



# From Inner City to Center City:

One PAL Youngster's  
Triumphant Story

By Raina Goods



PHOTOGRAPHED BY John Carlano



Attorney Raina Goods with her mentor, Philadelphia Police Officer Darren James.

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s a child, my career goals ranged from becoming a fashion designer to being president of the United States of America. As I grew older, I began to think more seriously about my career path. Through all my daydreams, there was one thing I was sure about: I wanted to be someone who other people perceived as powerful, but I also wanted to help others. I thought about becoming a doctor, but the thought passed since I could not tolerate the sight of blood. By my middle school years, I decided I wanted to become a lawyer.

At age 12, I never fathomed what it would take to become a lawyer, but I knew that with hard work it was attainable. While this was a longtime goal, I was concerned how I would go about making my dream a reality. No one in my family was a lawyer, nor did we know anyone in the profession. I was extremely shy and shuddered at the thought of speaking in front of a room full of people, let alone the fears of even one-on-one conversation. To top it off, I was growing up in an impoverished Philadelphia neighborhood in a single-parent home. Luckily, even with these strikes against me, I had a saving grace. Not only did I have a mother who was eternally devoted to ensuring my future would be filled with happiness and success, I also found comfort, safety and solace in my Police Athletic League (PAL) officers, who became pivotal figures in my life.

In sixth grade, I started attending the Mill Creek PAL Center in West Philadelphia after it opened in 1996. The Police Athletic League started out as a place for me to go after school and over the summer to stay off the unsafe streets of my neighborhood and out of trouble, but quickly became much more: a great influence on the decisions I made on a daily basis. Due to my extreme shyness, I rarely talked, and, even when I did, my voice was barely audible. But as I participated in PAL, I began to come out of my shell. I learned to play basketball, golf and tennis, and participated in numerous sporting competitions. I learned PAL was not just about sports – it also had educational programs. I was always a good student, but I really found my niche at PAL when I participated in some of the academic competitions like spelling bees, the PAL Challenge and 24 Math Challenge. My love for PAL grew and I started attending the PAL center in my neighborhood every day. I would wait outside the doors for the center to open, and I would be one of the last members to leave. At PAL, I felt comfortable in my own skin and was encouraged to develop my social skills, and especially to be proud of my love of learning.

I had two great mentors during my participation at PAL: Sergeant Jeff Campbell and Officer Darren James. Sergeant Campbell was my first PAL officer and the person who encouraged me to enroll and attend PAL. He was very passionate about PAL's mission of "Cops Helping Kids," and just the type of person I needed to help me open up. He was the driving force in my early years and encouraged me to step

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out of my comfort zone. After a few years, Sergeant Campbell received a promotion and left PAL. I was devastated when he left. Sergeant Campbell was someone I respected and whom I had taken a real interest in me. I thought things at PAL would never be the same.

Before leaving, Sergeant Campbell introduced me to his successor, Officer Darren James. Officer James quickly became a mentor and father figure to me. He, too, was genuinely interested in my well-being and success. Although I lived a few blocks from the PAL center, Officer James would always make sure I got home safely. When report cards were released, he checked my grades to make sure I didn't need extra help. Due to his diligence and my own determination, my grades were never an issue.

When I turned 18 and became too old to participate in PAL activities, I volunteered my time. I helped coach the PAL Challenge and 24 Math tournament teams I had once been a part of and became the head tutor for Officer James' Homework Club and Computer Education Program.

When I applied to colleges, I decided not to apply to any local schools. I needed to be away so that I could expand my horizons and continue to develop my social skills. I decided to attend Hampton University in Hampton, Va., and graduated summa cum laude in 2006. PAL helped alleviate some of the burden of the costs associated with college by providing me with a \$1,000 scholarship each year during my four years of undergraduate study.

After Hampton, it was on to the next level – law school. I was accepted into seven different schools. After weighing my options, I decided to attend Drexel University Earle Mack School of Law and became a member of Drexel Law's inaugural class. While I could have taken a more traditional route and attended an already established law school, it was

exciting to be a member of a prestigious school's first class. This was my chance to be a part of history. If there was one thing I learned from my mentors, it was to make use of any opportunity that could further enrich my character, as well as my future.

Attending Drexel was an experience that I will never forget. PAL continued to support me during law school in many ways. In 2006, PAL awarded me the Anne Krancer Memorial Scholarship, which provided me with a \$5,000 scholarship during my first year of school. This was a tremendous help, especially since first-year students were discouraged from working. When times were tough and the workload seemed insurmountable, I would often confide in Officer James. It was through our frequent conversations that he encouraged me to continue my path. He always reminded me of my humble beginnings, as well as the successes I had achieved. With his and my mother's support, I continued to develop into an intelligent and well-adjusted student. In May 2009, with Officer James and my mother watching, I walked across the stage with my head held high as a member of the Drexel Law School's inaugural graduating class.

PAL is a great program for inner-city youth. My one hope is that kids continue to take advantage of PAL's programs. Many of my childhood acquaintances participated in PAL sporadically or stopped attending once they reached a certain age, and many of their stories did not continue as happily as mine. Once I realized what PAL had to offer, I refused to fall victim to the statistics of many of my peers, such as the high rate of teen pregnancy, crime and school dropout rates.

I often think about how my life could have turned out had I not joined. PAL's support has been immeasurable in the way it shaped my life and helped me achieve my goals, and has instilled in me the belief that every child has the potential to be someone special. I know that as long as PAL is around, many children will continue to be given the encouragement needed to pursue their aspirations. PAL officers will continue to serve as confidants, mother and father figures, teachers and friends, and uplift the thousands of inner-city youth who attend the 26 PAL centers across the city. I know I will continue to follow in Officer James' footsteps and work toward being an inspiration and mentor for the youth of PAL.

From a young age, a law school degree was my goal. I took the initiative to seek employment at a law firm – The Law Offices of Eric A. Shore, P.C. – in high school. Not only did this law firm become a starting point for me, Eric Shore became a valuable mentor and his firm is where I am now employed as an attorney. I am admitted to practice law in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, and currently represent individuals who are disabled and seeking Social Security disability benefits.

With great mentors you can be successful. One could say I defied the odds and achieved my goal on my own. One could also say that this was something I was meant to do all along. I know that my success was mostly because of my own determination. But, I also know that it would not have been possible without the love and support of the adults who took the time to recognize something special in me. ■

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