

## High School Homecoming Queen Sees College as the Pathway to Overcome Homelessness and Help Others Living with Disabilities Succeed

*Alani Feliciano is dancing in Schurz High School's Autism Awareness Assembly on April 25*

The night that Alani Feliciano was named the Homecoming Queen at Schurz High School, she didn't have a place to call home.



The now-18-year-old senior was selected Homecoming Queen in the fall, then spent the night at a friend's house. It is one of several places Feliciano has stayed since she came to Chicago from South Carolina when she was 13. Feliciano has lived with her parents, relatives and friends during that time, including in Schaumburg, Elmwood Park, Wicker Park, Hermosa and, now Old Irving Park. She estimates she's lived in

as many as 10 different apartments in the last five years alone.

And yet Feliciano, who has a 4.5 grade point average, is deciding which college she will attend among the 9 colleges where she has been accepted. Those include Concordia, North Park and University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), as well as Lewis University, where she has earned a \$16,000-a-year Lewis University Trustee Scholarship that is awarded, among other things, for outstanding high school records. Her decision will be based primarily on what is the most affordable choice for her family.

She plans to major in nursing then earn a master's in the field to help those with mental and developmental disabilities.

"I sit down so much every day and think why did I have to go through all of this, but then I'm so happy that I went through all this because it's gotten me to

achieve this much,” Feliciano said. “If I can achieve this, then I can achieve anything.”

Feliciano said her college future would not have been possible without Bottom Line, a nonprofit that helps low-income and first-generation students attend and graduate from college.

Feliciano first heard about Bottom Line when she was a Schurz junior and met counselor Adam Lindemulder at a school fair. She said Lindemulder has helped her fill out scholarship forms, apply to colleges and write essays – hers was about dealing with trying to find a place to stay on many occasions.



“Without Bottom Line, I had no idea what to do,” Feliciano said.

“Because no one in my family has gone to college and I was not receiving help from anyone else. Without Adam’s help, this wouldn’t have been possible.”

Founded in Boston 20 years ago, Bottom Line’s Chicago office opened nearly four years ago and the students in the program have a college persistence rate of over 90 percent. This year the program is serving more than 1,000 students in Chicago, with a wait list of 500 students.

Lindemulder said it’s been “extremely rewarding to work with

Alani one-on-one through the process of submitting her college applications during her senior year.”

“Through these conversations, she has openly shared how experiencing adversity in her past has only inspired her to do more to help others instead of letting it discourage her from succeeding in the future,” he said.

Feliciano said she’s had an adult mentality since she was 13 years old. She wants to work with patients with mental and developmental disabilities in part because of the Schurz dance team she’s currently a part of. The dance team combines



general education and special education students, especially those with autism, and is planning its fifth annual Autism Awareness Assembly at Schurz on April 25 at 11 a.m. as part of it being Autism Awareness Month. The assembly is open to the public. “I like to take care of people,” she said. “And I like to know that people are in a good state because I know that I haven’t been.”

Feliciano can’t wait to start college and said she’s looking forward to finding her new home on a college campus for the next four years.

“I will finally feel like it’s a place that I don’t have to leave from,” Feliciano said. “I can finally stay still.”