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THE TURNAROUND KID

West Aurora student's academic success demonstrates how much difference a simple change in attitude can make

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Jomar Mendoza is juggling three tassels between his hands on graduation night. There's the one he gets for graduating from West Aurora High School, one for National Honor Society, and one for Spanish Honor Society donning his cap.

"This is exciting. The whole thing," Jomar said, sitting in the front row with the other students graduating with honors - he's ranked 25 out of the 652 in his senior class.

At the Northern Illinois University Convention Center in DeKalb, his whole family is in the stands - mom Freda, dad Juan, sister Janelle, both grandmas and a slew of

cousins, uncles and friends. Jomar seems to have it all: he was crowned Homecoming King, a soccer star, president of Boys II Men, president of National Honor Society and he was a math tutor.

He had more than \$330,000 in scholarship offers. He drives a 1976 Mustang Cobra that he paid for himself. As his mentor and Boys II Men founder Clayton Muhammad puts it: "He's managed to make being smart cool."

It's this moment - high school graduation - where Jomar's story ends and begins. This represents the culmination of his high school success and the beginning of a new chapter of academic challenges. Halfway through his freshman year, those closest to Jomar Mendoza would tell you the all-around good kid hasn't always been that way.

Ask his mother: "He was kind of like the class clown."

Ask Muhammad: "He was a bad kid back then."

Ask Andy Scharm, director of student activities at West, who had Jomar in class: "He was a little squirrely, unfocused. There were times I had to ask him to step out of class."

But Jomar says it best: "I was a smart a--. I talked back to teachers and I had a reputation. Almost every single teacher I had freshman year I got in trouble with," Jomar, 18, said. "Right off the bat, I'd say I was a statistic."

By statistic, Jomar, who was in all honors classes in junior high, said that he acted out and let his grades slip in an effort to fit in.

"I was in a bigger environment and I was scared. I wanted to stand out," he said.

"Standing out" brought Jomar lackluster grades, bunches of TCRs - Temporary Classroom Removals - and detentions. He ended his freshman year with a 3.2 GPA on a 5 scale, meaning he earned a few C's.

"It was nowhere near where I could have been," Jomar said.

Hoping to shake things up in her son's life, Jomar's mom, Freda, bugged him for two years to join Boys II Men, a leadership group for minority youth.

"If Mom thinks it's cool, it's not," Freda said of the struggle. "But after he went, he was hooked. The whole philosophy really appealed to him."

The son of a Columbian-born father and an African-American mother, Jomar said that he had trouble knowing how to fit in and identify with both sides of his roots. He said joining Boys II Men got him back on track in school and find his identity.

"When I went, I thought it was so cool. There's people like me doing good things. The older brothers, I saw their accomplishments and it made me want to do the same," he said.

Muhammad said that it was hanging out with kids like him - young minority men who wanted to find their way - that helped Jomar realize his own potential.

"We always knew he had it in him, something special," Muhammad said. "There's a smile, this gleam in his eye. Boys II Men allowed Jomar to step out on a foundation of success and to succeed on his own."

When Jomar returned to school for his sophomore year, he committed to turning over a new leaf.

"I thought, 'It's a new year and I'm going to make everyone feel different about me,'" Jomar said. "And I did - my math teacher even asked me if I got struck by lightning," he said, laughing. "I said, 'No. I just grew up.'"

During the next three years, Jomar said he worked hard in classes and tried to get involved in a variety of activities.

"If I wasn't in Boys II Men, though, I wouldn't have tried for those things," he said. "I wouldn't have believed in myself to do it." Jomar said he knew he really succeeded when he was inducted into National Honor Society.

"I looked at the stage. Of all the juniors and seniors, I was the only black man at the ceremony," Jomar said. "It made me proud, but it's also a sad feeling - If I didn't make the decision to change, there would be no one."

On the field, Jomar met success, too. The forward/mid-fielder soccer player traveled to Sweden his junior year to represent the United States in the Gothia Cup, a youth version of the World Cup tournament. He started all four games and scored the most goals on the team. Jomar also has battle wounds from his sport - after taking a knee to the face, he had to have two permanent plates put in place of his right cheek bone. Role model Muhammad said that Jomar doesn't just have a "good kid" persona - he practices what he preaches everyday.

"It's great if you can be good and represent (what the organization is about) Sunday at 6 p.m., but when you can do it publicly, that's where it's at," Muhammad said.

Jomar was accepted to all seven colleges he applied to and was offered more than \$330,000 in scholarships and a full ride to Iowa State. He was the first student to win both the Henry Cowherd Scholarship and Hoy scholarship for \$1,000 each, given out by the African American and Latino Heritage Foundations.

"He was searching for scholarships - which sometimes meant at midnight after a game," Muhammad said. He'll be attending Indiana University-Purdue University in Indianapolis in the fall, majoring in engineering.

His \$34,000 award means he's got at least his freshman year paid off.

"That's a pretty rare accomplishment," said Scharm, West's activities director. "At times students may receive a scholarship offer from a couple of schools, but for (Jomar) to get financial offers from everyone that he applied for is quite impressive. It really shows what one can achieve if they work hard, focus, stay dedicated and apply for lots of scholarships."

Jomar also was offered athletic scholarships at two smaller colleges to play soccer. He said he'd still like to play at Indiana University-Purdue University, but is unsure if he'll be able to walk on the Division I team.

Of all his accomplishments in high school, Jomar said that while it was "pretty cool" that the soccer team had a 17-5-2 record, it will be getting called first at graduation because of his honors is what he'll remember. He said although he was able to bounce back from his freshman year, he's excited to see what he'll be able to accomplish in college.

"It's really challenged me to start college off on the right foot," he said. As Jomar walks up to the graduation stage, he flashes the Boys II Men hand symbol at Muhammad. They're both smiling.

"He's an extremely bright child who works hard, but he's also very popular. The impact of kids like him is huge," Muhammad said. "It's one thing as a 35-year-old educator to lead by example, it's another for the young, cool soccer star to do that."

As he prepares to enter college, Jomar said he's been able to redefine the labels he once had.

"I'm a leader. Fun. Take charge. Down to Earth and outgoing," he said.