



## Three Girls

They remember the bags.

Three girls. One mother. Three bags when they arrived in Naples eight years ago—"one bag for our mom's clothing, one bag for our clothing, and a bag of our toys." For five months, they slept on a single inflatable mattress in a friend's garage. No beds. No closets. Just a mattress that lost air overnight between them and the concrete floor.

They had come from Bolivia. Their mother had been an attorney there, but here her credentials meant nothing. She didn't speak English. "So she worked as a housekeeper," they said, saving enough money to move them into a small two-bedroom apartment. She used Google—late at night, after work—to research school reputations and chose an apartment not for its comfort, but for its school attendance zones.

From the beginning, their mother was clear. "From the moment she had us, her life was not hers." She worked two jobs so they wouldn't have to. Then one day she sat them down and told them the truth: she would not be able to pay for college. "We would have to figure out how to pay for college."

As eighth graders, college felt abstract at best, unreachable at worst. "We knew we were immigrants with limited English. And we knew our mother didn't speak any English." What they didn't know about preparing for, getting to, and paying for college made them feel alone, scared, and afraid to hope for something that felt out of reach.

They didn't know what a GPA was—or that it mattered.

They didn't know the difference between regular, honors, and AP courses—or how early those choices close doors.

They didn't know about summer enrichment programs, or Florida Virtual School, or SAT prep.

They didn't know that taking the SAT more than once mattered, or that fee waivers even existed.

They didn't know how to apply for college financial aid—and their mother didn't know that she would need to save copies of her tax returns to complete the federal financial aid applications.

They didn't know that a Bright Futures Scholarship from the state of Florida required paperwork *before* graduation, or that missing that deadline could cost tens of thousands of dollars.

They didn't know that community service wasn't just meaningful—it was

required for the Bright Futures Scholarship.

They didn't know how to choose a college and that out of state colleges were a possibility.

"There was so much we didn't know," they said. And no one at home could teach them. "This is a new country for our mom too" they observed.

Their high school counselors were caring, but stretched thin. "It would be implausible for them to give the support that is needed by students." And without intervention, this is where the story usually stalls—not because students lack ability, but because they lack information, guidance, and someone walking alongside them.

That's where Champions for Learning entered their lives.

A volunteer mentor. A coach. Staff who knew the system and translated it—step by step. Someone who said, *Here's what comes next. Here's why it matters. You can do this.*

Because of that support, everything changed.

They joined JROTC and discovered the joy of service. What started as required volunteer hours turned into more than 500 hours each, five times what was needed. They became club officers. One received Collier County Youth Volunteer of the Year. One earned a full-ride scholarship to Johns Hopkins. The other two were accepted to multiple selective universities.

When asked about the possibility of living far apart from one another and their mother next year, they said "We feel prepared. We know our mom will miss us, but she is proud of us and she knows we are ready."

Then their voices shift and they share what they are afraid of.

"We worry about our friends," they said—students like Keishalyn and Grecia. First-generation. Financially struggling. Smart. Capable. But without the support they had. "We worry it might be too late for them." They worry about the younger children of a single mother who drives Uber and helped their family when they had no car. "Her kids don't know what to do to make it to college."

This is the problem Champions for Learning exists to solve.

Talent is evenly distributed. Opportunity is not. Without guidance, deadlines quietly pass. Courses aren't taken. Applications aren't filed. Financial aid goes unclaimed. Without encouragement, capable young people doubt themselves.

Dreams narrow, not because students aren't capable, but because no one showed them the map.

When the need is not met, nothing dramatic happens all at once. Doors simply close, silently. Intergenerational poverty persists. Our community misses out on the contributions that could have been made if the talents of these young people were nurtured.

But when the need is met, lives open.

Your investment ensures students don't have to figure this out alone. It places a mentor beside them, a coach in their corner, and a clear path in front of them—before it's too late.

Join us. Help transport the next student from uncertainty to possibility. Stand with students who are ready to work hard, but shouldn't have to navigate the journey alone.

Together, we can make sure the next story for students like Keishlyn and Grecia doesn't end with "*we didn't know.*"