

high that a former drug dealer would backslide, so parents, friends, and relatives hedged their bets. Thus it was only at the end of Norberto's junior year that he realized he wasn't his family's big loser anymore. A male cousin had gone to federal prison, female cousins were leaving school to have babies, and he alone still had a chance to get a high-school diploma.

Absorbing that spring's talk of high expectations, he'd begun to think that his former goal, to supervise a drywall crew, had been set a little too low. And perhaps the wisdom of his elder relations regarding college—"If you study too much, you forget to get married until you're so old that nobody wants you"—contained an element of self-justification? But to have expectations, it seemed to him, a person had to have a sense that his life was in his control.

"People say, 'Oh, your family can't get ahead,' but actually we get ahead all the time," he said. "It's just that then one of the trucks breaks—my dad and I need them for the jobs—or one of my parents is out of work, then we slip right back down." He thought that he coped fairly well during slippages: "For one thing, I found this store where you can get twenty cups of noodles, the supposedly shrimp kind, for four dollars and forty cents." But extreme poverty gave his mother "worry breakdowns," and, on and off all spring, these had dictated that he miss classes to work full time. Typically, his grades fell when he took such jobs, and the additional income was not guaranteed: the drywall crew most willing to hire him contained some heavy drinkers, given to sleeping through Mondays and getting the whole crew fired. Back at school, he'd find his teachers as angry as his bosses had been. Then he'd go home to the basement and cry. He knew only one line of work in which he could earn the money his family needed while keeping his dream of a diploma alive, and the Southside Sureños had let him know that they were hiring.

Arriving at the Manual graduation, Bennet was braced for anger, and, when he passed out diplomas, some graduates refused to shake his hand. To his relief, though, most had come to celebrate. One of the graduation speakers cried out, to bedlam, "We're the future, like it or not!" Afterward, Bennet went back to work.

He was going to try something new that summer for the five hundred and fifty-eight. Since taking the job, he had thought a lot about his own education, with its challenges, expectations, and webs of social connections; he knew that his adulthood would have looked quite different had he lacked them. So he arranged a

summer internship at a law firm for his mentee, one of the shyest boys in the school, and opened a wing of Manual as a computer-filled "resource center," where counsellors might make similar connections for others. Many children were too busy working to avail themselves of the center's tutoring, internship, and college-planning services, but Julissa made herself at home. She began to advise the adults on what Manual should offer when it reopened as a model high school while considering prospects of her own. An official in the city government's youth-development program had been impressed by her spirit during the protest, and now urged her to take a summer job with the city.

She'd worked every summer since she was thirteen, including a stint as a roofer for a dollar an hour. The city youth program paid nine times that much—real, family-helping money, especially since her fourteen-year-old sister, Ashley, stood a chance of being hired, too. So one afternoon, after several changes of T-shirts, the two girls took the bus and the light rail to southwest Denver to be interviewed. Their appointment was in a neighborhood that felt like a suburb, as it had commuter colleges, big-box stores, and a Six Flags amusement park. They were excited, until they got off the train.

It was the beginning of rush hour, and the large intersection outside the station was snarled with traffic. Julissa and Ashley surveyed the scene uncertainly, as the lights changed three times. Finally, they tore, heads down, across one boulevard, then another, keeping the pace as they approached a residential block of white frame houses. "I represent East Side and I don't know who represents what here," Julissa said unhappily, eyes darting from left to right. "No idea."

Their directions had involved landmarks—the parking lot of a store called King Soopers, a Taco Bell. But which Taco Bell? Or was it Burger King? Panicked and confused, they went off course. Julissa used up her cell-phone minutes calling her mother for moral and directional support; her eldest sister, Dominique, rushed over from her workplace to serve as a guide. Eventually, an hour after getting off the train, they found the government building. On the elevator, the girls pressed against the wall as if pinned by centrifugal force—"Hate elevators," Julissa said—and reached the office just as it was closing. "Oh, don't worry, just come back next week," a friendly receptionist said. Julissa tried to smile back. It was not a journey she wanted to make again.

South High sat in an equally mysterious part of town, and, despite the reassurance of resource-center counsellors, its appeal faded, too. "I don't want to just stick

to my kind, but I'm scared to go," she said. Ashley, who had been accepted into a small, competitive program at another public high school, was uneasy, too, and, anyway, there were flyers at Wal-Mart about a publicly funded online charter school a few blocks from home. One of the people involved with the program had been a Denver Nugget, and his daughter was the R. & B. singer India.Arie. Students did their work on the Internet, and it was graded by teachers in an office somewhere else. Plus, they could train to be nurses or doctors, or something; the details weren't clear. Still, after a stressful year, the chance to stay near home, with Internet access and relational proximity to India.Arie, seemed soothing, so two of Manual's star students changed their plans.

"DENVER SCHOOLS PICK UP THE PACE," read the headline in the *Rocky Mountain News* one day in August. Although Bennet's ideas still hadn't been fully implemented, his district was posting historic increases on state exams in reading—single-year increases that were greater, in grades five through ten, than in the past four years combined. Math scores were up, too, and minority children had improved more than white children—though it would take eighteen more years of such incremental improvement for the minority kids to pull even.

Bennet considered the instruments of standardized testing primitive, and their results incomplete. Besides, a single year's increase could be a fluke—or the fruit of a predecessor's efforts. Still, if a person held the numbers up to a certain light, after a celebratory bourbon, he might see in them the power of plain and unrelenting expectation.

For a few days, feeling hopeful, Bennet tried to relax. He read a book of Buddhist reflections, and many "Mr. Putter & Tabby" books with his daughters. Some mornings, though, he woke up with a feeling that had chased him all summer, of something unpleasant about to occur. He sensed that he was about to fail at something he'd worked hard at, and for the life of him he didn't know why.

It was his particular skill, his wife believed, to distinguish the worthy challenges from the impossible ones. But when he ran into Manual parents and students and inquired about plans for September, their answers struck him as alarmingly vague. It seemed increasingly clear that, despite his efforts, he had failed to reach the five hundred and fifty-eight. A mass dropout now seemed likely.

Driving through his neighborhood one Saturday with all this on his mind, he passed an election sign with a

familiar name on it. One of his friends in Democratic politics had started a run for the state senate. From past experience, Bennet could envision how the candidate would spend that summer weekend, and every other one until November: studying maps marked by colored pins showing clusters of voters, then going out to knock on hundreds of doors. He called an aide, a veteran of political campaigns, and asked, "Could we capture some children this way?"

A strapping boy named Pedro, half-awake, half-naked, stared perplexed through a torn screen door. "Sorry to wake you up," Bennet said. It was a Saturday morning last fall. "We're from the schools. Can we come in?" The boy put on a shirt, and Bennet and Jaime Aquino, his chief academic adviser, walked into a living room crammed with beds. One of them was occupied by a boy who slept through their entrance, an announcer on a blaring television saying, "A lot of people have been talking about this, it's a revolution in blackjack tournaments," and the frantic barks of two emaciated Chihuahuas clad in zip-up hoodies, which had come skidding into the room. School had started five weeks earlier, but Pedro had not shown up, according to the printout that Bennet held in his hand. "So you're a senior," he began, over the barking. "Can I sit down?" For a moment, the boy studied the man settling in on a sofa between some boxer shorts and an aquarium that reeked of decay. And then, in a Spanish somewhat different from what Bennet recalled from St. Albans, Pedro began to map the distance between Bennet's ideas and his own economic obligations.

First, Pedro wanted it noted: his younger sister, one of the five hundred and fifty-eight, was continuing high school, and he was proud of her. But because of family finances, he had dropped out to work the night shift at McDonald's—a job he'd held for a year despite not having a car to get him home at two in the morning. Mentors and college fairs were beside the point. Pedro looked expectant when he finished, as if hoping for a thanks and goodbye, but Bennet and Aquino had begun to confer. After a year, the boy was a proven employee, and there was another McDonald's within walking distance of a high school that offered evening classes. If he transferred to that restaurant and switched over to the day shift—what were the hours of the day shift, exactly? It would work, then: Pedro could attend school after his shift, and get work-study credit for the job. Bennet's aides could call the managers of both restaurants, and get things moving along.