

Caring Adults Steered Me to My Cause

How I went from disengaged teen to adult on a mission.

By Antonio Dominguez

Antonio Dominguez entered high school “disengaged and directionless,” as he puts it, but emerged as a community leader. Now 24, he directs programs at a youth-serving organization in California, serves on the national Ready by 21 Leadership Council and plans a lifetime of working to improve young lives.

How does an unfocused teenager transform into a young man on a social mission? The key was caring adults who gave Antonio support and opportunities. Those of us who know Antonio have been inspired by his story. We challenged him to tell you that story in under 1,000 words; he does that here.



Antonio Dominguez

My story begins at home.

I come from a low-income, Hispanic background. When I was 4, my parents took me and my younger sister away from the crime-stricken streets of Lemon Grove (a small city in southern California) to El Dorado County, located in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. I grew up in an isolated rural area near Sacramento known as the Georgetown Divide. I spent a lot of time working with my father: repairing our house, cutting down trees and fixing cars.

By the eighth grade I knew a lot about hard labor, but little about math, science and English. I was another victim of the achievement gap in education.

The Divide has one high school: Golden Sierra High, home of the Grizzlies. Like most of my classmates, I didn't really know who I was or where my path in life would lead. But unlike most of them, I knew almost nothing about college. I didn't understand that high school could be a path to college, I didn't know anything about any particular college and I didn't realize I had the potential to go to college. My parents didn't graduate from high school. Very few of my relatives did. No one in my family had even attended a community college. For the first two years of high school, I did not understand why we had counselors, or AP and honors classes.

I had one thing going for me: I was friendly and empathetic. In my sophomore year, the school gave the students a survey asking us to name individuals we could rely on – individuals who help others and care about the well-being of other people. Many of my classmates listed me. So at the start of my junior year, I was one of 30 students chosen for a class that trained us to be peer mentors.

That class proved to be a turning point for me. Every school day, I looked forward to reaching out to other kids. I mentored over 60 freshman and sophomore students. Some liked to talk about their weekend activities, while others revealed deep emotions. I realized that peer mentoring was something many people needed. I loved helping people.

But I got more out of mentoring than good feelings. I did better in school and I stood out to adults. Some faculty members had joined a group of local leaders who were starting to implement Ready by 21 – a set of strategies developed by the Forum for Youth Investment to help communities work together to get all their young people “ready for college, work and life.” A teacher invited me to participate in a community meeting to kick-start the initiative.

At that meeting I served on a youth panel to discuss how the community could help local young people succeed. To my surprise, the adults took my words seriously. I no longer felt like just a student or a kid. I was a valued member of the community.



Spreading Wings

The Ready by 21 participants formed coalition groups to examine specific areas of need. My coalition, which was run largely by youth, focused on helping middle schoolers transition to high school. We collected data through interviews, surveys and focus groups with students, teachers and parents, then created a presentation of our findings for the public. We built new partnerships and wrote grant proposals to fund new programs.

These experiences fueled my ambitions to work with young people. After high school, I enrolled in community college and was hired by local schools to run workshops with students about tobacco and drug prevention. I also worked at a Boys & Girls Club as a youth development professional, and later became the teen services director.

Then came another turning point: In 2009, I was asked to serve on the board of directors of a new nonprofit – [Georgetown Divide Ready by 21 Inc.](#), which was set up to coordinate efforts to improve and expand services and supports for local young people. I started as vice president, and became president the following year. There I was at age 19, managing a board of distinguished and significantly older community leaders. I facilitated our meetings and helped regulate the distribution of work.

This was a rewarding and unforgettable experience for me. I decided I would work to do great things for the world, great things for youth.

To reach that goal, I'm earning degrees in Cognitive Science and Education at the University of California-Davis. And last year, the Forum for Youth Investment (which created Ready by 21) asked me to serve on its [Ready by 21 Leadership Council](#), to champion its efforts to improve conditions for children and youth in communities around the country. The other council members include politicians, CEOs of large youth-serving organizations and people with three times as much youth development experience as I have. I am living a dream, serving as a champion for youth development.

I also follow that dream as program director for a Boys & Girls Club in a rough neighborhood in Vacaville, Calif. Much of my work focuses on helping the most at-risk and disadvantaged youth, and assessing and readjusting our programs to ensure the highest quality.

I was once a disadvantaged youth who didn't have much of a future. But I was passionate and I was good at a few things. The trigger for my success was meaningful relationships with adults outside of my family. These adults showed me the way to college, and offered support and opportunities that I could not get anywhere else.

There are millions of young people with backgrounds similar to mine. If I improve any of their lives, it will be a reflection of the care and attention shown to me by the adults in my hometown.

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