

Little Village Student Finds Stride in College with A Little Help

By Justin Breen

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Against the odds, Little Village student is surviving and thriving in college by writing his own success story and sharing the stories of others.



The handgun was placed on his forehead for three minutes as Mateo Avila searched through his pockets for valuables.

He'd offer the robber his white iPhone with a cracked screen, telling him it was worthless and couldn't be resold for any value.

"I calmly told him that this situation wasn't going to get him anywhere," Avila said.

Eventually the gunman put the weapon down and walked away. For Avila, then 19 and now 21, it was a sadly familiar situation.

Since he was 14 years old, the Little Village native and current Northern Illinois University junior, has been shot at five times. Three other times, he had a gun pointed at his head, including an experience as a 19-year-old, when he was walking to his car from a party.

"I guess it wasn't my time to go," said Avila, who also had a gun to his head when he was 16 and 17.

Avila, a double major in journalism and communications with an emphasis in media studies at NIU, said his passion is telling other people's stories.

“You can become something for yourself,” said Avila, who produces videos for NIU’s student-led Top Shelf Sports.



Avila said he likely would have been a college dropout had it not been for Bottom Line, a nonprofit that helps low-income and first-generation students attend and graduate from college.

Avila first learned about Bottom Line when he was about to graduate from Little Village Lawndale High School Campus. His high school counselor, Ana Herrera, told him Bottom Line could serve as “a means of extra guidance” in his postsecondary academic career.

Avila said several Bottom Line counselors have helped him since he arrived in DeKalb. Once a month, Avila meets with his dedicated counselor for resume assistance, to discuss internship possibilities and just to tell his counselor how his life is going. Without Bottom Line’s assistance, Avila said he likely would have left school and would now be working full time as a bus boy in a restaurant.

Avila’s counselor, Hannah Lee, said Avila has “really found his stride in college.”

“When we took the time to talk about what Mateo has accomplished and overcome in life so

far, he was able to develop a sense of purpose and imagine himself being successful in new academy and professional environments,” Lee said. “That gave him the motivation to get more involved on campus and take advantage of journalism and sports broadcasting opportunities that will prepare him for life after college.”

Last year, Lee asked Avila to complete a “lifeline activity” where he wrote down important moments in his life and how they impacted him. That includes the times he was shot at – many times he was playing basketball at community parks and was at the wrong place at the wrong time. It also noted the two friends he lost to gun violence, including his 14-year-old neighbor Roberto Duran, who was fatally shot in a drive-by in 2007.

“It made me realize how much I love my community, how much I want to give back to it, and how much I want to make a difference so that the future youth of Little Village and across Chicago doesn’t have to endure the horrible experiences I did,” Avila said.

And Avila said his story can help him relate to others trying to survive and thrive.

For more information on Bottom Line Chicago, visit <https://www.bottomline.org/content/chicago>