



From left to right: Jonathan Sosa, Daethron Anthony Gales, and Eddy Mijarez.

KIDS OF PROMISE:

JAG Nevada Sending Students on a Pathway to Success

For Jonathan Sosa, bullying led to severe low self-esteem and self-confidence. For Daethron Anthony Gales, occasional homelessness and the financial struggles of a single mother with six children forced him to grow up fast to help his family. And for Eddy Mijarez, academic struggles led to hanging out with the wrong crowd and a sense of apathy about his future.

High school can be a challenging time for any teenager, but for some, extra support and guidance can mean the difference between a high school dropout and a high school graduate. Enter JAG Nevada, a statewide high school dropout intervention and work readiness program that serves more than 3,000 students in 53 programs in 41 high schools across the state.

The typical student that JAG recruits is most likely to leave high school before graduation due to issues such as disengagement

from school, excessive absenteeism, credit deficiency, and/or falling behind in classes.

“JAG students are kids of promise, not at-risk youth,” said Rene Cantu, executive director of JAG Nevada. “We help our students identify their strengths and talents and use that to achieve their present and future goals. It’s an asset-based approach versus a deficit-based approach. Our program’s 92 percent graduation rate proves that what we are doing is moving the needle in a state that has struggled to improve its graduation rate.”

Sosa, who graduated from Western High School last year, found that bullying from his classmates affected his attitude about his life and future. He had zero interest in his studies and could care less if he ever reached graduation.

"I experienced a lot of bullying, and no one liked me very much. It was hard, I had no one...I started wondering what was the point in graduating," said Sosa, who spent three years in Junior ROTC before joining JAG.

As an immigrant, Sosa found it difficult to fit in with new classmates in a new country. He became mean, explosive, and easily provoked, starting his fair share of fights. The isolation proved too much, and he fell prey to deep depression and withdrew. Yet, once he joined JAG and met his specialists Josh Arredondo and Gina Rivera, Sosa found acceptance that gave him a renewed outlook.

"My mentors told me I wasn't just destroying my life; my actions were hurting others. That really hit me. I was so scared of other people hurting me, I created a shield and would hurt people first," said Sosa. "For the first time, they helped me care about myself and my future, and I've been accepted to multiple colleges. People say that I've done a 180: I'm nice, I care, I listen to others. Once I let people in, I became a social person my senior year."

An integral part of the program's success lies in its JAG specialists who wear multiple hats: they are teachers, mentors, parents, friends, cheerleaders, and compassionate individuals.

"There is no barrier too big or too small for our JAG specialists, they will help students confront it," said Cantu. "If we have a homeless student, the specialist will seek resources that provide temporary housing, clothing, and food so they can make it to class; if a student has a high absentee rate, the specialist will call them every morning and pop into their classes throughout the day to make sure they are present."

Gales, who is set to graduate from Bonanza High School in May, felt that bond early on with his specialist, Dion Lee. Gales found someone who believed in him, kept him accountable, and most importantly, didn't judge his past mistakes.

"My mom, who is a single mother to six children, moved my siblings and I to Las Vegas from California," said Gales. "We are constantly moving from place to place, and we've been homeless a few times. Being a middle child, I had to grow up quick to take care of my younger siblings while my mom was working to provide for our family."

In middle school, Gales was always causing trouble. He was expelled after a fight with another student and forced to undergo a three-month boot camp program, which he describes as "brutal." In high school, he was introduced to Lee, who is also his football coach. Gales currently lives in a weekly motel across



Isabelle West at Tesla.

town from his school, but his quest for a high school diploma and his special relationship with his specialist gets him up every morning to take the two-hour bus ride to Bonanza High School.

"Mr. Lee changed my way of thinking and the way I view life," said Gales. "I am not stuck because of my circumstances. With hard work and discipline, I can achieve anything I want to and right now I want my high school diploma. My mother and older siblings never got their diplomas, so I feel like I have a lot of weight on my shoulders to achieve this, but I will not let anything get in my way. I also want to set a positive example for my younger siblings and let them know it's possible."

Gales gets his incredible work ethic from his mother, who taught him first-hand about sacrifice. "My mom is my hero. She always puts her six children before herself, and even though she wasn't dealt the best cards in life, she never gave up. I owe everything to her, and my future success will also be hers."

What differentiates JAG Nevada from other graduation programs is that JAG specialists continue to mentor the student during their first year after graduating to ensure a successful transition into life after high school.

"One of our star alums is Isabelle West, who took a chance and joined other JAG students traveling to the Tesla Gigafactory in Reno for job interviews," said Cantu. "Being on the line at the Gigafactory and working alongside engineers sparked her interest in engineering. Now Isabelle is attending Truckee Meadows Community College, learning coding, and she now aspires to become an engineer and continue her work at Tesla."

Often students and their families continue to contact their specialists long after they've completed the one-year follow-up program because of the system of support and a desire to give back to a program that helped change their lives.

For that reason, it's not unusual to see Mijarez pop into a JAG classroom or event, even though he graduated from Mojave High School last year. His outgoing personality, easy smile, and willingness to share his story to help others makes him a favorite among program participants.

"I was never the best student, I struggled with Math and English, and it didn't help that I hung with the wrong crowd," said Mijarez. "Experimenting with marijuana and ditching classes because I cared too much about what they thought of me, trying to be cool, even though they were pushing me to get into trouble."

Once in JAG, Mijarez found his calling. He had a talent for public speaking and felt at home in the spotlight. He used to follow the misdeeds of his old crew, but Mijarez discovered that he is a natural born leader.

"I never knew that I was good at public speaking, or that I would become a co-director for my JAG program three weeks after I joined. I got to set up fundraising drives and community service for my classmates...it was like we were the adults making adult decisions," said Mijarez. "I've been exposed to all these really cool experiences: I met Governor [Brian] Sandoval in Carson City; I gave a speech at an event at [North Las Vegas] City Hall and was asked to give my suggestions on how to help high schools. I was interviewed by Telemundo, which was awesome because I like being in front of the camera. Without JAG I would have never had the chance to experience any of this."

In addition to academic success, JAG teaches its students "life skills." While in the program, Mijarez took career assessment tests, and learned how to balance a budget and what it takes to achieve home ownership. His specialist Michelle Tewes helped him land a job after high school and counseled him on applying to college – he is enrolled at College of Southern Nevada where he is working on a career in the loan industry, while keeping his mind open to a career in front of a camera, such as communications.

"I want to continue working with JAG and speak to teens about my story, how I turned my life around, and what I'm doing to reach my goals," said Mijarez. "It was not too long ago that I was one of them, but look at me now."

To learn more about JAG, visit jagnv.org. ♦



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