

## **Cristal Harris: Self representation and Getting the most from Student Support Programs<sup>1</sup>**

June, 2014

Cristal Harris walked across the UCLA campus, considering her potential academic and professional options. It was a bright southern California day and it was easy to be excited about the future. Cristal had received acceptance to four law schools even though she had achieved only a middling LSAT score, and after taking a hard look at the costs of relocation, had finally decided on University of San Francisco for Fall 2014. Then, knowing she would benefit from additional preparation, she had applied for and been accepted to the CLEO Summer Institute for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>2</sup> The program was for students who had already been accepted to law schools and also for those who were interested in applying. The six-week Summer Institute provided an introduction to the rigorous curriculum that students would face in their first year and gave them an opportunity to enhance their preparedness as well as their study skills. Cristal was looking forward to attending the classes, but had just received word that all the scholarship funding had been expended and she would now have to pay the full cost if she wanted to attend.

Facing road blocks to her future was not a new situation for Cristal and she had become adept at navigating difficult situations with support. She had attended community college at the urging of a high school Spanish teacher, had excelled and then transferred to UCLA. Once there, she had had to readjust to a very large and competitive campus but had succeeded with the support of mentoring and her own determination. The greater part of her junior and senior years were spent studying hard, working to pay for housing and

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<sup>1</sup> This case was prepared for use as the basis for class instruction and discussion by Sylvia Sensiper, PhD, Director of the Guardian Professions Program, Office of Graduate Studies, UC Davis. The following have provided funding for the GPP: The Stuart Foundation, the May and Stanley Smith Charitable Trust, The California Wellness Foundation and the University of California Office of the President.

<sup>2</sup> CLEO (the Council on Legal Education Opportunity) is a non-profit project of the American Bar Association. The mission of the organization is to provide various programs – summer institute, Saturday academies, high school training – to disadvantaged students in order to diversify the law profession. See <http://www.cleoscholars.com/>

talking with her mentors from various student support programs about how best to approach the law school application. She had not had time for clubs or many outside activities to build her resume or develop leadership skills and she felt the CLEO program would really help prepare her for the challenging legal profession she had chosen and put her on the path towards becoming a law professor.

As Cristal walked up the hill towards the north of campus, she mentally calculated the funds she needed to raise in order to pay the CLEO tuition and when she would need to have those funds available in order to make sure her registration was secure. Her pace slowed as she considered all the possibilities and when disparaging thoughts of ‘this may not happen’ entered her mind she almost came to a standstill. But then she recalled a fundraising website she had seen another Law Fellow create the year before.<sup>3</sup> Soon she was walking more briskly, considering her options and thinking about the ways in which she might go about this task herself. But how would she represent her goal and what would she need to say on her website in order to raise \$2,000 for the CLEO Summer Institute tuition?

### **Growing up**

Cristal lived with her great aunt and extended family in Oakland, California until the age of thirteen, when the group moved to Stockton hoping for a better life. Unfortunately this did not materialize. Because of a medical crisis, her aunt lost their house to foreclosure and during her senior year of high school, Cristal was homeless, a fact few knew because she carried on nevertheless, even serving as the editor of the yearbook.

“My early life was indicative of a typical foster care experience,” Cristal said. “There were drugs in the home and my aunt didn’t know how to read. But I didn’t want to be like the people I saw around me. I wanted to pursue my education. I just didn’t really know how.”

Cristal was fortunate to find support at Weston Ranch High School in Stockton where her Spanish teacher, Andres Treviño, suggested she apply for community college instead of going into the military. “I didn’t know anything about college and didn’t think I had enough money. But my Spanish teacher told me that I could get financial aid and so I just applied to the nearest community college.”

### **Finding a Place at San Joaquin Delta College in Stockton, California**

Cristal realized fairly quickly that college had a ‘culture’ and that a student had to learn how to operate within that culture in order to do well. “It’s not that some people aren’t intelligent or aren’t able to master a topic,” she said. “Some people just never learn that it takes time to learn to do school well. You have to learn how to raise your hand, gain confidence, study in groups and take notes in class.” Cristal was fortunate to have a

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<sup>3</sup> The web has spawned a number of fund-raising sites that individuals can access: Fundly, GiveForward, and GoFundMe are just a few.

professor at San Joaquin Delta College who helped her get a Federal Work-Study job and from there she was able to surround herself with people who wanted to help her succeed.

Cristal worked for an educational retention program called AFFIRM, a program aimed at helping African American students matriculate through community college with a curriculum focused on African American history as well as life skills and cultural empowerment. Cristal worked as both an office assistant and a peer mentor. She was also asked to join the Associated Student Body Government (ASBG) and by appointment became the Student Representative to the Presidents Council. She was then elected Senator of Committees. These very practical experiences helped her learn about policy and administrative procedures and also opened her eyes to the fact that decisions could be voted on and finalized without ever consulting those who were affected.

Cristal considered majoring in art and then Spanish, but when she was advised that majoring in a language was too narrow, she settled on linguistics. “I developed a work ethic at Delta,” she said. “They had a program called Delta Gold and a room where you could study and a mentor who would check in with you. That program taught me a lot.” In the summer before her sophomore year, Cristal took part in a program of the Center for Community College Partnerships (CCCCP) that involved visiting UCLA and staying on campus.<sup>4</sup> When it came time to transfer to a four-year university, southern California was her chosen destination.

### **Living in Los Angeles**

Cristal approached UCLA with her hard-earned work ethic, intending on majoring in linguistics. But she didn’t like the scientific approach to the discipline so she changed her major to African American studies, wanting to ensure that her GPA remained competitive for graduate school. To keep housing costs down, Cristal again took part in the Federal Work-Study program, but unlike her position at San Joaquin Delta, her job in the cafeteria was just a way to pay the bills. “UCLA was harder than community college,” said Cristal. “I decided I just needed to study, work and get my degree.”

Once she applied and was accepted to the UCLA Law Fellows program, Cristal also set her sights on applying to law school.<sup>5</sup> The Law Fellows program included Saturday Academies with professional instruction including exposure to cases and other materials used in law school. Students also worked with a mentor and if they completed the course, received a scholarship for an LSAT prep course. Knowing the value of student support programs, Cristal also met regularly with a law mentor she found through the UCLA

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<sup>4</sup> The Center for Community College Partnerships is focused on strengthening academic partnerships between California’s community colleges and UCLA. The program helps facilitate the transfer of underrepresented students to the UCLA campus.

<http://www.ugeducation.ucla.edu/aap/cccp/>

<sup>5</sup> The UCLA Law Fellows Program, launched by the School of Law Academic Outreach Resource Center in 1997, aims to increase the diversity of the law school pool of applicants. <https://www.law.ucla.edu/admissions/outreach/>

Academic Advancement Program (AAP).<sup>6</sup> “I made a connection with that mentor, and I went to him for every single, little thing. It’s my strong belief that I don’t know everything and a lot of the stuff I’ve learned has come from other people helping me.”

Cristal also decided to bolster her experience and resume by participating in the Quarter in Washington Program through the Center for American Politics and Public Policy (CAPP).<sup>7</sup> Finding funding to attend the program was again a challenge and shone a light on educational inequities that are not always initially apparent. “It makes no sense to have a start date for a program before the financial aid dispersal because that means students who are dependent on financial aid can’t participate,” she said. Fortunately, Cristal received assistance from the UCLA Guardian Scholars Program and other campus units and was able to gain valuable experience interning for Congressman Xavier Becerra (34<sup>th</sup> Congressional District) and working on the Hill.

By this time Cristal’s early interests in language and art had given way to a focus on a career and tangible employment post-graduation. “If I had felt more free or more sure of my finances, I might have considered a PhD,” said Cristal. “But for me it was important to make sure I was heading towards a career and not just accruing all this debt with nothing certain for my future.” For Cristal, law school was a path to a research career and her ultimate goal was becoming a law professor.

### **Understanding the Law School application process**

Cristal’s conversations with her mentors had provided her with a good understanding of the Law School application process and what various law schools would be looking for. Cristal had to create an account on the website of the Law School Admission Council (LSAC), a clearinghouse or gateway to the law school admission process.<sup>8</sup> All documents that were submitted - transcripts, letters of recommendations and evaluations - were bundled through the LSAC Credential Assembly Service (CAS) and combined with her LSAT score and personal statement, and then sent to the law schools to which she applied. Cristal had maintained a good GPA but felt she hadn’t started early enough preparing for the Law School Aptitude Test (LSAT). “I think people should start preparing for the LSAT as soon as they know they want to go to law school. I think I presented myself well in the application process, but I didn’t have the LSAT score to back it up.” Similar to medical school, many students actually take a year off after completing their undergraduate degree in order to study for the test. Because Cristal had

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<sup>6</sup> UCLA’s AAP promotes excellence through academic advising, workshops and mentoring students to prepare for graduate school. <http://www.aap.ucla.edu/>

<sup>7</sup> The UCLA Center for American Politics and Public Policy promotes research and knowledge as well as programs to educate students about policy and governmental processes. The Quarter in Washington Program was established in 1990. <http://www.capp.ucla.edu/quarterinwashington/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.lsac.org/jd/applying-to-law-school/overview>

completed the Law Fellows program, she earned a scholarship for an LSAT preparation course and also took advantage of the fee waiver for the LSAT itself.<sup>9</sup>

Knowing that the personal statement was her chance to make a case for herself outside the quantitative representation of her GPA and LSAT score, Cristal put a great deal of thought into what she would say. “I wanted to lead the reader on a journey of where I started and where I am today. I tried to show a progression of identity and knowledge.” (See Exhibit A)

In choosing schools to apply to, Cristal looked at their website to find out if they posted the median LSAT score and the average GPA of accepted students. She also considered the fact that some law schools offered fee waivers for the application fee.<sup>10</sup>

### **Ensuring success through preparation**

Cristal’s first choice had been UCLA and she was disappointed when she didn’t receive a letter.<sup>11</sup> Still, she received acceptances to four law schools including Howard University School of Law, American University Washington College of Law, University of the Pacific McGeorge School of Law and the University of San Francisco School of Law. After considering many factors, Cristal ultimately decided on the University of San Francisco. She received a great deal of recruiting encouragement from the law school and also realized that the expense of moving to Washington, DC (for either Howard or American University) would be a large burden. She also based her decision to go to San Francisco University on the availability of a student support program, ASP.<sup>12</sup> “I’m a big supporter of student support programs,” said Cristal. “I want to be in a place where people will help me along and will be accessible if I have a question about something that might be simple for others, but is complicated for me.”

Throughout her academic journey, Cristal had relied on her own determination and spiritual faith in order to face many difficult challenges. But she had also seen the benefit of the extra preparation provided by student support programs. Now, knowing that the challenge of law school lay ahead of her, she wanted to be as well equipped as possible. The CLEO Summer Institute was like a mini-law school and the instruction would help her develop the abstract thinking, analysis and synthesizing skills she needed for the rigorous work she would take on in the next few years. She had applied too late to the

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<sup>9</sup> This is another effort on the part of the LSAC to promote diversity among the law school applicant pool. <http://www.lsac.org/docs/default-source/jd-docs/usfeewaiverinstructions.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Stanford Law School is an example. [https://www.law.stanford.edu/degrees/jd/jd\\_application](https://www.law.stanford.edu/degrees/jd/jd_application)

<sup>11</sup> UCLA’s class profile is an example of the kinds of statistics available at many law school websites. <http://www.law.ucla.edu/admissions/class-profile/>

<sup>12</sup> The JD Academic Support Program (ASP) at San Francisco University offers a summer program and additional tutorials throughout the year to ensure the success of first-year law students. <http://www.usfca.edu/law/jd/asp/>

CLEO program to receive any scholarship funding but would be able to attend if she could pay the tuition herself. Setting up a fundraising site could be the answer, but what should it say?

## **Exhibit A: Personal Statement of Cristal Harris**

As a foster-child growing up in East Oakland, California, it was commonplace to see abandoned cars, find burnt spoons and foil in the bathroom, and hear gunshots from rival gangs at night. I was 13 when my legal guardian, my cousin, my paranoid schizophrenic uncle and I decided to relocate to Stockton, California in hopes of gaining better education; housing and safer neighborhoods. That dream was short lived. My guardian had been in a tragic car accident while commuting home from work and subsequently had a triple by-pass surgery. She had to retire and without her steady income we were forced to move out of our home by foreclosure; by the end of my junior year in high school we were homeless.

I looked at the plastered walls. This *used* to be a garage. We used a small television for light, to keep the roaches away. Our food bagged, sitting on the table, because the refrigerator in the musky house did not work. I lie on a mattress on the floor, cold, with some dirty blanket to cover myself with. I turned away from my aunt who slept on the couch across the room. It was deathly cold in the valley winters. Something scratched me. I pulled back the covers to reveal roaches that have smelled my dirty scent, hoping food was attached. I could hardly hold back tears. This was what my life had amounted to, 17, nearly a high school graduate and homeless. The remainder of my senior year in high school was spent just hoping to get to school to obtain sanity, and to escape from my depressing situation. Inside the walls of Weston Ranch High School I was Editor- In-Chief of my schools yearbook among other activities. No one knew the struggles I endured outside of school.

A caring high school Spanish teacher saw my dream, before I could make it a reality. Mr. Trevino aided me in completing a community college application. In college I began to form who I was, my mind, my heart, and my academic endeavors. I no longer was a homeless black girl, but an agent of change, studious chick with good grades, hard worker, steward, and mentor. Before shaping an academic goal, I did the tedious work of laying an educational, emotional, and spiritual foundation that was not afforded to me in the first 18 years of my life. By this time, life no longer happened to me, I happened to it.

One such happening was being recruited to be a major part of the Associated Student Body Government, first being a Student Representative to the President's Council, then going on to be the Senator-of-Committees. In both capacities I received my first taste of the political process and how bylaws and administrative procedures affected the real world. I was able to attend shared governance meetings, participate in the election committee, and work closely with the colleges' administration and board of trustees. These were my first experiences in which law and society converged.

Meanwhile, I worked for an educational retention program called "AFFIRM" which helped African American students get acclimated to community college. Although I was totally engrossed in black life and history I had yet to understand the strong connection between law, society, and ethnicity.

When I arrived on the UCLA campus it was like nothing I had ever seen before. It was large, beautiful and so different from my small Stockton, California experience. Although I had an extensive amount of financial aid I still had to work to secure year-round on-campus housing. In lieu of extracurricular activities at UCLA I used my free time to focus on finding my academic voice, my individual interest in research, and what



I would contribute to the world. I became obsessed with the story of the African American people in American society, our importance, and how we were viewed historically and presently.

I then was accepted to into UCLA Law's Law Fellows program. I was able to connect my passion for law school with a tangible plan for further success. My preliminary research hunches about the law had become full, viable and research worthy. What my hunches and passion became was "law school professor". Fittingly I have written three pieces of research which explore the relationships of African American women, hair, politics, law and their convergence. In this arena I became acquainted with the works of Kimberlé Crenshaw, Tracy Owens-Patton, and Paulette M Caldwell. I decided that I would do whatever it took to be a contributing member of this discourse surrounding gender, politics, race, and the law.

Today, this former foster youth from East Oakland California, has a bed, in a warm room, with clean sheets and more food than I could ever eat. I have used my past as a stepping stone for greater endeavors such that homelessness was not the last page of a sad story. I have already written and claimed college graduation. Now, I write another chapter to my ongoing work of success called *Law School Acceptance: Beauty for Ashes*.