

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

**Article V:
Jessica Rodriguez:
Still Struggling Against the Odds**

Jessica Rodriguez is a 23-year-old mother of three. Her children: 47-year-old Marlene Rodriguez, 24-year-old Nelson Rodriguez and 19-year-old Robert Rodriguez.

Since she was very young, Jessica has had to take on the role of parent, filling out lunch applications for school, Department of Children and Families applications and any other forms that needed to be filled out. Her mother, Marlene, did not know English and could not fill out the forms. She had come to the United States from Cuba in 1980, but with three kids and no father to help, she had never had the time to learn the language.

Today, Jessica remains, in many ways, the head of her household. As the only driver in the house, she often has to drive her mother to doctor's appointments and the store, and take her little brother, Robert, to court every time he has a hearing for some mischief he's caused on the streets.

School loans and the income from her job at Walgreens' often makes Jessica the provider of household items such as food or medicine when her mother's government aid money runs out.

Jessica's family expects so much of her, but she rarely hears a "thank you." Still, she's the only one in her family to make it out of the poverty she grew up in. She has cleared road block after road block to get to where she is now, in her third year of pharmacy school at Nova Southeastern University in Ft. Lauderdale, Fla. where she boasts a 3.5 grade point average.

Despite her difficult life, Jessica is a happy and vibrant young woman. She thrives on her productivity and accomplishments. At 5'3", she's a slim woman with dark olive-colored skin and long, brown hair that sways down to the middle of her back. She doesn't take herself very seriously, even when she speaks of the serious situations in her life. She speaks softly but assertively and often laughs at herself.

She didn't have an easy time growing up. Her father was gone, and her stepfather brought drugs and strange rituals into her home. Her home life included grave financial instability (living off of government benefits), one handicapped brother and a dangerously rebellious one, and practically no home support for education among other factors. But despite these challenges, Jessica has managed to stay focused on school and create a viable future for herself. It's not that bad, she says with an outrageous calm.

Jessica was born in Hialeah, Fla., a working-class, largely immigrant community in Miami-Dade County. The relationship between her parents, Marlene Rodriguez and Nelson Valdivia, was always on-again, off-again, leaving her with only rare instances of a normal home life.

Until she was 6, Jessica lived in a one-bedroom apartment with two great grandparents, her mother and two brothers.

"My older brother slept with my great-grandmother in her bed," she says. "My great-grandfather slept in his own bed, and I slept in the living room with my mother. She slept on the sofa, and I slept on the floor."

Robert, her younger brother, was still a baby then. He slept in his playpen.

When she was 6, the family moved out into their own one-bedroom apartment. Now they all slept together in one room. Her father was never around, and Jessica remembers he'd only call once in a while.

"He hardly didn't even call for birthdays or Christmas," she says sadly.

Soon Marlene and Nelson were over for good. She met someone new, Ray, and he moved in.

Ray didn't have a job. He was in a band he had put together and often practiced in the house.

"They sang old songs like 'Lady in Red,'" Jessica says with a giggle. "He was the singer in the group."

The family had already been surviving on welfare benefits, a Section 8 housing allowance and the Social Security benefits Marlene received for Nelson, who had been born paralyzed from the waist down. Marlene could not work because she had to take care of Nelson, who had to use a wheelchair. Although he attended school for half of the day, she had to be there when he got home because he could not get into the house without her help. She also had to periodically change him, as he could not use the bathroom on his own.

With Ray not working, he added only one more mouth to feed, with no additional income coming in. Even so, the family soon managed to move into a two-bedroom apartment so that the couple could have a room of their own. They did this by claiming to the Section 8 housing authorities that Marlene and the children each needed their privacy. Thus, they were granted an apartment with two rooms, one for Marlene and one for the children. They didn't mention Ray on the lease.

Jessica did not get along with her stepfather, whose restrictions kept her from doing a lot of things, like having friends over or going to their houses, talking on the phone and sometimes watching TV, and she didn't like that. He was not her father, and she was a good kid, she says. He always said she was sneaky, though she never understood why.

In spite of his shortcomings, Jessica admits that Ray brought some much-needed discipline into her family. Nelson and Robert especially needed it, she says, and they grew to respect Ray, even though his disciplinary methods were often strange.

"When he would punish us, like if we would do something bad, he would make us stand against the wall and write lines," Jessica says, laughing. "He would make us write out sentences saying, 'I will not do this or I will not do that.'"

When Jessica was 11 and her brothers were 12 and 7, she recalls, Ray became very religious, to the point that he practically made the apartment into a church. Jessica and her brothers would pray and have Sunday school in their home each week. They sang songs, and Ray woke them up early before school so he could test them on Bible versus.

Ray was religious by day. By night, he used drugs. He still wasn't working, so he was always asking Marlene for money. Someone had to pay for his habit.

"My mom should have never allowed that in the house," Jessica says with a frustrated look.

Still, she recognizes that Ray was not all bad. He disciplined Nelson and Robert, and when Robert had an epileptic seizure in 1995, Ray took him to the hospital and took care of him.

“But he wasn’t a good provider, and my brothers didn’t really know about the whole drug thing,” she says. “I was the only one that knew.”

In late 1995, Marlene had finally had enough. She ended the relationship with Ray and asked him to leave the house. Jessica was glad to see him go.

By that time, Jessica was in the sixth grade at Twin Lakes Elementary School in Hialeah. She was always a decent student, despite little involvement from her mother. Marlene never pushed the three children to study or do their homework, Jessica says. She never went to the school’s open house meetings. All she asked was that they behave.

Fortunately, Jessica didn’t need her mother to push her. She was responsible on her own, having realized that she would have to succeed in school if she didn’t want her life to end up like her mother’s.

Later, at Palm Springs Middle School, Jessica also excelled. She was already taking honors classes in the eighth grade. She was on the honor roll and actually was somewhat surprised at her own progress, given the lack of home support.

When she was about 12, Jessica met 18-year-old Yosvani, and he became her boyfriend. There was no father figure in the house to forbid the relationship, and Jessica’s mother did not attempt to interfere. Despite the significant age difference, Yosvani was good to Jessica and her family, she says.

“He would help me a lot,” Jessica says with a smile. “He would take me to places because my mom did not drive, and we didn’t have a car. He helped out in the house. He helped my mom buy food, and he would buy me clothes for school.”

Jessica and Yosvani dated for the next six years. He taught her how to drive. He helped her find a decent car when she was 16. He would fix the car if it broke down. He

continued to help with household expenses. Over the years, Yosvani became the man in all of their lives.

When Jessica turned 18, Yosvani cheated on her with another woman. Although she forgave him once, he continued to cheat on her repeatedly. She decided it was time to let go of the love that had shaped her life for so long, that Yosvani no longer fit into her life. He did not speak English and had little education, and he often felt uncomfortable around her friends. Jessica was beginning to need more.

At 14, Jessica had moved on to Hialeah Miami Lakes Senior High School, currently an F school in Miami-Dade County. There she continued to take honors classes, and in her junior and senior years, she took four advanced placement classes as well. Even though she was taking “advanced” classes, there was nothing challenging about her classes, she remembers, a fact that would affect her later in her studies.

At 15, Jessica started her first job at a pharmacy around the corner from her house. Section 8 Housing had now allowed the family to move into a three-bedroom house, with one room for Jessica, one for Marlene and one for the two brothers.

Universal Arts Pharmacy was within walking distance from the house, only a block away, and the job paid \$5.50 per hour. It was perfect.

Jessica worked there for about a year and a half and saved up enough money to buy her first car. It was the year 2000, and she was 16. With Yosvani’s guidance, she bought a green 1994 Camero.

At 16, she felt like an adult. She had bought the car. She was paying for the insurance. She was on top of the world, she says.

“Since I started working, I never needed anybody to buy anything for me,” Jessica says proudly. “I bought my own clothes. I paid for my own insurance. I paid for everything that I wanted and I needed.”

When she was 17, Jessica took a different job with the Vitamin Shoppe in Hialeah. It paid more, \$7 an hour, and she needed the extra cash.

Jessica graduated in the top 10 percent of her class at Hialeah Miami Lakes Senior High. Her work in pharmacies led her to choose pharmacy as a career.

But pharmacy school requires a lot of prerequisites, Jessica explains. Attending Miami-Dade College was the cheapest way to get them done.

Jessica received the Florida Bright Futures Scholarship and financial aid from Miami-Dade College. She continued to work 30-40 hours per week at the Vitamin Shoppe while taking a 15-credit course load.

Jessica had no one to hold her hand through the process. Her mother had never finished school in Cuba, and neither had her father. Her brothers were not spectacular students either. What she wasn't taught at school, she had to figure out on her own.

In Spring 2005, she was admitted to the pharmacy program at Nova Southeastern University. She has had to take out loans to finance her studies, so by the time she graduates, she will owe more than \$120,000.

At Miami-Dade College, Jessica rarely felt at a disadvantage compared to her classmates. When she arrived at Nova, however, the differences between her educational background and that of her classmates hit her.

Jessica did not know as much as the others in her science and math courses at Nova. Most of her classmates had gone to better high schools, and some had entered the

university immediately after high school instead of attending community college. They were better prepared for the challenges of upper-level classes at Nova. They seemed to have more discipline to study for long periods of time. But Jessica, who had never had to study much to do well in high school or at Miami-Dade, in order to do well. Jessica was used to getting by with cramming for a test the night before.

Still, she has managed to do well at Nova with a 3.5 GPA by studying long hours and staying focused. With the help of study groups, Jessica was quickly able to catch up to her classmates and began to do well in some of her toughest subjects, such as organic chemistry.

Now in her third year of pharmacy school, Jessica is still dealing with many of the obstacles she grew up with – and some new ones.

Her younger brother, Robert, started getting into trouble when he entered the ninth grade at Hialeah Miami Lakes Senior High in 2003. He began hanging out with the wrong people and doing the wrong things, Jessica says. He was soon kicked out of the high school and placed in an alternative night school program. That didn't work either.

“My brother [Robert] would come home from school and leave to his friend's house and not come home until like 10 p.m.,” Jessica says. “This was, like, before he was 15.”

She remembers having to pick him up from school one day because he had gotten into trouble. While she was there, Jessica ran into her old accounting teacher, Novella Jones. She told Jessica that conditions at the school had changed for the worse. The students were not the same, she told Jessica. None of them cared about school, she said. They came to school just to hang out with their friends.

“They were walking around, and there was really no ambition,” Jessica says.

She is not sure if things were any different when she was there. Maybe she was oblivious to it because her honors classes and like-minded friends kept her in a different world.

She’s not sure if the teachers have lost interest or if the students have lost the motivation to learn. She does know that what she saw at Hialeah Miami Lakes Senior that day was sad -- students yelling at each other across the halls, not interested in attending their classes, bad manners, disrespect towards teachers and administrators, and a complete lack of purpose.

Maybe the school had something to do with what has happened to Robert, she says, or maybe their mother did not discipline him enough.

Robert is now 19. He’s involved with drugs and gangs. He doesn’t work. He doesn’t go to school. He never even finished the ninth grade. He steals from his own family to feed his drug habit, to drink with his friends and waste away into the late hours of the night.

Nelson is not involved in any of these activities. He graduated from high school in 2002, at the same time as Jessica, because he had lost nearly a year of school after a fractured leg kept him in the hospital for a month. He went on to Miami-Dade College after graduation, but he gave up after one semester. Now he makes a living selling lollipops at a quarter a piece outside Winn Dixie.

“The situation with my brother [Robert] is one of the biggest obstacles and the biggest problems going on in my house,” Jessica explains with a sigh.

Because Robert doesn't work, he's always asking for money. He starts crying, saying he'll be beaten up if he doesn't pay his debts, she says. When the family refuses to give him money, he screams, he punches the walls. Then he steals.

"He's taken money from us," Jessica says with dismay. "He's taken jewelry from us. He stole a radio from my mother. He stole my laptop."

Jessica had purchased that laptop on a credit card and was slowly paying it off. She needs it for school.

"I felt hurt, angry," she says sorrowfully. "I couldn't believe my brother did this to me."

Through the years, Jessica says, she has tried to help her brother. She has tried to talk to him. She has given him money so he wouldn't get killed on the streets for his debts. He's been on probation. He's been in rehab programs. Nothing has worked.

The situation at home affects Jessica in school, at work, in every waking moment. It's tearing her family apart, she says. They live in fear of what Robert might do and of what others may do to him. They are afraid he will be killed or that he will hurt one of them during one of his drug-induced fits. They don't want his friends in the house because they are afraid they might steal something or carry weapons into the house.

One day Robert might not come home. One day he might be killed. The rest of his family lives with their bedroom doors locked at all times. Absolutely nothing must be left out in the open. If it is, he'll take it.

Older brother Nelson was recently diagnosed with diabetes. He's overweight and has high cholesterol. He gets little exercise. He worries about Robert, and that affects his health even more.

Jessica worries that something will happen to Nelson, too. Every day, one more worry, one more nagging thought in her mind.

Nelson now has a nurse, paid for by a federal government program, and Marlene was able to get a job as a cashier at a T.J. Maxx. She still doesn't drive, so Jessica often has to take her to work and pick her up. Marlene mostly gets the night shifts and doesn't get out until midnight on most nights. When Jessica has a test or an early class the next day, it's tough on her.

Despite all of her problems, despite all of the challenges, Jessica says she has always been grateful for what she has. She knows there are others who have less.

"Yeah, I wish I had mommy and daddy to pay for all of my stuff, and I wish I could have my mom and dad buy me a brand new car, but I was happy with what I had, and I've always been happy with what I have," she says humbly.

Jessica recalls seeing classmates go to school with their new clothes and expensive Nike shoes. For her, celebrating birthdays at MacDonald's was a big deal. There were no family vacations like the ones she heard her friends talk about at school. There were no luxuries. Her first trip to Disney World was for Grad Night during her senior year of high school. Still, she's had boyfriends who have taken her on a few nice vacations and given her the opportunity to see nice things. She is thankful for that.

In high school, most of the other students had a cell phone. Jessica wasn't able to get one until she was 18, and she could afford it on her own.

She did have a computer while she was in high school, but only because Yosvani bought it for her. She paid for the Internet service herself. Before that, Jessica had done

her school work at friends' houses or at the library, squeezing in the time between school and her job.

Jessica will graduate from pharmacy school in May 2009: Dr. Jessica Rodriguez. She can't believe it's so close. Through all of the obstacles and the difficult classes, she often thought she might not make it.

"I feel good," she says, beaming. "I feel accomplished. I feel like I'm reaching one of my highest goals in life, and I can't wait."

Jessica is excited about the future. She knows she will be able to give her children a far better life than her mother was able to give her. Nevertheless, she believes her mother is someone to be admired. Marlene raised the three kids on her own, dealing with health problems, money issues and bad behavior. Yet, Jessica never lacked love. She never went hungry, she says.

Jessica advises others struggling to stay afloat in an environment full of pain and failure to stay focused and set goals. Learn from the mistakes your parents have made, she says.

"Never see yourself as a victim of the situations because you're not," she says boldly. "Everybody has the same potential. No one is stupid."

It's all about the decisions you make, she explains. There are sacrifices involved. Making sure you do everything you need to do for school is the key, she says. If that means giving up a party or going out on some night, then that's what you've got to do. It's your future, she insists.

"You have to have the initiative to figure things out if you don't have someone there telling you, 'This is what you have to do. You have to go through here, through

here, through here,”” Jessica says. “You have to go about your own way to figure out how it is that it has to get done.”

“If you do that,” she says, “then you’ll make it as far as you want.”