

**Faces of Miami-Dade County Public High Schools:  
An Intimate Perspective on the Struggle for Education  
(A Series)**

**Article III: Jimmy Miller Beats the Odds**

Keep a low profile. The INS (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service) might find you. Go to school and study hard, but remember you could be deported and lose it all. Don't walk home. The neighborhood is not safe. Take out the garbage, and do your homework. Your parents won't be home from work until dark.

Growing up, this was Jimmy Miller's reality.

In 1989, Jimmy Roberto Miller, 6, and his family fled to the United States from Nicaragua to escape civil war, and his parents filed for asylum. Then-President Bill Clinton's Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act in the late 1990s granted the Millers permanent stay in the U.S. and green cards so they could work.

The Millers, in a sense, already had American ancestry. Jimmy's grandfather, a railroad engineer from Kentucky, traveled to Nicaragua when the national railroad lines were being built there, Jimmy explains. He met and married Jimmy's grandmother, and they stayed in Nicaragua.

Jimmy became a U.S. citizen in early September 2007. His story is one of resolve and hard work, of knowing how to push yourself to succeed when there is no one there to hold your hand.

Jimmy is now 24. Despite all his hard work and challenges, he never seems tired. He jokes and laughs often. His brown eyes shine with relief from behind his glasses as he shares everything he's been through to obtain an education. He speaks with confidence and a youthful wisdom.

When Jimmy's family first arrived in the United States, they settled in Allapattah, a low-income, primarily African American community in Miami. During their first years in the states, the Miller family, parents Rosa Payan and Jimmy Miller Molina Sr., and sisters Maritza and Wendy Miller, lived in a duplex with an uncle. A few years later, they were able to rent their own place.

Jimmy attended Allapattah Elementary School, where he struggled to learn English. By the time he was in the fourth grade, though, Jimmy had made significant gains. He was now nearly fluent.

But when he reached the sixth grade at Allapattah Middle School, Jimmy began to encounter problems at school and in the neighborhood.

He remembers the school as a mix of about 70 percent Black students and 30 percent Latinos.

Both Allapattah Elementary School and Allapattah Middle School are located in a very poor area. Even back in the 1990s, the people who lived there considered it an unsafe neighborhood, beset by gangs and other problems, Jimmy says.

Sometimes Jimmy would miss the bus home from school and have to walk. He always made it a point to walk with friends. Walking alone put him at risk of getting into a fight, he explains, and then he'd get in trouble with his parents for having taken that chance.

Jimmy also recalls being harassed during school rituals – like being pelted with eggs on Halloween. The egging ritual revealed the conflicts between different social cliques at school, Jimmy explains, usually the popular kids against the less popular ones.

And then there was “cracker day.” Jimmy was often a target of the latter.

“It was basically whoever was light skinned, and in my case, I would be considered a cracker,” he says.

“Cracker day” started early in the morning on the day before classes ended for the school year. The kids who arrived early to school, as Jimmy did, would hang out in the PE field until class began, he explains.

“On that specific day, someone would come up to you, pick on you, something stupid like, ‘Hey, you stepped on my shoe. Get down and clean it,’” he says. “If you didn’t get down and do it, you’d get jumped right there. That happened to me a few times.”

Jimmy can laugh about “cracker day” now, but back then, it was scary.

Growing up, Jimmy often had to look out for himself in Allapattah. His mother worked two jobs, one as a cashier at a local supermarket, and the second as a bank teller for Brinks Corporation. His father worked until six or seven in the evening repairing air conditioners.

Payan, who still speaks only Spanish, recalls the difficulty of those years.

“When I arrived here, it was quite a strong task with three kids,” she says in Spanish. “There began the fight.”

Between the two jobs, Payan earned an estimated \$8,000 annually, while Roberto brought in about \$12,000, for an annual household income of about \$20,000 to support two adults and three children in an expensive city like Miami.

Jimmy and his sisters were accustomed to taking care of themselves from a very early age. He remembers being alone with his sisters often from the time he was 9, Martitza 12 and Wendy 10. Jimmy was in charge of the garbage and the lawn. Maritza

and Wendy were expected to make dinner each night. The eldest, Maritza, was also in charge of making sure Jimmy and Wendy did their homework and washed up before bed.

Although Jimmy's parents never had the time to spend with their children or the English to help them with school work, they always stressed education.

"From me, they always knew that they had to study," Payan says in Spanish. "We were in this country now, and they had to find a way to get ahead. There was a barrier. The language was a fairly large factor when we arrived, and I never had much time to help them."

Although his parents always kept track of report cards and demanded nothing less than As and Bs, their involvement was never really enough for Jimmy. Given the hours they worked, there just wasn't any time for that.

"I think the hardest thing educationally and even in my growing up was not having a parent who has the time to sit with you and kind of talk to you a little more about discipline and about commitment to getting something done," Jimmy says, a sad expression on his face. "My parents weren't really there to hold my hand and put me in a baseball team or some type of activity where I constantly challenged myself. They would check on us periodically, but it wasn't ever the hands-on where I felt like my mom had a genuine interest in what I was doing."

On the other hand, Jimmy says he understands that his parents realistically only had time to put a roof over their heads and food in their stomachs. He knows that reality came at a hefty price.

"I think that my sisters and myself, we lost a lot of guidance that you need from a parent because you are stuck having to pay the bills," Jimmy says. "I never got to go to

Disney with my parents. You need some time with your parents to get to know them and for them to get to know you.”

When it came time for Maritza to enter high school in 1993, Jimmy’s parents were concerned about her attending Miami Jackson Senior High School. Several family members had told the Millers that this school was unsafe and not academically challenging.

“It was during that time when Jackson had a drive-by shooting, and one girl was killed, and one ended up being paralyzed,” Jimmy says. “My parents got it into their minds that they were not going to send their kids to Jackson Senior High.”

Luckily, a new technical school, William H. Turner Technical Arts High School, was opening that year in a safer part of town, several blocks away. (Although Turner is currently a C school in Miami-Dade County, at the time – and still today – it was an improvement over Jackson.)

Not every one could attend Turner Tech, however. There was and still is an application and screening process through which selected students are granted admission based on certain criteria. These include no less than a C average in academics and conduct and a proven record of achievement throughout middle school.

Jimmy recalls that Turner Tech had a strict no-fighting policy. Violators risked immediately being kicked out of the school and sent to their home schools, which in his case would have been Miami Jackson. No one was willing to risk that.

Maritza applied and was accepted. Wendy and Jimmy followed suit when it was their turn to enter high school.

Unfortunately, his home life had changed by this time. Their parents' relationship had begun to deteriorate. They were constantly fighting, he recalls.

Jimmy slowly started to lose interest in school. He was still keeping decent grades, but his mind was not focused on getting to college or thinking about the future. He began internalizing his problems at home, he explains. Soon, this spilled over into his academic interests.

"To see your parents separate, it kind of changes your paradigm," Jimmy says. "It throws you in a whirlwind."

He remembers the climactic moment in the demise of his parents' marriage. They already had separated, and Payan and the three kids had already moved out to a smaller house. One night, Jimmy Sr. came over and wanted to come in the house. When Payan would not let Jimmy Sr. come in the house, he threatened to set the car on fire, and the family was forced to call the police.

Soon after, Molina decided he would move back to Nicaragua. Jimmy has never seen him again.

"I was like 15," Jimmy said. "My parents ended things, and he didn't like the system. He's a Nicaraguan patriot. He felt his opportunities were better in Nicaragua, so he went back to his home country."

Jimmy had already been tremendously affected by the conflict between his parents. His father's departure multiplied the effects.

"I think that during that time, I really grew up by like five years," he says.

Jimmy's interests in high school now turned to more socially oriented ones.

In 1998, Payan opened up her own restaurant in the neighborhood, using money she had saved through frugal living; shopping at K-mart, Payless and a small inexpensive grocery store, La Mia Supermarket. She had good credit and the help of her new partner, Juan Mendez. She called it Puertonica Cafeteria.

The business gave Jimmy easy access to a steady supply of alcohol for him and his friends. Every week, he took cases of beer from the cafeteria. They always went unnoticed. Fortunately, his drinking habits did not reach any destructive level, he explains.

During his junior year in the finance academy at Turner Tech (because Turner is a technical school, students are all part of a specific career academy), Jimmy took an internship in the operations office of Continental National Bank. With easy access to alcohol and some extra money in his pockets, Jimmy spent a lot of his time partying, taking girls out on dates, and just having a good time. He was still managing to maintain decent grades at school.

“I don’t know that I was college-bound when I graduated from high school,” Jimmy says. “I don’t think that when I finished I was an expert at anything.”

Although Turner Tech was created with the intention of providing a specialized environment where students are trained in specific areas in order to be considered experts at the end of the four years and then be able to enter the job market, Jimmy explains, the training was not very technically advanced.

Despite the training available at the school, Jimmy believes it was not reasonable to expect a high school freshman to choose the career he or she would pursue in the long

run. The structure of the school, he believes, was not rigorous enough to prepare students to compete successfully as freshmen at the university level.

During his time there, Jimmy also felt that he and his fellow students were receiving mixed messages. Part of the administration was lobbying against the introduction of honors-level courses into the curriculum, while the other part was urging their inclusion.

“I think there’s a disparity there in goals, and it leaves a lot of students under-prepared,” he says. “I think that’s the biggest downside to Turner.”

With problems at home and confusing guidance at school, Jimmy’s head was still not focused on going to college. He had received a 970 out of a possible 1,600 on the SAT and felt no college would take him, even if he wanted to attend.

One counselor at Turner urged Jimmy to try community college first. She suggested this would help ease him into higher education and also would allow him to get a feel for it before he decided to give up on college for good.

Jimmy took the College Placement Test (CPT), applied to the honors college at Miami-Dade College and was accepted. His 3.4 high school grade point average qualified him for the Academic Achievement Award, a scholarship that would cover all of his tuition for the two years at Miami-Dade.

In addition, Jimmy also received the Fanny Mae Futures 500 Scholarship, which amounted to about \$2,500 for the two years.

With his school funds set, Jimmy now began to take his education more seriously. He started to feel he had a real chance to do something with his life.



At Miami-Dade, Jimmy quickly found guidance. He had been successful in the finance academy at Turner Tech and decided to major in accounting. He began acing the accounting courses and knew this would be the field for him.

With this new sense of accomplishment, Jimmy began to get more involved in his school work and in the college. He became a student ambassador for the college, giving tours to potential students. He also became involved in student government.

“I guess I surrounded myself with a lot of good students and enough personnel in the college to motivate me,” he says.

In 2002, when it was time for Jimmy to transfer to a university, he decided to apply to the University of Central Florida in Orlando, Florida International University in Miami and the University of Florida in Gainesville.

He was granted acceptance into the University of Florida and decided he would take the opportunity to have a more complete college experience away from home. The question was, how would he pay for it all? Jimmy turned to scholarships once more.

He was fortunate enough to receive a \$5,000 award through the Hispanic Scholarship Fund and the Coca-Cola Foundation. A second award from the USA Access Fund for \$2,000 a year, and a handsome financial aid package from UF sealed the deal. Jimmy was off to Gainesville to finish his undergraduate career in accounting.

In addition to the scholarship money, Jimmy worked different jobs to fund extra-curricular activities and entertainment. First, he worked as a desk assistant at the dorms and later as an office assistant at the Institute of Hispanic/Latino Cultures on campus.

Arriving at UF was shocking to Jimmy in several ways, he says. Sitting in his first class at the university, he listened to some of the students' backgrounds and

achievements. They talked about their homes, their schools and the lavish trips they had taken during the summer. Immediately, he felt different, disadvantaged.

Jimmy felt that many of the students had received more training than he had, especially in literature and math. He felt a general disadvantage in most areas compared to the students sitting beside him.

“I don’t ever remember being that worked in high school,” Jimmy says.

His financial situation also made him different from a lot of his classmates. He believed that many of their accomplishments stemmed from having parents who had the time to guide them and encourage them to participate in many different activities, something his parents had never had time to do.

Jimmy instantly realized that he would have to learn to discipline himself in order to catch up and stay afloat in this new, more rigorous environment. He spent countless hours glued to his accounting and taxation books.

In December of 2004, Jimmy proudly walked across the stage to receive his bachelor’s in accounting from UF. He would be the first in his family to receive such an honor. Both of his sisters had gone to college, but neither had graduated.

For the next year, Jimmy took a job at Braman Management in Miami, but it was not long before he would start to hunger for more education. He knew a master’s degree would give him that extra edge he would need in his field.

In Spring 2006, Jimmy enrolled in Florida International University’s master’s of science program in taxation. He graduated in August.

After all of the hard work and perseverance, Jimmy is now finally content with his position in life. With his education out of the way, he now spends his time studying

for his state license test to become a certified public accountant in Miami. He is also working part time in the Miami-Dade County finance department.

He lives in a charming townhouse in Miami Gardens, a relatively higher income area than Allapattah, with his mother, stepfather and fiancée, Monica Hernandez.

In his old neighborhood, Jimmy recalls having the family car broken into four times. Their house was also broken into once. The streets were dirty, and there was poor public lighting, he says. Walking around the neighborhood alone was never a good idea. The houses were older, and no one took care of their lawns. There was garbage everywhere, he remembers with disgust.

His new neighborhood is clean, Jimmy says. It is a gated community where the neighbors are friendly, you can take a jog at midnight without feeling unsafe, and there is a big, clean community pool for everyone to enjoy. The new townhouse in Miami Gardens is bigger and sturdier than his old house in Allapattah. It was built in the mid '90s while the old house was built in the '30s. It is clean and attractive, he says. The old house was dirty and run-down.

Payan sold the cafeteria in 2006. She had been suffering from dermatitis in her hands due to all the cleaning chemicals she worked with and decided it was time to take a long-awaited break. Now 56 years old, she is living off her savings for the time being.

Through painstaking work, dedication and commitment, Jimmy and his family have progressed nicely from their days in Allapattah, he says, beaming.

Jimmy recently signed a contract with Kaufman, Rossin & Co., an accounting firm in Miami. He will begin working there in the spring of 2008 after he takes his CPA exam. He says he is ready to conquer the next stages in his life.

“I’m very proud,” he says excitedly. “I’m very thankful that things worked out the way they did. I acknowledge my parents’ efforts, life’s events. I also acknowledge that I put a lot of work into it.”

Payan is also proud of her son and his accomplishments.

“I feel good because I know that my kids have gotten ahead because of my efforts and their own efforts,” she says in Spanish.

Now that he’s in a position to help others who may be trying to conquer some of the same hurdles he overcame, Jimmy can smile. He has become the go-to guy in the family for younger cousins and relatives trying to go on to higher education and succeed despite obstacles similar to those he faced.

Jimmy knows the hardships that accompany succeeding in life when you come from a low-income, immigrant family, urban schools and rough neighborhoods. But he also knows that it’s possible to rise above the obstacles and the statistics to become something different.

Payan remains convinced that, as tough as it was, she made the right decisions for her family.

“I think that this country is hard, but with effort and pushing that your child go forward, forward, it can be achieved,” she says in Spanish. “Yes. It can be achieved.”

Jimmy advises teenagers who might find themselves in some of his past situations to set a goal for themselves and know that they are capable of accomplishing that goal.

“When you set yourself a goal, you just have to envision what it is that you want to do,” he says confidently. “Then take some time to ask people or just go to the library. Get on Google and type ‘I want to be a...’ and then read about it. You could be dirt

broke. You could come from a poor family. It's a matter of going out of your own space and really talking to people at school, and remember that this is a country where grades are important. It should always be your first priority to be educated."

If a guidance counselor doesn't give you the time of day, he says, go to a teacher. There's got to be a teacher out there who will listen to you and point you in the right direction, he insists.

"You always have to keep your eyes on the prize," he says. "As a student, you always have to remember, if you want something, work at it. It's going to cost you, you're not going to like it, it's going to be uncomfortable, but if that's what you want, you can always do it."