

## GRANTEES IN ACTION

# Gateway to College National Network



*Arianna with her  
brother (Abel)  
and grandmother  
(Pauline)*

## LEARNING TO GO FOR THE GOLD AGAIN

Arianna Gonzalez couldn't stand to miss a day of elementary school in Riverside, California. When she was sick, she'd go anyway, telling her grandmother Pauline that she was healthy. The young girl always had her eye on the perfect attendance trophy awarded at the end of the school year. She liked the gold metallic finish and the way it felt in her hands.

Pauline was proud of her granddaughter back then. She was also glad she could provide a home where Arianna and her younger brother Abel could be safe. She'd taken custody of the children when Arianna was two and Abel was just 10 months because of their parents' addiction to crack cocaine, a habit that landed them in prison more than once.

Although her grandmother was Arianna's anchor, life in her home was anything but stable, and Pauline was often moody due to her own ongoing battle with drug addiction. The apartment was crowded with aunts and uncles and cousins in financial trouble—not to mention Arianna's parents and their other six children, who moved in and out.

By the time Arianna was in tenth grade, her competitive spirit was sagging under the growing weight of self-doubt. She gravitated to the punk lifestyle, complete with piercings, patches and band shirts, and hung out with the local punk bands. At John North High School, she was sure nobody liked her, she fell way behind on her credits, and scarcely cared. Both her parents had dropped out, and she was about to follow in the family tradition. "I just felt like a number at school," Arianna says. "I couldn't get any help, no tutoring or nothing."

One million American teens drop out of high school every year. Gateway to College National Network was founded to enable young people who have left school to get back on track with

their high school education and at the same time accrue college credits. The result is that they not only achieve a high school diploma, they also catch up with their peers who may already be on a path to a postsecondary credential.

First established in Portland, Oregon, the program expanded to the Riverside Community College (RCC) campus as the second of what are now 43 Gateway to College (GTC) programs in 23 states. Its evidence-based model emphasizes wraparound support from dedicated resource specialists. A caring adult not only keeps a close eye on the academic progress of GTC students, but also understands and responds to the critical daily needs of a student who is facing adversity outside of school. The result is that 73.2 percent of GTC graduates continue on to postgraduate studies. Although most participants enter the program well after they've dropped out of high school, some, like Arianna, go straight from public high school to GTC. For these young people, all of whom are at high risk of dropping out, it's just as much of a second chance. "No one was ever very big on education in my family," Arianna says. "My grandma wasn't supportive at all. I wanted to prove to her that I could do it."

Arianna was interviewed and accepted into Gateway. In the fall of 2009, age 16, she attended a one-week "boot camp" orientation in the row of bungalows on the RCC campus that house Gateway's school within a school.

Divided into cohorts of 30 young people each, the students then moved on to a "Foundation Quarter," including English and math classes for high school credit, as well as a guidance class for college credit instructing students in organizational skills, time management, note taking, and how to work in groups.

"It seemed too good to be true," Arianna says. "The classes were a lot smaller than at my high school, and the teachers would come to me instead of me going to them"—a big plus for a girl whom Robin Acosta, a GTC Resource Specialist, remembers as shy and very withdrawn.

"We have students who've been to five high schools by their junior year and they're just beaten down," Acosta says. "They've been told they weren't going to succeed, and that's self-fulfilling. So they're wary, and they're not sure it's going to work for them. But then when they see that we have follow-through, they become excited about school again."

Arianna gradually emerged from her shell. "I had a guidance class, and everyone had to get in a circle and talk about ourselves and it got really personal," she says. "No one really knew me before. I was able to open up here, have a new perspective and a new image." Eventually, Arianna continues, "the cohort became like a family."

"Once everyone could see what Arianna was all about, everyone loved her," says Acosta. "I remember that she was volunteering all over the place, and she's still doing that."

Arianna appreciated that Acosta periodically checked to make sure she was getting enough sleep and eating reasonably healthy meals. She was also very thankful when the school covered her \$25 semester student fees because Pauline was unable to come up with the money. Nevertheless, Arianna explains, this incident "made me realize I had to do things for myself."

"Overriding everything, our goal here is to make the education relevant to the students," says Acosta. "We ask them, 'Where are you going, what's your plan for your life?' And we show them how everything connects."



*Arianna with Riverside  
Community College GTC  
Director Jill Marks*

**ARIANNA HAS FOUND THAT SHE IS OFTEN MORE PREPARED FOR HER COLLEGE CLASSES THAN HER NON-GATEWAY PEERS. WHEN A POWERPOINT PRESENTATION WAS REQUIRED FOR A GROUP PRESENTATION IN HER COMMUNICATIONS CLASS, SHE WAS THE ONLY STUDENT WHO KNEW POWERPOINT AND HAD TO HELP EVERYONE ELSE.**

Of the 30 young people who started in the Gateway program with Arianna, approximately 20 completed the Foundation classes. “You need to be an adult here. You have to take it seriously,” Arianna says, explaining that some participants run up against serious family issues, drug problems and sometimes prison time. “I’ve spent a lot of time trying to help people stay in the program; I just want it so much for everybody.”

“College is a long-term investment and sometimes the short term gets in the way,” Acosta says. “Maybe they have to move out of the area, they get pregnant, or they have to work—we have students working swing shifts and graveyard shifts and trying to go to school at the same time. One of the reasons our program is year-round is that we know we’re in a race with what’s going to happen in their outside life.”

Arianna completed the high school program in December 2010, proud to have 30 college credits already under her belt. Given priority in registering for college courses due to her Gateway status, she attended classes on RCC’s upper campus, an iconic Mission-style quad. After class on most days, she’d go down to the Gateway bungalows to visit faculty members for advice, or to consult the Gateway writing coach. She also dropped by at least twice a week for a required check-in with Acosta.

In the spring of 2013, Arianna was accepted as a transfer student into the University of California Riverside, UCLA, and UC Davis. She chose to stay close to home—and to her Gateway family – by opting for UC Riverside. “The program becomes a touch point for the students for years after they leave,” says GTC Riverside Program Director and principal founder Jill Marks. “Sometimes they may need help with college or job applications. Sometimes they make bad decisions and they’re temporarily homeless and need transitional housing.... Of course, they share their successes, too. They come back to tell us about their academic successes, their marriages, their children.”

Now 20 years old, Arianna has excelled as the social media marketing expert and web content developer at the Riverside YWCA. The classes she took in web design prepared her for the part-time position. Arianna tries to be as professional as possible. “I started feeling weird wearing my punk band t-shirts to work. I wanted to look respectable. My friends think I’m a sellout, but I’m going to make more money than them.”

In fact, many of Arianna’s pre-GTC friends don’t have jobs or even want them, choosing instead to panhandle. When they ask Arianna for a loan, she finds they don’t pay her back. “They think I’m rich because I have a job. I’m not rich,” she says. “I just work.”

Others speak of the positive impact Arianna has had on them, a ripple effect that is another benefit of GTC’s program. Her brother Abel, now employed fulltime in a warehouse, says, “Arianna motivates me to get up and go to work.” One of their younger sisters is now enrolled at UC Santa Barbara.

As her first year at the University of California approached, Arianna decided to add a second major in business administration because she sees it as more practical than her English major. A young woman clearly poised to step through the gateway to success, she is going once again for the gold.