

From College to Homelessness

My name is Kaelys Garcia. I am 24 years old, and currently I live in CT. I was born and raised in PR until I was 20. In September 2017, two major hurricanes hit Puerto Rico. When the hurricanes happened, I was a junior in college to become a teacher, and I also worked as a student worker. I was going through some major identity issues which were causing a lot of problems between me and my mom. For most of the people in PR the storm was a tragedy, but for me I took it as an opportunity to finally leave the toxic home environment that I was living in.

A month after the hurricane a lot of universities in the USA were offering free tuition for the victims. When I got internet connection, I saw an announcement for the Airbridge program. At first it was difficult to convince my mom to let me go, but she finally agreed, and within 2 days I was in Connecticut. Central State Connecticut University was my new home for at least two years.

Now that I remember I was kind of in a survival/shock state. I was so tired because I barely rested the night before I arrived, but to be quite honest since the hurricane I didn't have a good sleep. At night in Puerto Rico the only things I could hear at night were the power generators and coquis.

When I first arrived at CCSU I had a lot of mixed feelings. I was excited and had so many dreams, and was so happy to be free from the toxic home environment that I was in. I was also feeling anxious, depressed, and overwhelmed by everything and everyone. Everything was happening so fast and my mind was all over the place. Everyone at CCSU was trying to be nice, but I was feeling overwhelmed and was in survival mode after leaving from the hurricanes in PR and the trauma it caused. I was dealing with a culture shock, in this new place experiencing 50 degree cold weather, with new people who spoke predominantly English, which I was not used to.

The Airbridge program offered one month of worry-free from tuition and food. Donors also bought us warm clothes for the winter, and goodies for our dorms. While in the program, we were not thinking about the long term future. We were just trying to get through the semester, and winter. I think because it was an emergency thing it wasn't as organized as it should've been. I knew that we had a wellness center but didn't know they had therapy services (maybe I missed that), but I think that should've been a #1 priority after what we went through. After the first semester I don't think we had the same help as in the beginning. I think the support we had before should've stayed in till the day we graduated by the organizer.

With time I stopped communicating with the people who created the Airbridge program. I felt like there were preferences towards other students. This is when my issues actually started, when I started having less support from the Airbridge program, because I was more on my own. During this time, I lived between the dorms and my cousin's house. I really wanted to get a car but I was a full time student and my work and school schedules were conflicting. I was running out of savings, but I had to quit because I just couldn't keep both the work and classes. A month

after I quit I was offered a student worker position at Equity & Inclusion department. I started working there but just for a little amount of hours.

My finances were really bad and that's when I started to see how lonely I was. I didn't want to lose hope so I just kept working my 8 hours a week, applied for food stamps, and continued living at the dorms. Luckily, I was able to get a car, but with the little money that I was receiving from my part time work I was barely able to pay my insurance and gas. I was so focused on surviving that I wasn't paying attention to my mental health. Like mentioned before I got very distant from the Airbridge program. I didn't have anyone advising me to use the therapy resource that CCSU offered. During my senior year I was so exhausted mentally because I knew once I graduated I didn't have a place to go, and I was also recently kicked out from my friend's house. I wanted help so I went to the wellness center and started going to therapy. My therapist referred me to an external psychiatrist because of PTSD symptoms and also because I was about to graduate and as an alumni I didn't qualify to keep going to school therapy.

There was so much going on during my senior year that at some point I made the decision to call 211 to see if there were any shelters available, but I really hated it. I hated myself, I felt like such a loser because I worked so hard for my bachelor's degree just to end up homeless. I felt like such a failure to my family but at the same time I was grateful that finally my cat and I had a place to stay, eat, sleep, and have basic necessities. Since graduating from college, I have been living in shelter. While I have been there I have gone through many jobs, but issues came up that affected my health and wellbeing, which made it so that I could not continue with the job. I finally have a job, and am saving money, but apartments are so expensive, and it is hard to think about how I am going to be able to afford the home that I want in the market that I am living in. I went to school, I work hard, and I save my money, but I am still not able to move into my own home. I feel like the system failed me in so many ways.

College could've helped me better if they prepared me on what to expect after graduating. I think they only focused on getting me out of college and completing classes and they failed to help me prepare for the future especially after the hurricane. If they ever make another program like this they should have some classes or workshops on how to manage finances. Of course I am grateful for the help I received, but I also feel like the program organizer needed to take more action for the students who came after the storm in Puerto Rico. At least following up on the people who stayed after the program ended. I graduated on time thanks to other connections I personally made and because my professors were flexible due to my situation. College should prepare student for when another pandemic hit, or a natural disaster. That way students have a better foundation for the future.