THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
KERSTEN INSTITUTE FOR URBAN EDUCATION
Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice

the To&Through project

To&Through Student Stories



South Chicago

South Chicago is a predominantly Black (70%), lakefront neighborhood located on the far southeast side of Chicago right along the Illinois/Indiana border. Latine residents make up an additional 23% of the population. Youth make up a significant part of the population and most children attend public schools.

The South Chicago Quality of Life Plan envisions revitalizing vacant land, improving parks and transportation, and restoring the natural environment as a way to address longstanding issues of disinvestment of community spaces and air, water, and soil pollution.

Learn more:

Quality of Life Plan - CLARETIAN ASSOCIATES - BUILDING COMMUNITY IN SOUTH CHICAGO
Claretian Associates
To&Through Community Tool

Meet Anaya

“I used to live in a complex, the buildings and all my family was out there, all my friends, so I was able to always be around people that loved me and people that I loved.” Anaya said of South Chicago, a community she was born and raised in. Anaya is a bubbly 10th grader, attending South Shore International College Preparatory High School. She loves her neighborhood and has a broad vision for it that includes more businesses, spaces for youth, and overall increasing community safety.

Relationship with South Chicago

She remembers the park at Thorp Elementary fondly. “The park was the community spot for picnics. On the fourth of July, we would all come together to watch the fireworks together, cook, barbecue, all that good stuff.”

Her favorite part of South Chicago is the people in it. “They all have good vibes, good energy… it was always fun for me to be able to talk to them about anything and be around them every day.”

Anaya has experienced community support through her mom, aunties, and middle school teachers at Thorp Elementary. Her mom encouraged her by sharing her life experiences. Her aunties provided her a safe place to hang out while her mother was at work.

Her middle school teachers also played major roles in her life–supporting her through chronic illness, academics, and offering overall guidance in life. “They knew how my asthma flared up and when it flared up. They knew what precautions to take and how to help me.”

The life guidance she received from her teachers was rooted in their personal experiences and identity. “Ms. Shepherd has always been there for me for the past three years. She always helped me with anything, I could call her, talk to her about anything. Ms. Hayes, she helped me through school…She was one of the main teachers, one of the only girl teachers there for middle school. So if I ever needed anything, I would definitely go to her. Mr. Vines, he helped me learn more about the real world coming from his point of view since he is a man and he knows how boys think, how they act and all that. So yeah. They each played a role and made me who I am today.”

Hopes for South Chicago

Anaya’s vision for South Chicago includes centering safety and creating spaces for her neighbors to come together.

“I would like to see more playgrounds, more food places for us to eat, more spaces for the kids to play because there's not that many and also just a safer environment because nobody wants their kids outside knowing how high the violence rate is around here. So yeah, definitely safer places for kids and us teenagers to have fun and just be together without no problems.”

She imagines the playgrounds with slides, swings, and “a place where they can be active [and] just run around”. She notes that teenagers need a community space of their own where they can be their authentic selves. She imagines a building next to the park so they don’t have to travel far.

To help South Chicago grow into a place that better supports young people, she believes community leaders should get to know the youth. “Be there as somebody they can talk to about anything. Not just what goes on in the community, learn more about them in general because if you don’t know them, you’re not gonna know what they think, what they wanna do…so definitely be there for them.”

Additionally, she hopes for more restaurants and grocery stores, including both chain and locally-owned businesses. “If we had more options where people want to get outside, explore more instead of just being…inside the house all day.”

Remote Learning: Lessons Learned

Anaya was finishing up third grade and beginning fourth grade when the COVID-19 pandemic caused her school to transition to remote learning. She struggled to be present in class and doubted whether she would pass. Anaya said, “I was on the computer for all of that and me being in my bed, I was very tired …so it was hard to focus and pay attention and it was just really rough trying to keep my grades up and just trying to just be there mentally and physically.”

Now, she’s grateful to be going to school in person since it better fits her learning style. “I feel like being in school is way better because you get the actual point of view of what they are really talking about, how they explain it, how they demonstrated it and [you] can't really do that much on a computer,” she states.

During remote learning, she learned two big skills: patience and focus. “I had to be patient with the wifi, patient with the teachers coming back from their lunch breaks. Had to be patient with the kids. One minute they’re on ‘mute’ another minute, ‘unmute’.”

Another skill she learned was maintaining focus on her academic goals despite the various challenges that came up during remote learning. Through trial and error she was able to figure out how to complete her work while maintaining A’s and B’s. Overall Anaya learned that remote learning is not something she ever wants to do again.

High School

Anaya had about eight options when it came time to decide which high school she wanted to attend. It was important to her that the school was near South Chicago and academically rigorous. Anaya is an academically driven student and wanted to continue that streak in high school. “Grades are very important to me. In middle school I never slacked off. I always got A’s and B’s. If I got anything below a B, I feel like I wasn’t doing enough…I know I could work harder so I did. Grades mean a lot to me.”

At the encouragement of her mother, she spoke with her older cousins about their high school experiences. She then conducted her own research and was intrigued by the IB program of South Shore International College Preparatory High School (South Shore). Anaya ultimately chose South Shore because of their IB program that she felt would be academically challenging and offer many opportunities.

She encourages other students to see how influential school is in one's future. “If you wanna be something in life, graduate, go to college, want to make your future the way you want it to be and you cannot get there without passing school,” Anaya explains.

In ninth grade she met a lot of people including people from outside her neighborhood that taught her about different cultures. She also saw how different South Chicago is compared to her neighborhood and left her curious on what other neighborhoods in Chicago look like. “It opened my eyes to some other things, other places that's not in [South Chicago]. They have bigger parks, they have better food options and just like getting out, opening my eyes to a new perspective and how other people see the world and just how I see.”

Anaya has a broad vision for what career she wants to pursue. Thanks to a Career Day organized by her middle school teachers, she has taken an interest in real estate and finance. She is especially interested in interior design and flipping houses. However, she also considers a career in the medical field including pediatric nursing. What she knows for sure is that she wants to attend a four year university at a Historically Black College or University (HBCU). She states, “I am open to learning about my culture that I already don’t know about.”

Anaya’s Hopes for the Field

- **Young people value when adults care about them as people–their interests and values**. Anaya’s middle school teachers are part of her community support system. Throughout middle school they supported her through chronic illness, academics, and offered overall guidance based on their lived experiences. Anaya notes that community change can be built through authentic relationships with youth.

- **Young people crave a space to be their authentic selves.** Anaya’s vision for South Chicago includes creating spaces within the community for young people “to have fun and just be together without no problems.” Additionally, she envisions playgrounds for children, and generally more space for community members to get together.

- **When choosing a high school, young people turn to familial input.** As she researched high schools, she spoke with her family members about their high school experience.

When choosing a high school, young people consider factors such as academics, location, transportation logistics and more. (Reference)

- **Attending high school outside the community exposes them to new experiences.** Anaya learned about new cultures through her peers. She also noticed a difference in resources between South Shore and South Chicago. This inspired her hopes for her neighborhood.
- **In the college exploration process, young people are looking for a place that prioritizes them and their identity.** As Anaya considers colleges, she is prioritizing attending an institution where she can learn about her culture. She is strongly learning towards attending an HBCU.