

Still Rising: First Generation College Students a Decade Later

APM Reports Transcript

Mario Martinez: We would hear police every night. We would hear gunshots, we would hear people scream.

Emily Hanford: Mario Martinez was looking for a way out of poverty. So was Katy Sorto.

Katy Sorto: I'd say, "This is not enough."

Katy was cleaning offices noticing the diplomas on people's walls.

Sorto: They have money, they have like beautiful offices.

Hanford: So they seem to have a life that you want to have?

Sorto: Yes.

Back in 2008, Katy and Mario decided to go to college. We documented their first year.

Teacher: After you look at the purpose for writing the essay, I want you to look at the writing style.

Most students like Katy and Mario don't make it to graduation.

Brad Stewart: The odds in general are crappy.

Sorto: I'm starting from the bottom and I'm like 19 already.

Martinez: I didn't realize that I was in the perfect conditions to just live out a ton of statistics.

Today we tell you what happened with Mario and Katy. This is an APM Reports documentary, Still Rising: First Generation College Students a Decade Later, from American Public Media. First, this news.

Part 1

Emily Hanford: From American Public Media, this is an APM Reports documentary. I'm Emily Hanford. Ten years ago, I met Katy Sorto. She was 18 years old. She lived in Prince George's County, Maryland, a few miles outside of Washington, D.C. And she'd just graduated from high school.

Sorto: I didn't feel that proud graduating from high school. I mean I was because it's a big step – big, big step – but I didn't feel that much.

Katy knew she needed more than a high school diploma. She had a job in downtown D.C. cleaning offices at night at a law firm. The people who worked in those offices were rarely there – but their college degrees were on the walls. Katy imagined the lives they had.

Sorto: They have money, they have like beautiful offices, and I've been seeing pictures from their weddings, and it's beautiful. It's just, it's nice.

Hanford: So they seem to have a life that you want to have?

Sorto: Yes.

The way she was going to get herself from cleaning offices at night to working in an office during the day was by going to college. That's how Mario Martinez was going to move up, too. He was 19 when I met him – the same summer I met Katy. He didn't really know what kind of career he wanted; he just knew he wanted out of the circumstances he grew up in.

Martinez: We would hear police every night, we'd hear gunshots, we'd hear people scream, we'd see certain stuff in the neighborhood.

Mario grew up in a low-income neighborhood in Langley Park, Maryland. He got caught up in some bad stuff as a teenager and, when he was 16, he ended up in jail for seven months. But he was never tried for anything. All the charges were dropped. He got the idea he should go to college while he was working for a contractor, installing wood floors.

Martinez: We would go to a lot of big people's houses, like mansions. And I started asking a lot of them what they would do – like what was their career? They would tell me, you know, they got there because of school.

No one in Mario's family had been to college. No one in Katy's either. They were first-generation college students, betting that higher education would help them move up. For people who grow up in poverty, getting a college degree is the surest way out. But most students like Mario and Katy never make it through. Back in 2009, I made a documentary about their first year in college. Now, we're going to find out how that bet on higher education is working out for them.

[Music]

From APM Reports, this is Still Rising: First Generation College Students a Decade Later. Katy Sorto and Mario Martinez both went to Montgomery College, a community college in Maryland. In the first part of this program, I'm going to tell you a bit about their first year in school – and why they both faced long odds when it came to getting degrees. In the second part, we're going to find out what happened. Along the way, a couple of researchers are going to help us understand how Katy and Mario's experiences fit into the big picture in terms of what's going on in America when it comes to education, opportunity and moving up. And we're also going to hear from this guy.

Brad Stewart: My name is Brad Stewart and I'm the vice president and provost of Montgomery College's Takoma Park/Silver Spring campus.

This is Brad Stewart back in 2008. He told me he sees himself in the students at Montgomery College.

Stewart: My dad worked in a warehouse. The same place for 40 some years. And my mom did all kinds of other things including cleaning houses and stuff like that.

He grew up in rural Iowa in the 1960s and early '70s.

Stewart: Now I was fortunate enough back then to get into a four-year college with a financial aid package that made it affordable. Nowadays, that's a dicey proposition. Private colleges are difficult for students in my financial situation to afford and what Montgomery College does is fill that role.

Tuition and fees for a full-time student at Montgomery College were about \$4,000 a year.

Stewart: So it's possible for a student from limited financial means – a recent immigrant to this country, someone who comes from a poor family in an inner city area, to come to Montgomery College and get a chance at the American Dream.

And community college may be their only chance. Higher education is more important than it's ever been if you want a well-paying job. And while most college students from upper-income families go to the kinds of schools you see in movies – colleges with lush lawns and stately,

brick buildings – nearly half of all first-generation college students end up at two-year community colleges like this one.

[Sound]

The Montgomery College Takoma Park/Silver Spring campus is a collection of slightly worn-looking brown and tan cement buildings tucked between an affluent residential neighborhood in Maryland and a commercial area that extends into Washington, D.C. In the center of the campus, across from some train tracks, is the student center.

[Sound]

The student center is bright and modern. It was the newest and largest building on campus. The financial aid office was here, a cafe, the admissions office. But you don't apply to a community college in the traditional sense. There are no essays to write, you don't submit SAT scores and hope you get accepted. Most community colleges are open enrollment – everyone gets in. Half of all Hispanic college students in the United States start at a community college.

Sorto: Gracias, gracias.

That was Katy Sorto, buying a cup of coffee in the student center back in September of 2008. I was with her on her first day of classes at Montgomery College. We met up with one of her friends.

Navarrete: Oh, hi, my name is Thalia Navaratte. I'm 18 years old. Katy is my best friend and I've known her for five years. Yeah.

Hanford: So you guys know each other from high school?

Navarrete: Yeah, well...

Sorto and Navarrete: Middle school

Navarrete: 8th grade

[Music]

Thalia and Katy were nervous as they started college. They said their high school teachers hadn't expected much from them. They didn't think they were really ready for college. And they weren't, at least according to the placement tests they took when they enrolled here. Katy tested into an ESL class – that stands for English as a second language. She was born in the United States, but she lived in El Salvador for several years and then came back to this country when she was in middle school. And even though she went to American public schools for seven years, she ended up in the lowest level ESL class here. Katy would have to get through six more of these classes before she'd be eligible for an English class that counted for credit toward a college

degree. And she had to take remedial math too. More than 60 percent of community college students have to take remedial classes.

James Rosenbaum: In some ways, they aren't even in college yet.

This is James Rosenbaum. He's a sociologist at Northwestern University who studies community colleges. He says a lot of students don't even realize they're in remedial classes.

Rosenbaum: They're in college buildings, but they're in college buildings taking high school courses.

They're basically paying to do high school over again. Students from affluent, college-educated families are much less likely to end up in this situation. They go to better resourced high schools, their parents often pay for tutors and test prep. Mario Martinez tested into a remedial writing class. That's where I met him in the summer of 2008. But by his second semester at Montgomery College, he'd made it into a college-level English class.

Professor: After you look at the purpose for writing the essay, I want you to look at the writing style ...

It's pretty impressive that Mario made it to college English so fast. He hadn't even made it through tenth grade. Got kicked out of high school, got his GED when he was in jail.

Martinez: This is a difficult problem and some wise and compassionate people are working hard at it.

This was Mario in his English class back in 2008. He'd been called on to read aloud from one of the essays the class read for homework. Then he was supposed to identify where the writer stated the main idea. He was a bit off.

Professor: The actual main idea is a little farther down in that same paragraph and also in paragraph nine.

Mario's classmates ribbed him gently for not getting it right, and he smiled. He has this really big smile. Later, I asked Mario if he thought he needed what he was learning in this class.

Martinez: Oh yeah, I need it a lot.

He said he needed help with the basics, especially grammar. He told me he liked school when he was little. But by sixth grade, he was getting in trouble a lot, stopped paying attention. In college, he was beginning to feel good about school again. He'd been reading a lot – not just stuff for school, but self-help books, books about Christianity. He'd had started going to church about a year after he got out of jail. It was a big part of his life. One night I went with him to his Bible study class. The church was just down the street from Montgomery College.

[Sound]

We walked through a small, crowded sanctuary where people were praying loudly in Spanish. It was just after 7 p.m., people were still in their work clothes – many of them had been working construction or doing landscaping all day. Mario’s Bible study class was in a small classroom decorated with children’s drawings that said, “Jesus Loves You,” and, “Listen to your Teachers.”

Teacher: OK, Buenos, noches.

The class began with a prayer. Then the teacher led the students through a reading from the Book of Romans. Mario had a question about the Rapture.

Martinez: Tengo una pregunta Yo tengo una pregunta...

Teacher: ¿eh?

Martinez: ¿Ud dijo los judíos van a ser salvo en el rapto?

Later, Mario told me he thought God was the reason he was in college. Said he was lost until he started going to church and God put him on the right path.

[Music]

But there's this other thing that happened, too, when Mario was 16. It was a weekday morning. Mario's father had just dropped off his mom at work. She cleaned houses for a living. He worked construction. As Mario's dad was driving home, he was in a car accident. And he was killed. Mario's mom used his the life insurance money to get Mario and his brothers out of their violent neighborhood. She bought a small house in a middle-class neighborhood just three and a half miles away from where Mario grew up hearing gunshots.

Martinez: We moved to a neighborhood here in Silver Spring and it's quiet at night. It's – to me it was kind of creepy because I never slept in a quiet neighborhood so I couldn't sleep the first couple weeks.

Mario told me he had no idea other kids grew up *without* hearing gunshots at night. It was in the suburban calm of his new neighborhood that he actually started thinking about his future for the first time. For Mario, being in college was kind of like being in a foreign country. Here's how he described it to me.

Martinez: I mean I'm just walking around trying to catch things, like I'm on the learning mode right now, just see what I can learn. And then go from there.

Halfway through his first year at Montgomery College, Mario still had no idea what he was interested in, no idea what kind of career he wanted. But he felt like college was helping him figure it out. Katy Sorto was not feeling so good about college part way through her first year.

Sorto: ¿Que? Que voy a pasar. A la clase...

Katy was calling out to a classmate as she rushed across campus, on her way to get help from her writing professor.

Professor: Was it grammar you wanted to talk about?

Sorto: Yeah. It's like you can tell when I write, my writing, you can see all those mistakes.

[Music]

Katy was struggling. School was hard. She was still cleaning offices at night. And she was helping her mom out a lot, translating things for her, taking her younger siblings to appointments, going to their parent-teacher conferences. Katy has a younger sister and two younger brothers. And Katy was really worried about money, too. She had financial aid but something had gone wrong with some paperwork and she got a bill for \$800. Plus, there were all these other costs – transportation and books. Her aunt in Arizona said she was going to help Katy pay for books but she hadn't sent a check yet. Katy lived with her parents. Her mom ran a home day care; her dad worked construction. They couldn't afford to help Katy much with tuition.

Sorto: They just know I'm going to college and that's it. "Oh, great, I'm proud of you. Who's giving you the money?"

When Katy started at Montgomery College, she'd put makeup on in the morning, dress up a bit. But on this day, she had her long dark hair pulled back in a ponytail, no makeup, torn jeans and a sweatshirt on. She thought she was coming to Montgomery College for two years, then transferring to a university for two more years to get a bachelor's degree. But she recently realized that with all the ESL and remedial classes she had to complete, it was going to take her a lot longer.

Sorto: I don't know, I'm getting worried because I'm starting from the bottom and I'm like 19 already, and I think that I'm not going finish until I'm like 25, 27 I guess.

Katy's friend Thalia was feeling frustrated too.

Navarrete: You get your hopes up saying wow in two years I'm out, I can move on to another college, but it's all a lie. Yeah.

Hanford: Do you ever get frustrated and feel like you want to give up?

Navarrete: Almost every day. Yeah.

But Thalia and Katy said they couldn't quit. They would look around at what a lot of their friends and cousins were doing: having babies, living in tiny apartments, working at fast food restaurants and dollar stores. Going to college was Katy and Thalia's way to not live that life.

Navarrete: 'Cause either you go to college and you do something or you stay home and you help your mom and then until you like, your mom tells you, "OK you got to leave," and then you have to go find a man and stay in like a little room, like a basement, and have their baby and then, yeah.

Sorto: That's all your life.

Navarrete: That's your life. We don't want that for us, we want something better. Even though people, like, may say we're not going to make it and all this stuff. But, we try.

Hanford: Who says that to you, "Oh, you're not going to make it?"

Sorto, Navarrete: Family, friends.

Sorto: Everybody.

Navarrete: Yeah.

So what are the odds for students like Katy and Thalia – and Mario? They came to college looking for a way up. How likely is it they'll finish their degrees?

Brad Stewart: Well, um, the odds in general are crappy.

That's Brad Stewart, the provost at Montgomery College. More than a third of community college students quit by the end of their first year. Just 15 percent complete a bachelor's degree within six years – and the rates are even lower for black and Hispanic students. A lot of it goes back to the reason they're in college in the first place. They're looking for a way out of poverty. But poverty is a powerful foe – that's a line I stole from a book by James Rosenbaum, the sociologist from Northwestern. I asked him about that line.

Hanford: What are the stumbling blocks for students from poor families like Katy and Mario? Like what are the kinds of things that might stop students like them from getting degrees?

Rosenbaum: Ah, the list is too long for your show.

[Music]

He says it begins in childhood, with the neighborhood where you grow up. Mario doesn't think he'd be in college if his mom hadn't been able to buy that small house on the quiet street. The challenges for poor kids accumulate when they go to poor public schools, where they tend to get less experienced teachers and fewer opportunities to take advanced classes. When it's time to think about college, they don't have parents who can guide them, or pay for things like SAT test prep. Then when they get to college what they thought was a two- or a four-year degree might turn into five years or six or more, because they have to take remedial classes, or they can only

go to school part time because they have to work. And then if something happens – a parent gets sick, an aunt in Arizona can't help pay for books – everything can fall apart in an instant. When it comes to succeeding in school, kids end up on very different paths depending on their family income, says Prudence Carter. She's a dean at U.C. Berkeley who studies social and economic inequalities in schools. She uses this analogy:

Prudence Carter: There are some kids who are on escalators that are going up smoothly floor after floor. And then there are some kids who are on stairwells with missing handrails, broken steps.

And if you're on a stairwell with missing handrails and broken steps, you might not get to the top. Sixty percent of people who grow up in high-income families complete bachelor's degrees by the time they're 25. But if you're from a low-income family, your chances are only one in 10.

Hanford: Hey Mario, how are you?

Martinez: Fine. And you?

Hanford: I'm good, thanks.

It was the fall of 2009, just over a year after Mario had started college. I hadn't seen him for months. I'd been emailing asking for an update on how school was going – but only got back brief, polite messages saying he was busy. Finally, in late September, he invited me to his house.

Hanford: Should we just sit in here?

Martinez: Yeah

Hanford: OK

We sat down on the couch in the living room. Mario lived with his mom and two younger brothers in that same small suburban house they moved to after his dad died.

Hanford: So what's, like what's going on in your life right now?

Martinez: A lot, a lot.

Mario told me he was leaving Montgomery College. He'd just finished his first college-level math class and failed it. And he wasn't sure Montgomery College was the right place for him.

But he told me he had a plan. He was going to transfer to Liberty University. You might have heard of Liberty – it's a private Christian college founded by evangelical preacher Jerry Falwell. Liberty is expensive – sticker price more than four times what Montgomery College cost. But Liberty offered a degree in Christian counseling and Mario was thinking he wanted to do something like that.

Martinez: There's this program that comes on the FM radio, 105.1. And at 1 p.m. they have one hour of Christian counseling and people call and they present real situations.

And I was just thinking how the Latino culture – they enter into problems but they don't

know the solution, so they just find themselves stuck. And I was just thinking this is something that I really think we need. And it just came to my mind one day: if this is something we need, why not do it?

So that was Mario's plan. Move to Virginia and go to Liberty.

[Music]

Coming up after the break, we'll find out what happened. And what happened to Thalia and Katy, too.

You're listening to Still Rising: First Generation College Students a Decade Later from APM Reports. I'm Emily Hanford. You can hear the original documentary about Mario and Katy's first year in college at our website, APMReports.org. You can also find dozens of other stories about education and opportunity there – and on our podcast, Educate.

We'd love to hear from you. We're on Facebook and on Twitter – our handle is [@educatepodcast](https://twitter.com/educatepodcast). Write to us with a message for Katy or Mario or tell us your own story about being a first-generation college student. Our email address is contact@apmreports.org

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More in a minute.

This is APM. American Public Media.

Part 2

Emily Hanford: From APM Reports, this is Still Rising: First Generation College Students a Decade Later. I'm Emily Hanford.

Student 1: Emmet, did you drop the class?

Emmet: Yeah.

Student 1: Why?

I'm at Montgomery College. It's now the spring of 2018. And I'm with Katy Sorto. She's back visiting, ten years after she started college here. As we're walking across campus, we run into her friend Javier.

Sorto: (calling out to Javier)

He works in the maintenance department. Katy says when she was a student here, she often ate lunch with the guys in the maintenance department.

Sorto: Good to see you, too, Javier. Oh thank you, thank you. (giggle)

Katy has this lovely giggle. I remember she was always saying ‘hi’ to people when I was following her around with a microphone ten years ago. We’re on our way to the English department.

Hanford: Oh wow, it’s like totally redone.

Sorto: Yeah, it looks beautiful.

Hanford: Ahh.

The building’s gotten a complete makeover – new foyer, big windows. We walk into the English department office and working at the reception desk is Katy’s younger sister, Kimberly.

Hanford: Hi, you’re her sister?

Kimberly Sorto: How’s it going?

Katy Sorto: Good. We’re walking around. You have donuts?

Kimberly is a student at Montgomery College, following her older sister's example in more ways than one. Kimberly works as the student aide in the English department, same job Katy had when she was at Montgomery College. Katy was a student here for six years.

Sorto: Even my parents used to ask me when it was going to be over? You know because it's been so long.

It was finally over in the spring of 2014 when Katy graduated from Montgomery College with an associate degree in general studies.

[Music]

Six years is a long time to get a degree that was designed to take two. Why did it take Katy so long? One thing, she was determined to have no student debt, so she was often working two jobs and fitting in classes as she could. But a big reason it took six years is that she struggled academically. Failed several courses, had to take them again. Her teachers noticed.

Sorto: Professors kept bringing the suggestion that I might have a learning disability.

Because sometimes I had such a hard time, especially in math.

A full evaluation for a learning disability can cost thousands of dollars. But faculty and staff helped Katy find a nonprofit that would do the evaluation for free.

Sorto: And I took the test and there it was. Yes. I had a learning disability and I honestly wished I had taken that test before.

Hanford: Did anyone ever say in middle school or high school or anything, like, you might have learning disabilities?

Sorto: I wish they had, I wish they had.

But they didn't.

[Music]

Brad Stewart – who's still the provost here at Montgomery College – told me it's not uncommon for students from low-income families to get to college and have no idea they have a learning disability.

Brad Stewart: So if you're from an upper-middle-class family and you're a third grader and you're not doing well in reading, one of the things your parents are going to do is, "Oh maybe he's ADHD, maybe he's dyslexic."

They'll push for their kid to get tested, to get help. And many parents will pay for that help themselves if they have to – tutors, private school. Those weren't options for Katy. She was one of the students on the stairs, not the escalator. And the fact that she got no help for her learning

disability during her entire time in kindergarten through 12th grade is an example of how the steps are broken for some kids.

But with the diagnosis of a learning disability, Katy was able to get extra support and extra time on tests, and she kept going in college – year after year after year.

Hanford: And how come you never quit? How come you never said this is too much, forget it?

Sorto: You know, I thought about it many times. It came to me many times: “I just can't do this.” But you know, God had a plan for me because He always put someone in my path to push me, to tell me the words I needed to hear. You know.

People like Shelly Alves, Katy's supervisor when she was the student aide in the English department. We walk into Shelly's office and Shelly gives Katy a huge hug.

Shelly Alves: Oh you smell so good!

Sorto: So do you. (laughs) You smell better...

Alves: How are you?

Sorto: Good

When Katy wanted to quit, people like Shelly told her she couldn't.

Sorto: I had a lot of friends and I got to know a lot of people here. Janitors, security, everybody. So I had a lot of people cheering for me and I couldn't give up.

Hanford: Did you see other people give up? People here, friends?

Sorto: Oh yes. Most definitely. Many people just couldn't – you know they couldn't do it.

Hanford: Was it money? Was it time? Was it the stress? What was it?

Sorto: Money, time. They – they wanted, they wanted to get married you know.

[Music]

When getting a college degree is not a two or a four-year commitment but more like five years or six or more, it can start to cut into these key years in a young person's life, when there are other things they want or need to do too, like get married or start a family. Or maybe they already have a family. Nearly one in five female college students is a single mom. One of the findings from research on why students don't complete college is that when getting a degree is an epic journey, life events are more likely to get in the way. A baby is born, a parent dies. And sometimes it's just the stress of juggling it all – and paying the tuition. Katy made it despite the odds. But what about Thalia? Remember Katy's best friend? I reached out to Thalia several times. But I never heard back.

Hanford: What happened with Thalia?

Sorto: Well, Thalia, she's doing, she's doing great. She, she worked for a bank and she was very successful in what she did.

But she didn't finish college. Katy says it was money. She just couldn't afford it. Now Thalia is a stay-at-home mom. She has a little boy. And Katy and her partner do too.

Sorto: It was an “oops” to be an honest. Yes. It wasn't planned, but he's a blessing.

Getting pregnant almost derailed Katy's dream of completing a bachelor's degree. After she graduated from Montgomery College in 2014, she transferred to the University of Maryland, Baltimore County to work on a bachelor's degree in social work. She found out she was pregnant near the end of her second year there.

Sorto: So I told my mom I don't think I'm going to be able to do this and she said, no you have to finish. I'm going to be here to help you. You know, you have a good support system so you don't have to quit.

Her mom took care of the baby and last year – at the age of 27, nine years after she started college – Katy got a bachelor's degree in social work.

[Music]

She says her dad took the day off from work to come to her graduation – and that was a huge deal, because he never takes time off.

We're going to return to Katy's story in a bit – but first, what about Mario Martinez? When I last interviewed him back in 2009, he was about to withdraw from Montgomery College. And he had that plan to go to Liberty University.

Hanford: How are ya?

Martinez: Ah, I'm good, I'm good.

It's January of 2018, and I've arranged to meet up with Mario at Montgomery College. He looks pretty much the same way he did ten years ago – short dark hair, glasses, that big smile. He's 29 now – and I'm going to tell you the big news right away: Mario is in graduate school at the University of Maryland. When I caught up with him, he was working on a dual master's degree in business and social work.

Martinez: My focus in social work has been clinical behavioral health, one-on-one, primarily therapy and trauma.

He wants to be able to help people who grew up like he did. And the business degree is so he can do something like run a nonprofit or maybe do consulting. But the business degree has been a struggle because of all the math classes.

Martinez: Yeah, I don't – it was.... (laughs) math has been a challenge.

He says he failed multiple math classes in college. But he just kept retaking them, refused to quit. He went to Liberty University as planned. Didn't get enough financial aid to cover his tuition and living expenses, so he had to work – a lot.

Martinez: I washed dishes during the weekdays. And on the weekends, I'd work on farms. Digging holes, cutting trees, cutting grass.

He says he was always stressed about money.

Martinez: There were periods where I'd make a decision between – should I buy gas, buy food, pay my bill?

His cell phone got cut off a bunch of times. He had debt collectors calling him. He says sometimes he was at work 'til one in the morning, and then had to wake up at 5 to do schoolwork.

Hanford: Now your classmates at Liberty, or your friends there, were they working like that?

Martinez: No, many of them were not.

He says he hadn't really realized how poor he was until he went to Liberty, where he was exposed to a level of affluence he hadn't really known existed.

Martinez: (laughs) It was mind blowing. It was shocking. Ah...

Hanford: What was shocking?

Martinez: To see that people can have so much. I remember distinctly one person saying "I finally finished paying my car note and now the vehicle is mine." But I hadn't seen them work so I was thinking, "How in the world did you pay your car note?"

This student's parents had paid off the car loan. There were other examples.

Martinez: Traveling during vacations or school breaks. There was a notion that breaks meant they deserved, they worked hard enough to deserve a break.

His classmates would post pictures of themselves on the beach. But, for Mario, school breaks were just a chance to come home and pick up some days working construction, which paid better than farm work and washing dishes. It wasn't just money he was exposed to at Liberty. It was privilege.

Martinez: To see that people could think that that was what a normal life was and have expectation of what it will continue to be.

It was such a contrast from Montgomery College where it seemed like most of the students were like him – working several jobs, struggling to make ends meet.

Hanford: So suddenly you went to this world where you didn't really fit in?

Martinez: Yes, mmhmm.

Hanford: Did that ever make you feel like you didn't want to be there?

Martinez: Um, I wanted to be there. I didn't know so much if I felt that I belonged there.

[Music]

What Mario encountered at Liberty University is the class divide in American higher education. For the most part, kids from affluent families go to selective private colleges and the nation's top public universities. Low-income students go to community colleges and for-profits. A student from a wealthy family is 77 times more likely than a student from a poor family to go to one of America's most elite universities. Why should we care about this? Because research shows that low-income students' chances of moving up the economic ladder significantly improve as they attend more selective colleges. And that's why Mario went to college. To move up, do better than his parents, and ensure that if he has his own kids, they won't have to live in a neighborhood where they hear gunshots. By going to Liberty, Mario got a glimpse of how the affluent live. To be clear, Liberty is not one of America's most elite colleges. But it is a selective, private school where close to one in three students comes from the top 20 percent of family

income. And what Mario observed among his peers at Liberty is that money had not just afforded them cars and vacations, but entirely different life experiences.

Martinez: Going to Liberty, I was trying to figure out how people that didn't grow up in a rough neighborhood interacted with each other. And what I learned was that people are more open, they're more transparent, they're not afraid that somebody will come back and try to harm them.

Mario majored in psychology at Liberty – in part to better understand his own troubled childhood.

Martinez: Now I have a label or a concept or a theory to what we saw every day.

He says it helped, to learn about the ways that trauma – and poverty – affect children's development. Here's some of the stuff he learned.

Martinez: There are a lot of studies that show poverty also influences brain structure, grey matter in the brain, ability to think abstractly. Children have higher cortisol levels. Their amygdalas are flared up constantly, which shuts down the prefrontal cortex, which diminishes the ability to organize, structure, execute, planning.

Mario learned more basic things in college, too. Like grammar. When I first met him, his emails to me were full of missing apostrophes, misspelled words. His writing is so much better now. I told him that.

Martinez: (laughs) I hope so. I would hope so.

[Music]

I think Mario even laughs more than he used to.

One thing I was curious about is how college affected Mario's religious beliefs. Before our interview, Mario had told me he'd left his church. So, I asked him about that. He said that after graduating from college, he decided the church was too "conservative" for him. That's the word he used. He said the people who go to that church are mostly from rural villages in Central America, they have very traditional beliefs. He wanted to find a church where people were more like-minded. He said some of his ideas about God had changed. I asked for an example.

Martinez: I think this idea of provision. That God provides. I think that's the primary example.

Hanford: Like what do you mean?

Martinez: So what I saw differently, that people who grew up with parents who are educated or have money, if their car broke down, then they could pray about it and also

reach out to a parent. And there were instances where some students would have a new vehicle within the next week or month. If my car broke down, it would mean that I didn't have a vehicle anymore whether I prayed about it or not.

In other words, people with money don't need to pray to God for necessities. Mario believes he has a stronger relationship with God now because he's no longer looking to God for material things. That's what his college degree is for.

[Music]

Mario was at Liberty University for three years. He says he lived in constant fear that he would run out of money – or that his family would need him to come back home. His mom was still cleaning houses. His youngest brother became a father at the age of 16 – a little girl Mario adores. If anything happened to them, if they needed money, Mario would have to quit school and help them out. But, lucky for him, everything at home stayed okay and, in May of 2014, Mario graduated from Liberty University. Only about one in ten Hispanic males in the United States completes a bachelor's degree. I asked Mario if he sees himself as someone who beat the odds.

Martinez: Um, I don't know. I think I am more aware now than I was when I started and...

Hanford: Aware of what? How unlikely it was that you would succeed?

Martinez: Yes. I didn't realize that I was in – how do I put it? – I was in the perfect conditions to just live out a ton of statistics that would not lead to success. So I think a part of me is aware that I've gone against some odds and I think that's why it's felt difficult. But I'm not done yet. I still view myself as – I guess until I complete my graduate degree. Then I'm done with the odds.

[Music]

Mario is confident he'll finish graduate school. But since our interview, he's decided to stop pursuing the degree in social work and focus entirely on his MBA instead. It kind of came down to simple math. He doesn't think he can afford to do social work. He says he has a massive amount of student debt – he wasn't even willing to say how much – and while making a lot of money has never been one of Mario's main goals, he's going to need a pretty big paycheck to tackle his loans. Plus, he wants to be able to help his family. He'd like his mom to be able to retire from cleaning houses someday. And he wants to help his niece. She's five. Mario wants her to have opportunities he didn't have. For example, Mario told me that at one point in graduate school, he was in a math class, and he was lost on some stuff that everyone else seemed to understand. He remembers asking his classmates... did you learn this in high school? One classmate told him – yeah, in middle school, at math camp. His parents had paid for him to go to math camp. It was one of those mind-blowing moments when Mario realized what a divide there was between his life experience and the life experience of so many of his classmates. He wants to be able to send his niece to math camp.

[Mario]

When Mario and Katy started college 10 years ago, they were betting that higher education would help them move up. They didn't quite know what that meant or where college would take them, but – when Mario was installing wood floors in those mansions and Katy was cleaning offices at night, they got a glimpse of life in another world, a world it seemed they could be part of if they got college degrees. Now they have college degrees. So I wanted to know – do they feel like they've moved up? The term I used when I asked the question was “social class.” Here's me asking Mario.

Hanford: Do you feel like you're already in a different social class than you were?

Martinez: Based on current income? No. (laughs) I am way below the federal poverty guideline right now...

He was making less than \$600 a month as a graduate assistant.

Hanford: Okay, but still, are you in a different social class?

Martinez: Social? (breath) Oh, I guess, I guess so, yes, um...

The idea of being in a different social class makes Mario a bit uncomfortable.

Martinez: I cannot view a person that lives in quote unquote “lower social class” as less because I have people like my mom in my life who still cleans houses. Um, so when I am on campus and somebody is cleaning the bathrooms, they’re still a valuable person. There’s no way I can view them as less. So yeah, I plan on, I intend to and I’m working towards moving up social class. But I don’t believe that people that are in lower social class are any less of a human being or any less valuable.

Hanford: Are you saying that in part because you get an impression that sort of more society-wide there is that problem, that as people move up social class they look down on those quote “below” them?

Martinez: Yes. It’s like, I think people in a higher social class may for instance find it offensive to do something tedious, below their paygrade, like clean a bathroom. It’ll be almost offensive. That’s what they have their workers for.

[Music]

When I asked Katy if getting a college degree had changed her social class, she hesitated a bit too.

Sorto: Maybe, a certain extent. But, I’m not working at this moment, so I don’t know where, what place I might be in the social status right now.

Katy's been staying home with her son since she graduated from college. Her partner owns a home remodeling business and she says he makes good money. They recently bought a house. Katy would like to be a guidance counselor someday. She did an internship at a high school when she was in college. But – like a lot of women who can afford to stay home when their kids are little – Katy's feeling a bit lost about how to get back into the work world.

Sorto: It's not possible that I'm going to stay home forever. I have to do something with the gift you gave me.

The you she's referring to is God.

Sorto: Cause I'm pretty sure you didn't push me this far with my education knowing that I hated writing papers and the math, and not do anything with it, you know?

Katy says when she was in college, social class came up a lot. Professors would ask students what social class they thought they were in and Katy would say "upper-low class."

[Music]

If she were answering now, she says she'd probably say she's moved up. But she's not sure social class is really about how much money people make.

Sorto: I think many people, they go based on your race more than your money. Maybe because they look – you’re Hispanic, you might not have much. Or you’re Asian, you might have a lot.

Katy recognizes that no matter how much money or education she has, many people will still judge her first and foremost by her brown skin and her light accent. And ironically, though she is better off financially than she was growing up, it’s not because of her college degree. It’s because of her partner’s successful business – and he doesn’t have a degree. For all the ways that Katy was longing for the kind of life she imagined those lawyers were living while she was cleaning their offices, she looks back now on her own childhood and thinks she had it all.

Sorto: Maybe I just ate beans and rice and eggs all week long. But I still had food on my plate. And I had a loving family. I had great neighbors.

Her family didn’t have a lot of money, but her life was good. She’s not looking to move up and away from that. That doesn’t mean she regrets all that time she spent in college. The opposite. She is grateful for her college education.

Sorto: I learned so much. Oh my God, I learned so much. Everything. Life, books. I learned a lot about everything (laughs).

One of the things she learned is how important it is for kids to get a good education starting young. Her little boy is two and she's already thinking about where he'll go to kindergarten. She says she's planning on having just one child so if she has to pay for her son to get tutoring or go to private school, she can.

Sorto: I hope he doesn't have the difficulties I had in school. But I'm gonna try my best to give him the best education I can. So in the future we don't say, oh we didn't give him the best. Or what did we do wrong?

She wants to make sure there are no broken steps for her son. So he can go to college if that's what he wants. But if wants to skip college and take over his dad's business, that's fine with her too.

[Music]

I wanted to know what Brad Stewart thought of Katy and Mario's stories. As I mentioned earlier, he's still the provost at Montgomery College. I sat down with him again a few months ago. I told him that Katy and Mario had both gotten their bachelor's degrees, that they'd beaten what he referred to as "crappy" odds. And then I asked him what he thought of that narrative – beating the odds? He paused for a moment, and then said this.

Stewart: The narrative makes me sad because there are so many kids who didn't make it. Unfortunately, there's this little – match up with the American Dream, that if you try hard, work really hard and stuff like this, no matter how high the deck is stacked against you, you'll eventually succeed. That's not true.

In fact, he says completing college when you're from a low-income family often seems to require some luck. Like in Mario's story. His father dying wasn't lucky – but that's how his family got out of their violent neighborhood, and Mario doesn't think he would've ended up in college if he hadn't gotten out of there. Also, everything stayed okay with his family while he was at Liberty, he didn't have to come home and help them out. That's luck – or God – depending on how you see it. Brad Stewart sees it as luck.

Stewart: There's an old phrase about – it's better to be lucky than good. And Mario, I think, is probably lucky and good. But there are too many students who aren't lucky and aren't given the resources to be that good.

I went back to talk to James Rosenbaum, too – the sociologist from Northwestern. He told me completing college when you're a person from a poor family does often include a disturbing element of random luck. And he says Mario was really lucky to get out of that violent neighborhood.

Rosenbaum: I have studied people who moved from low-income neighborhoods to middle-class neighborhoods and the remarkable change of environment is just amazing. And the children that I studied, they discovered that they had abilities they didn't know they had and their mothers didn't know they had. So moving away from that is just life changing.

[Music]

None of this talk about luck is to dismiss the hard work it took for Katy and Mario to complete their college degrees. The point is that hard work isn't enough. You need things to break your way and you need people to prop you up and help you out – like all those people at Montgomery College telling Katy she couldn't quit, and her mom who swooped in to take care of the baby so she could finish her bachelor's degree. Having a bachelor's degree is a powerful thing. On average, people from low-income backgrounds who complete bachelor's degrees increase their career earnings by 71 percent. They make hundreds of thousands of dollars more in their lifetimes than people from low-income backgrounds who complete only high school. And while Katy hasn't yet figured out how to use her degree to build a career, the fact that she went to college has probably changed the lifepath for her son. I asked Mario how he thought higher education had changed him.

Martinez: Higher education is – that's a good question. How has it changed me? Right now, higher education still exposes me to what can be. And gives me, somewhat, a sense

of hope. I think I've held on to hope for a long time. So being in higher education helps me see that things are becoming possible.

And then I asked Mario what he thinks his life would be like now if he hadn't ended up at Montgomery College 10 years ago.

Hanford: Like if you hadn't gone to college where do you think you'd be now at the age of 29?

Martinez: I, I, umm – I need, umm...

Hanford: You need a moment?

Martinez: Yes. Yes. Yes, for that one yes.

He collected himself. And then said this.

Martinez: First, I think definitely if I hadn't gone, I'd most likely be in prison. I'd be in prison or I would have ended up handicapped, injured...

Hanford: You mean, from being shot or something?

Martinez: Yeah, I think so. I think shot or stabbed. I have friends who were shot and stabbed. So that wasn't something out of the norm. So, I think it would have only made sense that that would have happened to me. Now, also, if I hadn't gone to college and those extremes wouldn't have happened to me, then I think I would've been working construction. So, I'd either be locked in a cell, injured, dead or the only other thing that I

knew at that time was working construction. So, I'd probably be in the construction, working outside right now, in the construction industry. So, college, although I don't think it's the only means to success, I view it as the method I've wanted to take, that I want to sustain. And I'm aware there are people who can be successful outside of an education, I just want to have those degrees. It's like a personal, self-fulfillment, achievement thing that I want to have for myself.

[Music]

Last time I was in touch with Mario, he was in India doing an internship as part of his MBA program. He's hoping to finish that degree in about a year.

You've been listening to an APM Reports documentary, *Still Rising: First Generation College Students a Decade Later*. It was produced by me, Emily Hanford and edited by Catherine Winter. Our web editors are Andy Kruse and Dave Mann. Mixing by Chris Julin and Corey Schreppel. Our research and production fellow is Emerald O'Brien. Fact-checking by Betsy Towner Levine. Special thanks to Liz Lyon. The APM Reports team includes Alex Baumhardt, Sasha Aslanian, Stephen Smith and Editor-in-Chief Chris Worthington. Our theme music is composed by Gary Meister.

We have more about this program on our website. You can see photos of Katy and Mario – then and now – and listen to the documentary about their first year in college. It’s all at APMReports.org.

While you’re there you can subscribe to our podcast, Educate. We focus on education, opportunity and how people learn – with a new episode every two weeks.

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