

After fleeing abusive home, teen shows tenacity in drive to succeed

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By the time she reached 18, Kariyma Regis had already seen too much of life's hard side.

She fled what she said was an abusive household and was driven from her New Orleans home by Hurricane Katrina. She lived in a homeless shelter and alone in a seedy DeKalb County motel.



Fang Liang/AJC

Not long ago, **Kariyma Regis** lived in a homeless shelter. Friday, the 19-year-old graduated from an early college preparatory program at Spelman.

One time, she drove off a menacing vagrant by threatening to stab him with a screwdriver.

"I developed survival instincts," she said.

But Regis not only survived her troubled past, friends and supporters say — she overcame it. For proof, they point to what happened Friday, when Regis, now 19, graduated from a rigorous early college preparatory program at Spelman College.

"She literally could have been another person [living] under a bridge," said Darnell Houston, interim manager for Chris Kids Rainbow Program, an Atlanta area organization that helps children in extreme need, including Regis. "She really is extraordinary. I don't expect anything but great things from her."



Fang Liang/AJC

Kariyma Regis (right) hugs a classmate during an awards luncheon at Spelman College.

Sharon Crutcher, administrative assistant for continuing education at Spelman, puts it more succinctly.

"Tenacity," Crutcher said of Regis. "She has it."

Regis, who graduated from Stone Mountain's Stephenson High School last spring, was among 44 students from across the country selected to participate in the Spelman summer session. The competitive program requires candidates to take an entrance test and obtain recommendations from counselors and school officials.

The Spelman session doesn't guarantee Regis a college education. But her willingness to spend her summer studying pre-calculus and English is a sign, said Chris Kids director of external affairs Kevin Lynch, that she is "determined to be successful."

Now, Regis intends to get a job and stash away some cash while taking courses at Georgia Perimeter College to raise her grade-point average, giving her a shot to attend Spelman, her "dream" school, or another prestigious institution, maybe Tuskegee University.

She looks to the day when she can work in veterinary medicine and practice social activism on behalf of abused children.

"I'll do anything it takes," she said.

Not long ago, success of any kind seemed unlikely for Regis. She'd been passed around among relatives since she was 11, she said, going from New York to California to Louisiana and briefly to Houston after Hurricane Katrina two summers ago.

When she couldn't get along with her father, who'd moved to Texas after the hurricane, Regis wound up in Lithonia where an aunt lived. But the two clashed, and she went back to New Orleans to try again with her father.

After a physical confrontation with him, she said, she ran out the door crying into the streets and the night.

Her one thought: Get back to Atlanta where she knew people from school and where she would be able to graduate and move on with her life.

A bus got her here, but it was a perilous scene at the DeKalb extended stay motel where she ended up. "They had some dangerous characters hanging out there," she said.

Regis got her first break when a DeKalb school official who had been told of her plight took her into her home until she could find someplace more permanent to live.

After a few months, Regis moved into a shelter but found it depressing. Then she discovered Chris Kids and its residential program. Now she lives in an apartment that is paid for along with her meals.

"There is more freedom," Regis said. "It's more like independent living."

Regis put aside the distractions of her family woes and her housing crisis well enough to graduate from high school. The happy moment was capped when her mother, who came from New York, and her father both attended.

"That was a beautiful experience for me," Regis said. "That was the first time [her mother] ever came to something for me."

Regis said she has partly reconciled with her father, though she hasn't let him "back in my life entirely. It's hard for me to trust people now."

Still, she sees a purpose in her journey and her life.

"My passion is activism, because of my background. It really upsets me to see another kid go through what I went through. I feel I've come through all this for a reason."