

Started at the Bottom

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Not long ago, [I devoted a column](#) to the mostly upper-middle-class students at elite universities — the empirical kids. I thought it would be interesting to devote a column to students who at least started at the other end of the social scale. So the Times researcher Anne Snyder and I interviewed a bunch of young people whom we had met earlier through the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute.



David Brooks

The Conversation

Edgar Leon's background was pretty typical. Both of his parents immigrated from Mexico. His mom does janitorial work in Chicago, while his dad commuted to Indiana to fix railroad lines.

These young people have been shaped by their awesome life trajectories, from poor neighborhoods, to college, to internships on Capitol Hill. Cristi Privado is the last of seven children and the only one to graduate from high school. Kimberly Lopez has a brother and a sister who dropped out of school in the 9th and 10th grades. Her sister got pregnant at 16. "I got lucky," Kimberly explained.

None of them had pressuring parents who organized their children's lives for success. "College was more of an encouragement in my home, less a given," Edgar recalled.

Almost all of them experienced a life-altering move when they were teenagers. Reuben Kapp benefited from a school choice program that enabled him to move from an urban Michigan high school to a suburban one. "I'm a big believer in school choice," he said. "If it wasn't for choice, I wouldn't be here." Cristi's parents took her from a poorly performing middle school and moved to Greenville, S.C. At her new school there, she fell in with the smart kids. She developed a taste for country music. She ended up as class president.

She was not babied in school. "Until I got to D.C., I never heard the word mentor. When I got here, it seemed that everybody has one," Cristi joked.

Like several of the others, she was discouraged from applying to a competitive college. Cristi said her guidance counselor mentioned that her own son had been rejected by Clemson so Cristi shouldn't apply. "That made me definitely want to apply."

In college and at internships, they found a new world. "My mom and dad always worked the third shift. It dawned on me that some people leave work at 5 p.m.," Edgar remembered.

Edgar lived at home while going to DePaul, commuting 45 minutes each way. "I was just going to class and going to work," he noted, uncomplainingly. Cristi's father died a month before graduation. She had to finish the term through her grief.

Most of the students had some trouble gelling with the whiter, richer student body in college and hung out mostly with fellow Hispanics. "We love our culture," said Reuben. "That's what makes our group stronger and bonds us together." Now they seem to flow fluidly across cultural lines.

We met them as they were finishing a stint as Congressional staffers, often answering the phones and hearing the public rage about everything from the sequester to immigration reform.

All of them have experienced culture shock in coming to Washington. Kimberly observed, "I feel that here people will do whatever it takes to get to the top. It was really overwhelming at the beginning. Are they being sincere? I could never tell." Edgar echoed that: "Everyone is on a mission. People are all about networking. How can we use each other to get what we want? Maybe there's a lack of genuineness?"

Still, most wanted to stay in politics. As Kimberly put it: “I really want to go back to Delaware and seek elective office, whether it is local office or national office. To be president would be really cool.”

The economy has been bad during their adult lives, but they’ve been shooting upward. Anne Snyder and I both came away with the impression that they have fewer anxieties than the more affluent students or empirical kids, less of a fear that one false move can lead to disaster.

They seemed both hardy and a bit naïve, made more resilient by reality but not jaded by it. Their conversational styles were enthusiastic, grateful, direct and earnest. They seemed to us unself-conscious about how they present themselves — unironic, matter of fact, sincere and un-meta — not tripping in loops of self-awareness. They also have a less methodical sense of the exact steps you have to take to make it in the world.

Their ambitions were perpetually sandwiched by their affections. “I know people who move across the country for a job. They see their family once or twice a year. I could never do that,” Kimberly remarked.

Without even being asked, almost all of them burst into rhapsodies about their country. “I love the United States,” Reuben explained. “I have a lot of pride in the United States. I’m not a hockey fan, but when the American team is playing I go crazy.”

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