

To&Through Student Stories



Meet Bernijah

Bernijah is a Black college student who grew up in Englewood. She graduated from a selective enrollment school in 2025. She is currently a sophomore at an Illinois public institution pursuing her Bachelor's Degree.

Bernijah is a compassionate, motivated young woman and an inspiration for students who encounter social hurdles in their middle grades. Her story may encourage them to persevere through difficulties by asking for help and recognizing that the words of others do not define you.

Elementary School

Bernijah attended an elementary school on the South side. She recalls the school fondly, describing herself as someone who “didn’t get into trouble.” She appreciated that rules were well enforced, and teachers were generally caring toward students.

But outside of the building, Bernijah faced significant cyberbullying at the hands of her peers. Unable to monitor the situation, her school was not able to help her. Instead, Bernijah found support in her mother. “I’m grateful for my mom,” she stated, who encouraged her to ignore hateful comments rather than provide a reaction.

Despite the bullying, Bernijah is grateful for the learning opportunities she had in middle grades. “I recently caught up with some of my high school and middle school friends that went to [elementary school] with me... We kind of just went down memory lane basically. I

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feel like it shaped [my] character development and just showed me that people in my life are not gonna be just like me at all. That's a big lesson."

High School

Bernijah started 9th grade at a selective enrollment school near Bronzeville. Right from the beginning, Bernijah felt out of place. "While I was there, if you know the east side of Chicago, you will know the culture is so much different from the south side...You would kind of just feel you're around a bunch of people that think they're celebrities. They're going to high school and like in thousands of dollars worth of shoes and clothes and handbags, and you look around like, wait a minute, 'I feel out of place.'"

After her 9th grade year, Bernijah decided to transfer to a selective enrollment school in Englewood. She got involved in different school clubs like National Honor Society and modeling. Her favorite experience in high school was going abroad. "My highlight was being able to travel out of the country [through] this program called [Global Glimpse](#)... We went to the Dominican Republic."

Bernijah also got involved in other programs focused on career exposure to the fields of architecture, construction, and engineering. For two years, she was able to work with professional architects and get real hands-on experience in studios.

When it came time to apply to colleges, she was looking for schools that offered architecture programs and a financial aid package. Her goal was "not having to be in debt for school." She decided to attend an Illinois public institution after being awarded a full-ride scholarship.

Although grateful for the scholarship, Bernijah was disappointed she couldn't fulfill her dream of attending a Historically Black College or University (HBCU). "I just never really saw myself going to a [Predominantly White Institution]. I told myself, 'I'm gonna go to HBCU.'"

College

During orientation, Bernijah started registering for her architecture classes. When she saw the required math courses, however, she began questioning the major. "This goes back to middle school... Pre-calc, calculus, calculus 3, calculus 4, I don't like that. I never

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was the type to do that and [pass] the class with a good grade. **If I did pursue architecture, it would take me a minute to be on the level that everybody else was at."**

She asked the president of the architecture college for advice. "It was very eye-opening. She a Black woman and told me these things like, 'Oh, you know, if you continue to pursue architecture, you're gonna have to climb this big ladder.'"

The path towards a career in Architecture was full of challenges and uncertainty. So Bernijah decided to switch her major to 'undecided' so that she had more time to explore majors and career aspirations. But now that she is in her second year she feels that time is running out. "With school being around the corner right now, I'm currently still undeclared...I need to figure out what I need to major in and just like trying to see what will work for me, but at the same time like to stand on what I don't like."

Bernijah wants a major that will truly launch her to a successful, lifelong career. "I don't wanna settle in life. I don't want a mediocre job...I'm just still going through the process of doing research and talking to people. And seeing what other people are doing is definitely eye-opening...**I wish that there were more resources that they had [at the University] that can better help me figure out what I wanna do."**

In 10 years, Bernijah says, "I want to be able to pursue my passions still, which are crocheting, skating, modeling, and traveling."

What Bernijah Found Helpful

- **Opportunities and access to different learning experiences in K-12.** Throughout her time in CPS, Bernijah had learning opportunities that shaped her growth. In middle grades, she said, "I feel like it shaped me, [my] character development." In high school, her learning transcended the classroom, including travelling abroad and being a part of the Architecture, Construction, and Engineering program. These experiences helped shape her life, professional, and personal goals.
- **Carefully considering her major through inner reflection and seeking advice.** Although Bernijah was focused on architecture in high school when she arrived on campus and saw the required courses, she reconsidered whether she should continue pursuing the major. She sought guidance from the President of the

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College, who helped her make an informed decision. Thanks to having that early guidance in her 1st year, she is now exploring different majors to pick the one that best suits her passions.

Bernijah's Hopes for the Field

For High Schools

- **Stop policing students.** Bernijah vividly remembers starting school every morning walking through metal detectors. “People shouldn't come to school and feel like they're like criminals.” Although she understands that “they're just making sure [we're] safe”, she believes the regular inspection criminalizes young people and impacts their relationship with school.
- **Educators need to prioritize growing meaningful relationships with their students.** She thinks not having an “authentic connection with [a student] definitely does affect their learning process and ability to concentrate in class.” The educators who connected with Bernijah on a personal level inspired her to try new things and think proactively about her future.

For Universities

- **Support students in exploring possible majors and careers.** Bernijah has been searching to find a major that she feels passionate about and can lead to a successful career. She is actively connecting with people in different fields, but finds she needs additional support from her university. **“I wish that there were more resources that they had down there that can better help me figure out what I wanna do.”**

For Students

- **If you're being bullied, tell an adult.** “I'm grateful for my mom because when I was being cyberbullied, she was always there.”
- **Explore new opportunities & career pathways, connect with new people.** “In high school, try to just stay focused on your academics, get as many opportunities

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as you can, and experiences. Network with as many people as you possibly could because it definitely can get you far in life. And just try to learn or do research on what you think you wanna do later on in life.”