

Luis Colon: An Appetite for Education

Born in Camden, New Jersey, and growing up in places like Collingswood and Pennsauken, New Jersey, Luis Colon always remembered what his mom said to him: “Your education is important.” After a rough start in life, he rediscovered what an education could do for him.

Luis ran away from home at age 13, leading to his dropping out of school in 10th grade. As a result, he found himself homeless on the streets of Philadelphia, which ultimately led to substance use and prison.

Nonetheless, Luis has always had a yearning and dream of procuring an education and came to the Center for Literacy (CFL) in 1999, for two months. His first attempt at getting his GED was uninspired and unsuccessful because he says he was not dedicated or focused.

Then he made a life changing decision. At the end of his rope, mired in an insidious cycle of addiction, Luis decided to seek help and came to what he described as, “The crossroad moment of my life: Project HOME’s St. Elizabeth’s Recovery Residence!” While there, he received substance use treatment, a host of supportive services and got his life back on track. Today, he has 15 years clean.

He returned to the same CFL location in South Philadelphia in 2003, this time determined to get his GED. “I went back to school after 20 years. Ms. Jane had a unique way of getting her students attention by running very energetic and critical thinking classes. She taught her students tangible reading and math skills, things I had to re-learn,” he recalled. Jane McGovern was his instructor, who partnered with Assunta “Dolly” DiJoseph as his math tutor. “Another unique quality about Ms. Jane and Ms. Dolly was that they were accepting of others and challenged me. They made me commit to myself and to come to class. Simply, they gave me confidence.”

Jane was a dedicated member of the CFL family for 28 years and retired in 2015. Dolly earned her GED at age 79, and worked at CFL for many years before becoming a volunteer math tutor. Both nominated Luis for induction into the CFL Hall of Fame at the 2006 “Student Speak Out,” where he and four other students were honored for their commitment to education. This event also included hundreds of essay writings from CFL students across Philadelphia. At age 37, he wrote this essay:

My Appetite for Education

My appetite for education is stronger now, than at any other point in my life.

When I was a child, I remember my mother always saying to me, “Your education is important.” I believe that statement is just as true now as when she said it back then.

We all know that knowledge is power. Education is the gateway and pathway to financial stability and economic independence. Both of these allow a person to hope, dream and become anything they choose to be.

One day, I hope to take advantage of such things. My longtime dream of becoming a home owner can come through with education. My home would be my foundation against homelessness. It would be a place for family, love, and growth.

Education would afford me the ability of not having to struggle for everything in this world. This is why I hunger to fill my appetite with education. I know with hard work and God’s blessing, I can accomplish anything I set my mind to. If it is God’s will, I will become all that I can through “Education.”

Two years later, Luis got his GED. He immediately enrolled in Community College of Philadelphia and obtained an associate degree in behavioral health and human services, transferred to Chestnut Hill College, and obtained a bachelor's degree in human services, while holding an average grade point average of 3.95 at both colleges. He recalls what Ms. Jane told him when he signed up for college, "Luis, college is going to change your life in ways that you cannot imagine." That it did.

Making his mom even prouder, he was accepted into the master's program in social work in the College of Public Health at Temple University with a first year scholarship and research assistant position. He is currently doing internships working with mental health and substance use populations. He says, "My greatest passion is being able to encourage others and provide hope for them because someone took the time to encourage, inspire, and provide me hope. People can change, if we would only invest the time, resources, and ourselves, we can make a difference. I know this because I have turned my life around."

Luis will procure his master's degree in May 2016, after which he will look to obtain his license in social work. Subsequently, he looks to become a clinical social worker and eventually wants to earn his doctorate degree in social work. His goal is "help people the same way I was helped."