

TURNING ADVERSITY INTO OPPORTUNITY



The sound of handcuffs closing on Martin's* wrists echoed in his ears. Louder than the sirens. Louder than the sound of being read his Miranda rights. The handcuffs pinched his skin and he winced as he was placed in the back of the police car. Martin hung his head low, closed his eyes and wondered how he got here and feared where he was going next as the car drove away toward what he knew would be a very turbulent future.



Growing up in one of Chicago's most challenged neighborhoods — Roseland — Martin came from a broken family that constantly struggled to make ends meet. **Martin's parents faced innumerable difficulties like unemployment, substance abuse and sometimes homelessness.** He often came home from school to find no one there to greet him. No food on the table or in the cupboards. He would walk to the corner store, and buy whatever the \$1.50 he had in his pocket would afford. Martin often had potato chips and a soda for dinner.

Nothing about Martin's life was stable. Martin felt scared, angry and hopeless and began to act out. When he was 15 he dropped out of school and

succumbed to a life of crime on the streets. Martin had a lengthy rap sheet of serious offenses as he entered the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice's Illinois Youth Center Correctional Facility. Among them was unlawful use of a weapon and possession of a controlled substance. He was depressed and felt totally out of control.

Martin thought endlessly about how much he wanted to change his life and expressed to a counselor at the facility his strong desire to have a fresh start. **That's when Martin was referred to SGA and introduced to his youth advocate, Latrice.** Latrice worked with Martin to enroll him in SGA's education and employment services. While Martin was incarcerated, he and

Latrice worked together to tailor a detailed plan that would help him get his GED and obtain practical job skills. Martin and Latrice determined an academic intervention that would help him get back on track and into a job, and they began to address the social and emotional barriers that pushed Martin into a life of violence and hardship.

After two months of incarceration, Latrice and the SGA team worked with the Public Defender's Office to arrange for Martin to be released and put under house arrest.

Throughout his confinement, Latrice was by his side, providing counseling and helping him study for the High School Equivalency Test. Latrice helped

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Martin to understand how with SGA's help he could have the opportunities he needed to pave a path to a successful future, free of the adversity he was so accustomed to experiencing every day.

"I was impressed with Martin's eagerness to achieve greatness and get back on track from the moment I met him. Upon his enrollment into the program, Martin had only attended high school for a total of 30 days."

—Latrice Manuel | SGA Youth Advocate

After a few more weeks of tutoring and support, Martin was ready to take the first part of the High School Equivalency Test. Math. He felt anxious, but Latrice worked with him to find ways he could turn his anxiety into positive energy and Martin passed math. Two weeks later he passed science.

Martin's self-esteem skyrocketed and he was eager to keep going! He took the social studies test and passed that as well! Martin was three-for-three.

There was one more test to take before he successfully accomplished his goal of obtaining his GED. He was so energized that he quickly pushed forward without taking a week to study for the Reading and Language Arts section. Martin took the Reading and Language Arts test and did not pass. His heart was broken. Latrice and Martin reviewed the results of the test, identified where Martin needed more help and studied for another week. Two days after taking the last part of the test, Latrice received a phone call from Martin. He sounded dejected. "I failed again," Martin muttered. "That's ok! We will keep going, keep studying and we won't give up until you pass," Latrice assured him. After a moment of silence, Martin exclaimed, "Just kidding, Ms. Latrice, I passed!"

With his sense of humor intact, Martin had successfully passed the GED test and was well on his way to a successful future. Latrice and Martin continued working together to accomplish the goals of the plan that was set into motion when he was incarcerated and

today Martin is attending Olive Harvey College full-time. Martin has already received his Forklift Driving Certification, the first of many credentials he intends to obtain along with his Associate degree in Construction Management. Through the Cycle of Opportunity, SGA's comprehensive approach to creating lasting solutions that help children and families reach their potential, Martin and his family were provided with additional services that helped them deal with the adversity they faced together.

Martin still lives in Roseland, and supports himself and helps to support his family. Martin uses the financial literacy skills he learned through SGA to help him manage his finances and keep food on the table. Martin hopes to bring positive change to his community by volunteering to help inspire young people, like him, who are burdened by the challenges of poverty and at-risk of becoming involved in the juvenile justice system, so they never have to feel the restraint of handcuffs and the overwhelming fear of an uncertain future.



"Martin's story is a perfect example of how SGA helps young people and their families replace the barriers they face with hope and possibility through the Cycle of Opportunity, SGA's cradle-to-career approach to providing the most comprehensive services possible so that each person we touch can reach his or her full potential. Our goal is to help many more young men like Martin turn their back on a life riddled with crime and violence and instead embrace the chance to have a successful and prosperous future. By giving today, you can help for a lifetime."

—Susana Marotta, PhD, President & CEO

*Name and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of the individual.



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