

“How do you turn the video on? Is it this button? Oh! I got it!”

My computer screen lit up. The grinning face of a sixteen year old boy beamed back at me through the FaceTime call, framed by a bare, formidable room. The door was ajar, and the shouts and curses of dozens of other teenage boys echoed through the hallway outside.

“Good to meet you Ms. Gaby — hang on a minute — hey, guys! Quiet down! I’m on the phone!” the boy hollered over his shoulder. The ruckus in the hallway did not diminish in the slightest. Rolling his eyes, the boy stretched his leg to the door and pushed it shut with the tip of his grimy shoe. “Sorry,” he said sheepishly. “So, what are we going to talk about?”

By the late February morning when I made this call, I had already interviewed nearly a dozen young boys in more or less the same situation. Living in crowded halfway houses or juvenile detention centers, the boys all had felonies on their records and tales of numerous run-ins with the law - even the ones who had barely seen their thirteenth birthdays. The program I worked for was evaluating the Gang Reduction Initiative of Denver, an institution designed to provide basic assistance and counseling to street gang members. Before my involvement in this program, the term “street gang member” brought to mind an image of a tough, jaded, middle-aged man, like the gangsters that Hollywood has so widely glamorized. However, as I came to understand through my work in this program, gang involvement starts young — between ten to twelve years old — and it has an ironclad grip on the futures of the kids it catches.

This particular boy, Sam, was no stranger to the effects of gang life. He was in and out of school, in and out of correctional facilities, and had not seen his family in the nearly four months since his most recent incarceration. His chipper personality was offset by his bleak circumstances. Like the vast majority of the kids I spoke with, Sam came from a low-income household. His family had been stuck in a cycle of offense and incarceration for generations. The

fact that he was part of a vulnerable population seemed to make little difference to the court system. And the result was right there on my computer screen: a bright kid, with his whole life ahead of him, living in a dingy detention center with no room or resources to excel.

The lives of every teen I worked with are all deeply important to me. Growing up in my own neighborhood, I witnessed the effects of hardship around me. I watched my childhood friends give up on going to college, because they lacked the resources or assistance to go. I saw my own grandmother living one step away from homelessness after a lifetime of financial instability. I lived just a few houses down the street from where one of my friends lost his life to gun violence at the hands of someone he considered family. These incidents were neither random nor isolated. They were the grim results of generations of poverty, a lack of community support, and the inability to seek help or rehabilitation - the same factors that commonly encourage children like Sam to join street gangs.

I believe that the origins of violent crime are often misunderstood. It is not always born from evil or immorality; rather, it is commonly an expression of need. When I look at the American criminal justice system, I see the needs of struggling people continuing to go unmet. I see communities that are never given the chance to heal. This is why I have chosen to devote my life to the study of law and criminal defense. My studies will allow me to gain the knowledge and expertise I need to provide the most skilled and fair representation possible, so that I can help our society take its first step on the path toward a reformed definition of justice. I believe that defending and advocating for the rights of at-risk youth is a crucial component of a world where children are supported, not condemned, and new beginnings are prioritized over harsh punishment. This is the type of service I plan to commit myself to. We do not need another

generation of youth in prison. I want to use my studies to help give a generation of kids like Sam their futures back.