

My Personal Story on the Human Services Academy Model

By Jessica Liza, M.S.W., Human Services Academy graduate

Hard work and persistence were key factors in my successfully obtaining a master's degree in social work. As a first-generation Latina growing up in a small urban community in southern California, I never imagined that I would be the first in my family to further my education and obtain an advanced degree in social work. My parents, both immigrants from Peru with only a high school education, always instilled in me the value of a higher education because they knew that I would be respected and viewed differently as a professional.

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During my time in the Human Services Academy, a school within a school for at-risk students, I was taught the building blocks necessary for developing new learning strategies and furthering my education. The academy also helped my parents understand how to navigate the higher education system through workshops that engaged them in playing a role in my college and career aspirations. The academy teaching staff, a team of caring individuals, took the time to teach me the skills I needed to achieve my educational and career goals. Some of these skills were in:

- goal-setting;
- leadership;
- relationship building;

- oral and written communication;
- empathy and listening; and
- employability.

As I reflect on my journey ten years later, I've gained so much from the Human Services Academy model. Not only did it inspire and prepare me to pursue a career in mental health, I've also developed and maintained strong friendships with my academy teachers and fellow students. This group continues to support me in my professional endeavors.

One of my first experiences in the academy was going to Long Beach to listen to a guest speaker from Mental Health America of Los Angeles discuss the village model. This individual, who was a person living with schizophrenia, gave me and my fellow students a closer look at the life of a person living on the streets. He talked about his experience as a member of the village and his road to recovery. His inspiring story helped to dispel many of the misconceptions I had about people with mental illness as a young person. I learned that people with a severe and persistent mental illness can recover and lead a productive life. I was impacted by his story and felt a deep sense of purpose leading me to this profession. This and many other academy activities exposed me to the mental health field and helped me begin to realize and understand the value of the recovery model and the mental health professions.



Jessica the day of her graduation (second from right).

The Human Services Academy model played an important part in shaping my interest in mental health. The academy exposed me to the mental health field through real-life work experiences in which I completed over 200 hours in one semester. During that semester, I learned the value of helping others and put into practice the recovery-focused approaches that I was learning in the classroom. I realized that being a caring person and helping people had become a passion for me and that I wanted mental health to be my life's work.

Currently, I am a social worker working toward completing my hours to become a licensed clinician. I am often surprised at just how much the skills and preparation I gained throughout my high school experience as a member of the Human Services Academy model have led to my success as a mental health professional.