Meet Christian

Christian is a Black CPS alum who grew up in Englewood. He graduated from Bogan High School in 2019. Christian looks back on his time in CPS with an ambivalent eye. While he looks back with appreciation for supportive teachers and fond childhood memories, he is excited to share some ways he believes CPS can improve.

Elementary School

As he reflects on his childhood in Englewood, Christian emphasizes the importance of exercising, a passion that would follow him through his educational journey. In his youth, fitness often took the form of outdoor sports—conventional and unique ones:

“Basketball, football, track. In Chicago, there’s a thing…because we have a lot of gates…we hop over different people’s gates to try to see whoever can hop over the most. That’s what we did when we were young.”

These diversions allowed Christian to persevere through what he describes as a “hard” upbringing. They also allowed him to develop friendships with those in his community, building an essential support system.

Christian attended A. Phillip Randolph Elementary School (Randolph) from 2nd grade until 5th grade. Then he transferred to Barton Elementary School (Barton) from 6th grade to 8th grade. At Barton, Christian recalls that the difficulties continued. Social, financial, and academic pressures — combined with neighborhood issues — made his last year in

elementary school a rough period in his life. A light, however, came in the form of some advice he received from a teacher: “They told me to keep my head up high.”

This, for Christian, would become a lifelong motto. He falls on these words when encountering hardship, remembering his worth as a brother, son, intelligent learner, and human being.

High School

Transitioning to William J. Bogan Computer Technical High School was not too difficult for Christian; he carried over many of the friendships he had established at Randolph. Still, by 11/12th grade, he found himself unsure about life after high school. Luckily, he found guidance through a school program designed to empower young men of color through entrepreneurship, workforce training, and leadership development.

This program gave Christian access to tools he needed for a successful college application. Program mentors assisted him with his personal statement and resume. They instilled in him essential values for college life and steered him toward potential career paths that matched his academic interests. It was through this program that Christian first defined his love for computer work, settling on a potential profession in Information Technology (IT).

Unfortunately, Christian felt that Bogan lacked the funding and necessary facilities to truly foster his love for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics STEM. He points to a lack of foundational facilities, saying, “They don’t have any engineering labs or things of that sort to start working on robots or whatever else.”

As a result of inadequate resources, Christian says his passions were stifled. He therefore redirected his focus to more mechanical applications of computer work.

College and Beyond

Impressed by their computer science resources, Christian enrolled at Robert Morris University Illinois (now merged into Roosevelt University) to study IT. There, Christian explains, he quickly ran into difficulty with math coursework he felt unprepared for. As a result, he ultimately concluded that IT was not for him, despite his love for computers. He took coursework in computer science and the humanities, exploring different avenues to

focus his studies. Describing one social ethics course that left a positive impression on him, Christian remembers,

“So basically…they tell us to read the book, and then we come to class. We talk about the book—let’s say it was the 48 Laws of Power—and then we talk about what led this character to believing this was the right course of action. It’s a really good class.”

The smile on Christian’s face says it all: this was a truly impactful course. He also discusses how college introduced him to more advanced computer resources; in many ways, his world had opened up.

Unfortunately, with the COVID-19 pandemic, things came to a crashing halt. Christian claims the shutdown led to: “Financial stress, mental stress, emotional stress—what else—stress!”

The overbearing difficulties at this time, in conjunction with a described “loss of motivation,” led Christian to ultimately stop college. He adds that no one at college gave him any support to continue pushing forward.

Persevering through this difficult phase in his life, Christian renewed his interest in personal fitness, beginning a venture in martial arts and other high-contact sports. Since 2020, he has again defined a clear path for his future. Looking to pivot to a career in trades, he is currently in the process of getting licensed in HVAC. He is also considering a move to Nashville or other cities where the cost of living may be more affordable.

What Worked for Christian

- **Being involved in school activities, like sports.** Through sports, Christian was able to enjoy himself and make friends. Those friends became his support system and helped him persevere during a stressful time in elementary school.

- **Motivating advice from his teacher.** In 8th grade, his teachers gave him advice that has shaped how he navigates life, even now as an adult. “They told me to keep my head up high.” The advice has helped him move forward during difficult times.

- **A mentorship program for young men of color.** Christian's time in the mentorship program helped him as a student and as a growing young professional. In the program, he discovered his passion for IT. His mentors supported Christian's IT dreams by working with him to apply to college, where he could continue to learn more about IT professionally.

Christian's Hopes for the Field

CPS

- **More funding for STEM equipment:** Christian wishes he could have explored his technology passion in high school. During college, he realized that unlike him, some/many of his classmates had access to multiple STEM course options during high school. Reflecting on his own high school experience, he realized that he was missing access to "engineering labs... [and] accreditation to start [working on] robots or cars." He hopes CPS could fund more tech equipment and resources to support students' careers.

- **Support to persist towards his degree.** Although Christian had support from his mentorship program to enroll in college, once he was on campus, he was entirely on his own. When the pandemic started, he was overwhelmed by "financial stress, mental stress, emotional stress—what else—stress!" Sadly, no one at college offered support to continue pushing forward. Christian hopes both CPS and colleges can have someone help CPS students overcome challenges and encourage them to persist.

- **He also makes an astute reference to high illiteracy rates among the Black community, encouraging CPS to tackle this trend head-on.** "There's like a huge problem in the Black community right now with literacy. So [CPS] gotta figure out a way to solve that problem. They gotta put literacy, like English, at the top."

For Students

- Christian's advice for struggling students is simple but powerful; he passes on the words once told to him. "Keep your head up high." Maintaining dignity and pride

during times of hardship can be difficult, but it is essential for picking up the scraps and moving forward.