

UNC senior aims to help others reach college

By Marissa Peterson
Durham VOICE

"I wish I would have had someone to help me out from the very beginning, [starting] freshman year. [Someone] to tell me the importance of a higher education," Symone Morales said, thinking back on her journey to college.

Morales is a Durham native, born and raised in the Bull City. She has lived all over the area, with addresses on Hardee Street, Broad Street and Foxfire Road, just to name a few. Now a 21-year-old senior at UNC-Chapel Hill, she has plans to help other young students begin their paths toward higher education.

Having a father in prison and a mother diagnosed with a mental disorder, Morales was able to avoid foster care and has been raised by her grandmother since age 10.

Morales' Own Path

Although Morales recalls that going to college was a popular option for most students at her high school, it was not the decision chosen by everyone. "It's a majority white population; people's parents have money and push them to make sure their college education is on track," she said.

"My grandma has never been to college, no one in my family has gone to college and I had a teacher who took me under her wing...and am grateful for that now," she said.

Morales credits the ability to further her education to one of her teachers at Riverside High School.

The teacher helped Morales with college applications, filled out her FASFA forms and actively encouraged her to continue her education after high school.

Morales' grandmother was also part of her motivation to pursue a college education.

"Me and my grandmother had a rough relationship, and I was like, 'I cannot live in her house,' so my only other option was to go to college," she said.

But before even thinking about college, Morales's desire to get out of the house helped jumpstart her path toward higher education.

"I just didn't like to go home. I did



Symone Morales, a senior at UNC-Chapel Hill, has dreams of helping high schoolers pursue higher education. Morales, who will be the first person from her family to graduate from college, had a high school teacher who strongly encouraged her to go to university.

everything I could just to be at school and not be at home: dance, band, cheerleading, track," Morales recalls.

"And by default those things helped on my resume. I didn't know that stuff was helping me until it came time to apply for college. I was fortunate enough to have that happen. A lot of people don't know and don't do anything until senior year when it's almost too late," she said.

Morales received the Carolina Covenant, a four-year scholarship for low-income students that allows her to graduate debt-free if she works for a federal work-study job. She works as a Residential Adviser and as a public relations and program assistant in the Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History.

A Plan for the Future

With her college graduation just weeks away, Morales is patiently waiting to be the first person from her family to turn the collegiate tassel. She will be graduating with a double major in sociology and African American studies as well as a minor in social economic justice.

After graduation, Morales hopes to use her knowledge and experience to help underprivileged students find

resources to apply for college. She said she would not be where she is today without the help of her high school teacher.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, nearly 25 percent of low-income students who score in the top quartile on standardized tests never attend college. As a student who was included in this 25 percent pool, Morales wants to decrease this number by getting more low-income students the opportunity to further their education.

Morales hopes to work for the National College Advising Corps, where she will be able to work directly with high school students to motivate and help them apply for college. She hopes that working alongside the students will make an even stronger impact on their lives than her teacher made on her.

Ultimately Morales wants to make a big change in the amount of low-income students who apply for college. She aims to change at least one student's life and lead them on the important path toward furthering their education.