One of my earliest memories is my father getting disappeared and then being deported when I was about 6 years old. He was born in Mexico but had been in the States his whole life so when he was deported it was a major shock to my family. He was on his way to pick me up from school when the police stopped him. For the next year I would only hear his voice through a phone. Soon after my dad’s deportation my family was evicted and left living week by week out of motels through vouchers. My brother, who was in a college-bound school program and an avid basketball player, was arrested and sentenced to Probation Camp at 16 years old not long after we were evicted.

Despite my family being separated through incarceration and deportation and facing homelessness, I managed to be selected into the college-track GATE program. Even though I was in a highly selective academic program that was supposed to prepare me for college, it was impossible to focus in school with what was happening to me and my family. School did not become a place where I wanted to learn, but a place where I can escape to and act out how I wanted. The GATE program and the schools that I attended did not have the resources, competence, or desire to help me beyond academics. The education system completely separated my education from my personal life and my mental and emotional well-being. The only “help” I ever received was in junior high when they sent me to see the school psychologist who made me feel like there was something wrong with me because of my behavior. I knew plenty of kids who were put on pills for ADHD and other “disorders” and I didn’t want to be on no pills. No pill would ease the pain of my family being separated or bring us back together.

I was still in junior high when I was first arrested. I was chased down by a cop who falsely accused me of vandalism. The cop took me to the police station and held me for hours. While I was there police officers would pass by and mock me saying things like, “We got a fresh one. This your first time?” as they smirked and chuckled. The arresting officer told me, “You would never make it in juvie. You’re too small. You wouldn’t last a day.” Not once did they offer me any supportive words or resources, ask me about my well-being, or divert me to any youth programs. Instead I ended up with a huge fine, a suspended license before I could even drive, and a conviction that would bar me from entering the military.

My first semester in high school I got into a fight and did not earn any credits, so I was pushed out to a community day school. While I was there one of the teachers (who I’ll call “Mr. Smokey”) would let us play card games in class all day and allow us to smoke weed in his presence during PE. I hardly earned any credits while I was there. Eventually I was kicked out of that school because I would stay in Mr. Smokey’s class all day. He would allow me and other students to stay in his class all day and play cards, hang out, and go to the bathroom to smoke weed and even meth. Not once was he ever held accountable for his actions that enabled us to skip class and do drugs, but I was. I was kicked out of the school because another teacher, whose class I was supposed to be in, was looking for me while I was in his classroom.

I was sent to a continuation school where I only went in part time to do packets. Although I started recovering credits, my world shattered when my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer during this time. They sent me back to regular school the next year, but after another fight and multiple classroom disruptions, the school thought it was best to put me on independent studies. I only lasted a semester in regular school. During my time there, I had left school at lunch one day because I couldn’t focus and didn’t want to be around people. As I was walking home, I was brutally jumped by 3 guys. My head was full of lumps and my body left with cuts and bruises. A woman who witnessed the assault took me back to school where I was greeted by my counselor, dean, and a school police officer. My counselor and dean were genuinely concerned for my health and safety and made me a referral to the hospital. The school officer, however, laughed at me as he wrote a truancy ticket saying, “It’s your lucky day – you get your ass kicked and you get a ticket. Haha!” And even though the school knew my mom had cancer, they only had 4 counselors for 2,000 students and no other resources or support, except a school police officer. Because they could not adequately support me, the school put me on independent studies.

While I was on independent studies, I hung out on the block during school hours and stayed out late. This led to frequent police encounters where they would pat me down, fill out FI cards, illegally search me, and make me feel like I was always being watched in my own neighborhood. I never felt like I could be free. On one of these routine stops, the cops put me in the back of their car while they ran my name. Curious, I leaned forward to watch the computer screen as they entered my information and saw my file pop up. I saw my name, age, address, previous arrests, and to my surprise, words at the bottom that said GANG ASSOCIATE. At that moment I realized police were tracking me and hit me with a label that could have devastating consequences. I went from GATE student to push out and labelled as a gang associate.