

## GINA: Drop Out Risk to Doctoral Student

Communities In Schools of Miami  
Behavioral Interventions

*When Gina was in the 8th grade, she was told that the local high school would not accept her as a student due to her behavior and grades. She was referred to an alternative CIS school that helps at-risk kids graduate.*



The principal looked across her desk and saw the anxiety on Gina's mother's face and the familiar, defiant look of a teenager who didn't want anyone's "help." Gina and her mom were there to interview for a place at the alternative school for at-risk kids, and it was not going well.

The principal lifted Gina's large file and began thumbing through the stack of papers detailing years of incidents on her record: suspensions, failing grades, and frequent absences. The suspensions and instability at home created a vicious cycle that led Gina to act out more and more.

The alternative school was designed to support kids like Gina. Communities In Schools site coordinators became mentors and counselors to guide the at-risk teens towards better choices, and ultimately, graduation.

But getting into the school wasn't a guarantee. "To be honest, Gina," the principal explained, "we don't usually accept students who have been so disruptive. We're a 'choice' school, and that means kids who come here really want to be here. I can see that you have much more potential than you're letting on, however, and I have a good feeling about you. I think you'll do well here if you try – my question is, will you?"

Gina couldn't remember the last time someone told her she had potential. Slowly, she nodded. Maybe this place would be different.

Gina was nervous on her first day. She put on her trademark "tough girl" attitude and for months, refused to engage with staff. The administration needed a way in so Annie, a CIS site coordinator, stepped forward and was introduced to Gina as someone who could help with her Spanish homework. Soon, however, it became clear that Annie was much more than a tutor.

“I heard you were acting out in English class today,” Annie said one afternoon. They were in a quiet classroom looking over Gina’s homework. The teen shrugged. “So?”

“So... I think you’re better than that. I also heard you’re a good writer and I know you're smart. Your teacher really knows his stuff; give it a chance.”

Gina shrugged again in response, but Annie’s words stuck. She didn’t talk to Gina the way most adults did; there was no judgement or reprimand in her voice. It was one of the first moments to chip away at Gina’s tough exterior. Slowly but surely, Annie, along with the caring CIS staff and teachers, helped Gina open up. She improved her grades and found a passion for writing. By the end of her sophomore year, Gina let her guard down and bonded with people at school.

Trouble at home still took a toll, and junior year was a roller-coaster of ups and downs. Gina could still be hot-headed, but she leaned on Annie and other staff for support. She confided in them and let her frustration boil over in a safe place. Eventually though, her old, rebellious ways got the best of her and Gina dropped out.

Unwilling to give up, the staff made every effort to encourage her to come back. Believing the promise that no matter what happened, none of them would ever give up on her, Gina returned to school where she was welcomed with open arms.

Months of hard work later, she was ready to graduate.

Tears flowed freely at the commencement ceremony as teachers and the entire CIS staff came to watch Gina walk proudly across the stage to accept her diploma and become a high school graduate.

That was Gina’s first graduation. She has since earned her undergraduate and her Master’s degrees in social work. She also joined the Board of Directors of CIS of Miami and volunteers at the local school. Her passion for writing fueled another dream: Gina was accepted as a doctoral candidate in 2015 and will study health disparities among at-risk youth this fall with plans to earn a PhD in social work.

Today, Gina is a shining example of what is possible with the caring support of Communities In Schools. Thanks to a principal seeing her potential and the unwavering support of adults like Annie, Gina found within herself the courage and resiliency to succeed.

*September 2015*