

SUCCESS STORY

Escape to Hope: Juan's Journey to a New Land

Los Angeles Unified School District | California

When Juan entered America at the age of 16, he expected his uncle to be waiting for him. With his papers in order, he had no reason to believe his journey toward a good education and a successful future would be so difficult. But from the moment Juan approached the immigration officials, nothing went as expected. Juan was held in custody by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) until his uncle could prove Juan's identity and fulfill other requirements for his release.

Having left his home, his family and friends, and the only community he had ever known, Juan was terrified at his situation. Terrified that he may be sent back-back to a grave fate.



Just months before, Juan's brother was murdered by gang members in his home country. His brother's fatal mistake was not joining the gang and refusing to give in to their extortion demands. Juan vowed to keep his brother's convictions but his relatives recognized that in doing so, Juan had signed his own death warrant. Fearing the same fate as his beloved brother, Juan's relatives managed to obtain a visa for him. Now he was sitting in a cell, terrified he would be sent back to face the gangs.

Traumatized by his brother's death, detained by the INS and unable to speak English, 16-year-old Juan was deeply relieved when, in a few days, his uncle managed his release. His uncle brought him to the Immigrant Student Guidance Assessment and Placement Center for enrollment in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). LAUSD is a partner of *Caring Across Communities*, a program supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to increase and improve mental health services for children. This partnership provided just the assistance that Juan needed.

At the Immigrant Center, Juan's uncle obtained help filling out the necessary forms while Juan received a general health screening. A Spanish-speaking social worker in the program interviewed Juan and his uncle to identify what he would need to be successful in high school. Juan was referred to the Newcomer Program at Belmont High and received follow-up visits from the Center's school psychologist.

Now, two years later, Juan is a junior at Belmont and on his way toward high school graduation. He has received ongoing assistance from LAUSD and has voluntarily



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participated in a counseling program offered at the school. The program has been especially helpful as Juan deals with his grief over his brother's death and his own feelings of fear. In his group, he has also been able to meet and connect with other young people who have experienced trauma.

Each day Juan is a little less anxious and has begun to feel a little more at home in Los Angeles. As his language skills improved, he has expanded his circle of friends and is beginning to find ways to give back to his new community. "I still miss my brother and my parents," Juan says. "But I am glad to be here and to be in school. Not all the youth in my situation get this kind of help. I am lucky."

Young people like Juan need good mental health care to grow and prosper. You can learn more about *Caring Across Communities*, the program that is creating lasting change for Juan and others like him, at www.healthinschools.org.

To learn how *Caring Across Communities* is helping immigrant and refugee students succeed, please visit www.rwjf.org/newsroom/product.jsp?id=60828.

For more information about the Los Angeles Unified School District, contact Pia Escudero at pia.escudero@lausd.net.

About the Center for Health and Health Care in Schools

The Center for Health and Health Care in Schools (CHHCS) is a nonpartisan resource center at The George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services. CHHCS links educators and health professionals to the information essential to building effective school health programs; testing new school-connected strategies to achieve better health outcomes for children; and promoting awareness of successful new directions in school health programming.

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