

South Florida Survivor: Former Drop Out Turned MBA Grad & Mentor

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MIAMI (CBSMiami) — Walking through a university classroom in his suede sport coat, Orestes Mirabal looks nothing like a gangster.

But that's exactly what he says he was.

"Like a lot of our youth that don't have a lot of the guidance and support at home, I was caught up. I was hanging with the wrong crowd on the streets. At a young age, I was already a member of a street gang in Miami," Orestes told **CBS4's Lauren Pastrana**.

He even had the tattoo to prove it.

He's since covered it up, erasing a piece of his past he's not proud of, but still willing to talk about it in hopes of helping others.

"When I look back, sometimes you try to piece together to see what went wrong in your life. Drugs, drug abuse, was a normal thing," he said.

Orestes grew up in Miami in what he describes as an abusive home.

"There was domestic abuse," Orestes said. "My father was a big guy. Military background. I think he was lost as well."

At 15-years old, he dropped out of school and joined a gang called the "Latin Bad Boys."

"I was new to the area. I just ended up on the hit list of the wrong people," he said. "They intimidated me. It was something that I was scared. I was always scared as a kid. Just out of the blue I met this kid and he happened to be really into that gang world."

He said he never shot anyone, but concedes "I will say that I remember carrying a weapon."

"You don't see the severity of what's really going on when you're a kid. But looking back now I realize I could have lost my life," he explained.

Orestes admits to getting into plenty of fights, but says one day, he realized he wanted out— out of the violence, but back into school.

"In my situation, it was a spiritual encounter. I had to see that I was worth more than what I had, or what I thought I couldn't get," he said.

Almost 25 years after dropping out, Orestes earned his MBA from Florida International University.

"There's things in life you don't expect, there are consequences of your decisions," he said. "But no matter what, it's never too late."

While working on his "capstone" project to graduate, an idea was born.

"Real Walk Mentoring" is Orestes' way of giving back— an ode to everyone who helped him become a survivor.

"I think what makes me a survivor is any obstacle that has knocked me down, or that has prevented me from moving forward, I've been able to look deep inside myself to find the courage and persistence to overcome it," he said. "Whether it's looking for God, looking within yourself, or mentors. You always need help. Don't be afraid to ask for it. Don't be afraid to be scared. But once you get over. Reach back. There are other people who need help."

Orestes managed to complete his degree while maintaining a full time job at UPS, an organization he says has given him many opportunities to grow and thrive.

He is still getting his mentoring program off the ground, but in the meantime, he says he's volunteering with [Take Stock in Children](#) to help guide students through any challenges they may face.