

I was born in the Austin neighborhood on the West Side of Chicago. If I could take you on a walk through Austin, you would see abandoned buildings and garbage on the sidewalks. You would see people addicted to drugs buying their poison on street corners from teenaged boys who dropped out of school. You wouldn't see any businesses or safe places for kids to hang out. You wouldn't see any diversity because every single person who lives in Austin is Black, and almost everyone is poor. Chicagoans who don't live on the West Side only hear about Austin on the local news when somebody gets shot, which happens very often. Growing up in this environment, I had to defend my faith in the face of opposition every day. This didn't happen in the exact same way as it did to Fr. Dujarié, but my struggle required a lot of determination and persistence. While Fr. Dujarié chose to remain true to his faith at great risk during the French Revolution, I chose to remain true to my faith at great risk growing up on the West Side of Chicago.

I was my mom's sixth child and my dad didn't want to be part of my life. My family had very little money. When I was a little kid, we sometimes stayed in shelters because we didn't have anywhere to live. My mom turned to drugs to numb her pain, and I watched her cycle in and out of jail. My five older siblings each had their own struggle. My two oldest sisters had babies to take care of and my youngest sister had sickle cell anemia that kept her in the hospital. My oldest brother dropped out of school and started selling drugs. Every day was a new challenge to overcome.

From the day I started school, my teachers always told my classmates and me that an education was the ticket to a better life. "Stay in school," they said, "and you will go to college and be successful." It was a promise that I heard over and over again. A promise that doesn't

mean much when you are hungry and when you have no heat in your house and no clean clothes to wear. But that promise was all I had. It was my only chance to make it out.

My faith is the only thing that kept me believing in that promise for so many years. My faith was the force that got me out of bed every morning, even when there was no heat or running water in my house. My faith made me put on my school uniform and walk out the door. My faith guided me past my friends, who had dropped out of school and started selling drugs. My faith kept me going, day after day, because I knew that God wanted something better for me.

The opposition came from all around me. It came from my friends who had given up on school. I walked past them in my tattered, too-small shoes when they were wearing the new Air Jordans that they bought with their drug money. The opposition sometimes even came from inside myself, when I wondered if it would be easier if I just dropped out of school. But I defended my faith because I have always known that God wants me to live a life where I can do something good in the world. God didn't want me to drop out of school and become a drug dealer. God wants me to have a bright future so that I can do the Lord's work helping other kids not have to go through what I went through.

I'm lucky because God put people in my life who believe in me and are helping me achieve my goals. I met my legal guardian in 2013. I moved downtown with her and transferred to Holy Trinity so I could get a good education. It has not been easy. I missed a lot of school when I was younger because of my family's circumstances, so there are a lot of things that I've had to learn from the beginning that other students my age already know. But I am very determined. I'm developing better study skills and working hard so that I can be ready for college. Now, I defend my faith by continuing to know that God will help me overcome any obstacles in my path and that I need to keep trying my best at everything I do. I know that there

are a lot of other young people out there who have to choose between an education and survival every day. I want to get my education so that I can do something with my life to help those kids, to help the Austin community. I'd like to use my degree to change the Austin neighborhood by learning everything that I can and then helping the children in Austin have access to the knowledge and resources that I didn't have as a child. Then, maybe someday the news stories about Austin will be positive instead of negative.

It's funny because when I was growing up in Austin, all I thought about was how I was going to make it out of there. Now, I see that Austin made me who I am. I know how to be tough, how to survive, how to overcome obstacles. Most of all, growing up in Austin gave me faith that will carry me through even the toughest moments of my life. Because of this faith, all I want is to get my education and go back to Austin so that I can help kids who are like I was. The kids who are out there now just thinking about how to survive another day.