

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

**Article IV:  
Mily Cristina Raudales:  
The Lucky One**

At 9 years old, a young girl's world is falling apart around her. Her parents will not stop yelling. They fight about money all the time. After the divorce, they fight over her custody for two years. The family trips have ceased. It's just her and her mother now. She is doing OK, she says.

Mily Cristina Raudales, 17, lives in a plain little house in Allapattah, a low-income, primarily African American community in Miami, Fla. She is a laid-back teenager. A 5'2, chubby girl with shoulder length, straight, black hair, glasses, and a voice so soft, she can barely be heard at times, Cristy, as she prefers to be called, is full of spunk. She speaks with a quiet confidence and relaxation, despite the obstacles she's faced throughout her young life.

Cristy's story is one of quiet determination. Through her parents' messy divorce, low-income, bad neighborhoods and rowdy schools, she has managed to stay on track and work towards an education. With the support of her parents, siblings and teachers, she has slowly risen above the failure that surrounds her neighborhood and resisted the temptation to become a statistic. Cristy teaches us that although our personal lives and our surroundings at school or where we live can often become chaotic, it is possible to maintain the calm within and still succeed.

Cristy lives with her mother, Mily Madrid, 50. She has two older half brothers, Danny and Carlos, 30 and 31. Danny is in the Army in Texas, and Carlos, a Marine,

lives in California. Cristy's older half-sister, Aura, 26, is in law school in Michigan. Cristy's father, Jose Roberto Raudales, left home when she was 9.

Cristy's mother works at home, sewing clothes from a little back room in their house and selling them to manufacturing companies in town. She immigrated to the U.S. from Honduras in 1987 and knows no English. She makes about \$13,000 annually.

Cristy says her mother is moody, stressed out about money and lonely. Cristy, the only one left at home, often gets the brunt of her mother's frustrations. She gets yelled at constantly, sometimes for no reason, Cristy says with frustration.

Raudales is an engineer at Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami. He had studied engineering in Honduras and worked through a six month certificate program in Miami to receive an engineering license that would allow him to practice in the United States.

Raudales makes a decent salary, but he has a live-in girlfriend and her son to take care of. He helps his former stepdaughter, Aura, with her law school expenses.

Still, Cristy says, her father does a lot for her. He provides her with the things her mother cannot provide such as a computer to do her homework on and an iPod, money for clothes and tickets to her favorite sporting events. He also tries to stay in constant communication with his daughter, even if he can't always be right there with her.

"As a parent, one has the responsibility, and if you are conscious of that responsibility, it doesn't matter where or how you are," Raudales says in Spanish.

Cristy remembers one time her eighth-grade classmates were getting ready to take their class trip to Islands of Adventure in Orlando. Cristy had her heart set on going because this might be the last time she saw many of her friends. After eighth grade, many were going to different high schools.

The trip cost \$80, and Cristy's mother just didn't have it. Raudales was in Puerto Rico at the time and could not pay for the trip either.

"I remember that day I was in my room all day," Cristy says sadly. "They [her classmates] left on a Friday after lunch, and I would go to my classes, and no one was there."

Madrid tried to cheer Cristy up by offering to take her out somewhere, but Cristy was too upset to indulge her mother's efforts.

"It broke my heart that I didn't have it to give to her," Madrid says in Spanish. "When Jose left, there was just a lot more things I needed to pay for than I could keep up with on the money I make from sewing."

As a child, Cristy recalls living in a happy home with her mother, father and three half-siblings. Her mother had come from Honduras with Danny, Carlos and Aura. She met Raudales in the United States, and they had Cristy in 1990.

Cristy remembers trips to Disney World every summer, birthday outings, the mall every weekend and going to the movies often. When she was 9 and her father moved out, that all changed.

Madrid and Raudales had been fighting constantly.

"I can't remember a time when they didn't fight," Cristy says, the sad memory apparent in her eyes. "That's why I got asthma the first time because anytime they'd fight I would cry uncontrollably."

Raudales would hit the walls, she recalls. Every year when summer time rolled around and school let out, Cristy would have another asthma attack. She knew she would have more time at home to listen to the fighting.

The defining moment in Madrid and Raudales's relationship came one morning in 1999 when Cristy and Aura were getting ready for school. Her parents were yelling and yelling, she says. Cristy locked herself in the closet to escape the noise.

"I was in the closet crying, and he came in and he's like, 'Why are you crying? Why are you crying?'" she says teary-eyed at the memory. "And he just said something like 'Why do you think Aura never calls me daddy?'"

Cristy had not known that her siblings were not her father's children. She had no idea that her sister was not really her sister, that her brothers were not really her brothers.

"I remember I didn't go to school that day, and we went looking for houses," Cristy says, "because she [her mother] wanted to move out. He apologized, but it was still hard."

For the first couple of years after the break-up, Raudales did not pay the child support he was obligated to provide for Cristy. Madrid finally took him to court, and he was forced to pay. Next, a custody battle ensued over Cristy. After a long and painful battle, Madrid won.

After the divorce, there were no more weekend trips, no more family outings. Danny and Carlos left for the military as soon as they graduated from high school. Aura left to college soon after. A full, blissful house had quickly become a quiet and sad place.

Cristy now found herself dealing with different boyfriends and girlfriends. Her parents were dating again. When Madrid had a boyfriend, Raudales would demand that Cristy not speak to him. Raudales then often had girlfriends who would hang up the phone when Cristy called to talk to her father.

When Raudales first left the house, Cristy was attending Comstock Elementary School in Miami. She remembers the school's location was not considered a good area. It was close by to her house. There were a lot of fights, she says.

When it came time for Cristy to go to middle school, one of her teachers recommended she attend the magnet program at Ponce De Leon Middle School instead of Allapattah Middle, the school for which she was zoned.

Ponce De Leon Middle School is in Coral Gables, Fla., a higher-income area considered to be generally safer than where Cristy lived. Still, Cristy remembers a lot of problems at this school.

“One time they made us stay after school because a girl took speed in the cafeteria,” she says with a crooked smile. “The ambulance was there, and they didn’t want us to find out what was going on, but we eventually found out.”

Cristy’s now studying engineering in a magnet program at Miami Coral Park Senior High School, a C school in Miami-Dade County.

There’s plenty of trouble at her high school, too. Cristy says three students recently were arrested at Miami Coral Park for having a gun on school grounds. It ended up being a fake gun, but the situation was scary nonetheless.

Late last year, Cristy remembers, a man robbed a business near the school and then somehow got onto school grounds. The students were locked in their classrooms until almost 6 p.m.

“There were police cars everywhere,” she says loudly. “They almost tore down our door of the class.”

After being searched by the police for weapons and questioned, the students were finally released and escorted out by the cops.

During her freshman year at Miami Coral Park, Cristy says students did not have lockers, because drugs had been found in someone's locker the year before. The school did not want to risk this again, so they removed the lockers. During her sophomore year, lockers were put back in.

Cristy says all of these occurrences at her school do not necessarily make her feel unsafe. Unfortunately, she is used to it, she says with a strange calm. She feels safer at Miami Coral Park than she would have at Miami Jackson Senior High School, her home school.

Cristy's three half-siblings attended Miami Jackson, and one of her friends went there as well. Cristy says she always heard stories about fights or cops circling the campus. She did not want to go there. In addition, she wanted to study electrical engineering. At Miami Coral Park, she could.

Although it is a C school, Cristy believes the education she is receiving from Miami Coral Park is really preparing her for college. However, she is in a special engineering magnet program, which allows her to be bused to Florida International University every day for fifth and sixth period to take college-level engineering courses.

Almost all of Cristy's friends are also in the magnet program at Miami Coral Park.

"In school, they try to keep all the magnet kids together," she says. "In all my classes, more than half are magnet kids. The magnet kids are what make the school not so bad, and that's why they try to separate us from the bad kids."

This separation can make it harder for the regular students to succeed, she feels. For instance, her friend Marianne is not a magnet student. Cristy met her in a French class they took together one year. Marianne comes to Cristy or her other friends in the magnet program when she needs help with a class. There is no one to help her in her own classes.

Although Cristy has always managed to do well in school, she has had some behavioral problems along the way.

Madrid explains that when Cristy entered high school, she started to act up.

“She was lying about everything,” Madrid says in Spanish. “She would lie to me about where she went and who she talked to.”

Without her siblings and father around all the time, Madrid suspects Cristy was looking for attention. She admits she has often been easier on Cristy than she was with her older children. She feels bad that Cristy is alone in the house with her.

After many serious talks with her mom and dad and sister, Aura, Cristy has cleaned up her act. She has started focusing more on school and on being accepted into college. She recently started dating a 19-year-old boy who attends culinary school in Miami. Madrid thinks he has helped Cristy mature a little.

Although she often feels nagged by her older siblings, Cristy feels lucky to have had a sister who could help her with school and questions about college. Her father, although he knows very little English, has also been able to help her with math and science, but the language barrier has always remained a factor in helping her with school work. Cristy knows Spanish, but she doesn’t always know how to translate assignments.

When Aura was getting ready to go to college, she had no one to tell her to register for the SAT or how to go about getting financial aid for school, Cristy explains. Madrid and Raudales do not know anything about college. They don't know even what the SATs are. Aura had to talk to friends, teachers and counselors, and do her own research, Cristy says. Madrid and Raudales always remind Cristy of how hard her sister had it before her.

This year, as Cristy gets ready to apply to college, she is fortunate to have someone to go to for help.

"Without Aura, I'd be in a pickle," Cristy says with a smile.

It was Aura who stayed on top of Cristy, making sure she registered for the SAT this year and studied for the test. She told Cristy what study book to get, what flashcards to buy. From Michigan, Aura makes sure Cristy is taking the right steps to get into the University of Florida or the University of Miami, where she wishes to attend.

At school, Cristy says she can always talk to her physics teacher, Ricardo Markland, and David Kirkpatrick, her favorite engineering teacher at Miami Coral Park.

Raudales is also heavily involved in his daughter's education. He attends every parent meeting at school. He sets up parent-teacher conferences. If Cristy brings home a bad grade, he asks why.

"I'm behind her, watching her, telling her how important education is," Raudales says in Spanish.

Madrid was never very involved in Cristy's education. She works all day from sunrise to sunset, only stopping to run an errand or pick Cristy up from the bus stop in her old, beat-up van. Moreover, she knows even less English than Raudales does.



Cristy says students cherish their education when they know they have to work for it as she has. Students in higher-income, safer areas, and higher-achieving schools sometimes fail to take advantage of the opportunities given to them because it's easy, she explains.

Cristy and her friends are not supposed to attend Miami Coral Park. Their home schools are often F schools in areas that are frequently unsafe, like Miami Jackson, Miami Central and Miami Edison High (all currently F schools). They have worked hard to get into the magnet program at Miami Coral Park because they knew it would mean a better future for them.

"Just know what you want," Cristy says very matter of fact. "I don't want to sound cliché, but if you know what you want, you can get it."

Whenever she is stressed about school or she is ready to give up, Cristy thinks of a story her father often tells her.

"I remember he came here (the U.S.), and he had to take a class to get his engineering license," she says. "He tells me that the people there, they were all white and high class. He said they looked down on him because he was Honduran."

"For the next six months, he busted his [hump], and he said that out of the 18 people that were there, three people passed. He was one of them."