans had completed college when historian James Truslow Adams first coined the term "American dream" in 1931.

Today, many consider higher education the gateway to a better, richer and fuller life. But for many kids growing up in poverty, college might as well be Mars, and the American dream a myth.

Juan Carlos Reyes was once one of those kids. Today, he's a broad-shouldered young man, sporting a neatly trimmed beard. He's standing on the corner of 106th Street and Lexington Avenue in New York City, pacing the sidewalk in front of an old, refurbished school building — "the place that sort of opened up the doors to change in my future," he says.

The Heritage High School is where Reyes remembers first hearing about the "American dream," after reading *Death of a Salesman* in Mr. Saltz's English class.

"That's the first time in the classroom a professor actually brought up the concept of what the American dream was," Reyes says. "You can come from the bottom, and with hard work and dedication, you'll get a nice house, a nice car and enough money for your kids to go to school."

But for Reyes, the message rang hollow.

### 'A Lost Cause' Finds His Way

It was 2003—Reyes' junior year—and he was in all kinds of trouble. He had gone through a gauntlet of bad teachers and dysfunctional schools. He got high, ran with a tough crowd, rarely attended class and was written off as "a lost cause."

"I just wanted a job," Reyes says. "And I said something like, 'Well, doormen get paid \$16 an hour. And if I get that job, I can make it.' And to me, I guess that was the dream."

But the first teacher he met at Heritage High School, Rachel "Rocky" Rivera, disabused him of that idea. She knew what kids like Reyes needed.

"I gave them tough love, and I gave them good love," Rivera says. A physical education and karate instructor, Rivera has a pretty good track record proving to kids like Reyes that they're not "lost causes."

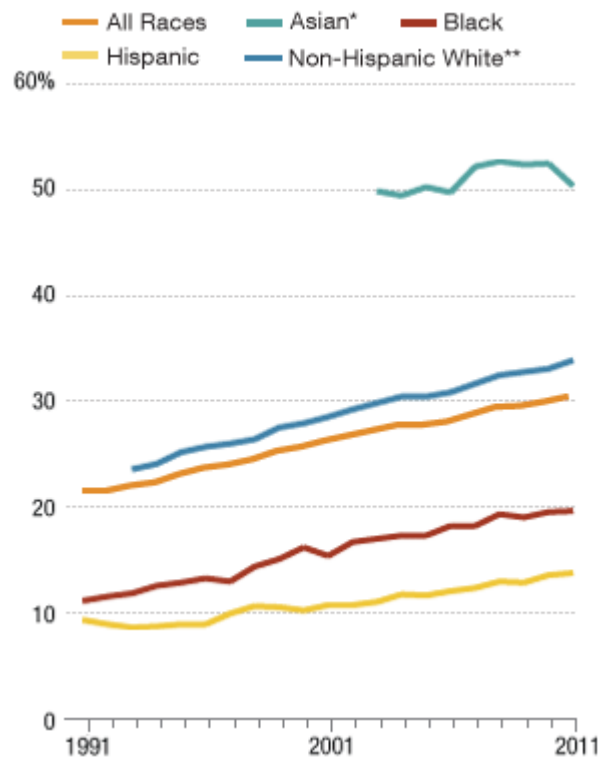
"They learned discipline, they learned respect. They learned how to get out there and be go-getters—[to] get what they needed in life," Rivera says.

Reyes took Rivera's message to heart, but that wasn't all he got from Heritage High. The school offered lots of academic counseling, college visits and free SAT prep courses.

For the first time, Reyes says, teachers provided what nobody else had: a culture of achievement and hard work that paved the way to college.

### Who Goes To College?

Percent of people 25 years and older who have completed four or more years of college, by race



#### Notes

\* Data not collected before 2003

\*\* Data not collected before 1992

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Credit: Kevin Uhrmacher/NPR

"By the time I left Heritage, I absolutely knew I was going to complete a college degree," he says. "Something that I never pictured became a reality—seeing my mom's dreams become reality—and I teared up because it was very significant to me."

After graduating from Baruch College, Reyes became senior manager in the Office of the President at Columbia Teachers College, where he's now pursuing a master's degree in higher education.

### 'The Lottery Ticket Of American Life'

How a poor Dominican kid from an impoverished South Bronx neighborhood can make it to college can be seen in two different ways, says cultural historian Jim Cullen, author of *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*.

"Some people would look at a story like Juan Carlos' and say he's proof the system works," Cullen says. "Other people look at the story of a Juan Carlos and say he's the exception—and therefore he's evidence that there's a problem."

Given the poor quality of education the vast majority of kids living in poverty receive, Cullen says, access to higher education for them is a matter of luck and good fortune.

"A college degree has become, in effect, the lottery ticket of American life," he says.

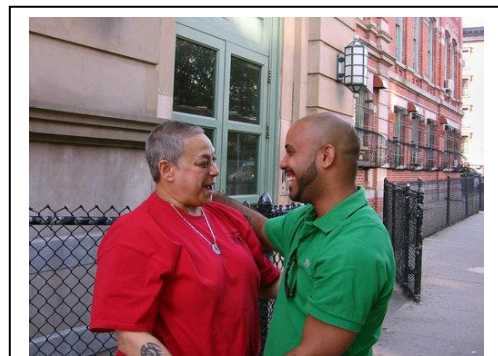
Reyes agrees. Back in front of Heritage High, he ponders the question he's always asked himself: Why did he make it out of the South Bronx, when so many of the kids he grew up with didn't?

"Many would say that I am the compilation of the American dream," he says. "I mean, I grew up in an inner city of the Bronx. And quite frankly, [I'm] lucky to not fall into the wrong place at the wrong time.

"But I don't think it's a coincidence that eight out of 10 of my friends don't have a college degree," he says. "In fact, they don't have a high school diploma."

So, Reyes asks, where's their shot at a college education? Where's their American dream?

These are the questions that now make up Reyes' life's work: to counsel poor, inner-city kids about the importance of a college education—and to convince them that their dreams are not far-fetched, but within their grasp.



Reyes credits his high school mentor "Rocky" Rivera with guiding him out of trouble and into college.

*Claudio Sanchez/NPR*