

EDUCATION JUNE 9, 2016 4:57 PM

# Homeless but college-bound: Miami grad overcomes life of hardships

## HIGHLIGHTS

Norberto Orellana has been homeless for most of high school

He has endured multiple surgeries due to cerebral palsy

Orellana is headed to college with a full scholarship and hopes of getting into medical school



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Through homelessness and physical disability, it would have been easy for Norberto Orellana to give up on his studies.

Instead, the 18-year old graduated from high school Thursday with a near-perfect GPA, a full ride scholarship and a goal to get into medical school.

On the last day of classes for Miami-Dade public schools, he flipped the graduation tassel on his cap along with a sea of classmates at the Adrienne Arsht Center.

Multi-colored cords draped around his shoulders and shiny medals hanging from his neck announced all that he had accomplished in high school. His family cheered from the first row.

“This is what he has always wanted,” said Orellana’s mom, Lorna Vargas.

On his graduation day, Orellana blended into a crowd of smiling grads in white robes. But at School for Advanced Studies, the organic chemistry textbook tucked under Orellana’s arm made him a standout. The high school is located on Miami Dade College campuses, allowing students to complete their associate’s degree. Everybody knew he wasn’t college aged but was taking one of the most difficult classes MDC had to offer.

It wasn’t until much later that his classmates fully understood what an accomplishment that was. Until his senior year, he never let on his family hasn’t had a home of their own for most of his high school career.

Orellana is like that, casually revealing surprising details. He once brought a guitar to school and unexpectedly started playing Spanish-style flamenco music. It was on stage during a TEDx lecture that he revealed that medical complications and homelessness could have easily knocked him out of school.

For classmate Galo Parades III, Orellana became a friend and an inspiration.

“He showed me the potential I had,” said Parades, a rising senior at School for Advanced Studies.

Orellana was born with cerebral palsy. By the time he was 5, he had undergone three surgeries to correct a club foot, lengthen his muscles and reshape his bones. His last surgery, to place a metal plate in his leg, was in August. Orellana called it “a complete success.”

Rather than be turned off by hospitals, Orellana knew early on that he wanted to go into the medical profession.

“The experiences I’ve had at hospitals have all been good. I’ve walked out better,” he said.

Despite multiple surgeries and doctor’s visits, Orellana has always excelled in the classroom. For a while, Orellana attended school in a wheelchair. Once, in elementary school, he missed a month of classes because of complications from his cerebral palsy.

“He caught up – and made the honor roll,” said his dad, Samuel Orellana.

Ninth grade was the last time Orellana and his mom, dad and younger sister had a permanent place to live. It was an apartment – small but nice, and home for a few years.

Eventually, his parents weren't able to pay rent. Orellana's dad has kidney failure and limited feeling in his extremities – a result of long-undiagnosed diabetes. His mother has simply had a hard time finding a job. Slowly, the things in their apartment started disappearing and the family wound up in a shelter before Orellana could finish his first year of high school.

“It's been a lot of bouncing around,” he said.

For seven months, the four of them crammed into a single room with double bunk beds. Fights would break out in the hallway, and Orellana's stacks of books and laptop made him a target for thieves. His twin bed served as a desk. Yet he stayed on top of his schoolwork at the Medical Academy for Science and Technology in Homestead, a rigorous magnet school.

“I already knew I wasn't going to let it stop me,” he said. “Whenever something got hard, I fixed it by putting in more effort.”

The family briefly had a home during Orellana's junior year, when he transferred to the School for Advanced Studies.

While he shuffled between shelters, motels and his aunt's home, Orellana enrolled in Advanced Placement courses on top of his college classes. During the summer, he woke up at 4 a.m. to take a train and a bus to downtown Miami, where he took extra college courses. He also landed an undergraduate research position to study medical marijuana.

“He's ambitious and hard-working and highly intelligent,” said Adrienne Pedroso, Orellana's English teacher. “Even though he comes from a challenging environment, he's never asked for accommodations.”

At school, Orellana is known for his sharp dress and academic talent. He usually wears a button-down shirt and tie, and carries a briefcase. Once, a college student mistook him for a professor.

“You can tell by the way he dresses and the way he carries himself that he's a nice kid,” said Rahl Patel, a classmate and friend.

Now that he's heading off to college – the first in his family to make it that far – Orellana's living situation is finally guaranteed. He was accepted to Colorado College, a private liberal arts school. His room and board are covered by scholarships through QuestBridge, which helps low-income grads go to selective colleges.

For now, his sights are set on becoming a pediatric orthopedic surgeon just like the doctors who performed his operations. His mother is not surprised. She has photos of Orellana dressed up as a doctor when he was much younger.

“It's something I always knew would happen,” Vargas said.

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