



Sanchez School student Sheila Colon checks out her new glasses at Harvey & Lewis optometrists in Hartford. Many Sanchez students have vision problems but don't have glasses because their parents can't afford them or aren't aware of the problem. So Hunt takes three or four students a week to the optometrist and pays for glasses.

←5 SINCERELY

2/7/04

Dear Mr. Hunt

...Did you give the letter I wrote to Mrs. Billings what did she say? Can you ask her to write me again please!!! I can't believe that I am doing good in school. I am planning to go to collage for medical assistant. Also to go to the Air Force for part time. BUT I HOPE I get the hunt scholarship because I can use it. Do you know any high schools that practice medical things?

Always, Maxie Quinones

W/B Write back.

Hunt meets with Victor and Jenny Matos, a year apart in age but both in eighth grade. He asks after their mother. Where is she working? Victor doesn't know. Jenny answers. They have moved. There is no phone.

He ignores their slipping grades, focusing more on the notes teachers made — talking in class, absences, missing projects, lack of homework, no note-taking.

"Both of you are special," Hunt says. "I know your potential. I saw it at Sanchez. I even saw some of it in the seventh grade. I want you to go to your teacher and say, 'I'm Victor Matos and this is B.S. I don't like these comments. I'm going to change this.' How can you be an 87 percent skill level and get a D? The comment next to the grade answers the question: 'No effort, no notebook.' "

Victor is fidgeting, rarely looking at the older man. Both students had trouble with pre-algebra.

Have you sought help? Hunt asks.

No.

Is help available?

They shrug.

You won't know until you ask the teacher.

They speak very little. The silence is excruciating. "Do you want me to go away from this conversation thinking you don't care?"

They look away.

When he started tutoring at Sanchez, Hunt got deeply involved with the Matos family, helping to arrange eye surgery for a sibling, helping the mother get a driver's license, paying some bills, arranging summer camp for Victor and Jenny, taking them and bringing them back.

"I've invested more in this family than I have on anyone else, except my own son," he says.

He struggles with the change he sees in many of his former students. Children who excel at Sanchez drop off the charts in

terms of grades and attitude in middle school. The wide-eyed smiles of third-graders are replaced by flat, hardened expressions when they reach middle school. He knows they have the intelligence to succeed, but something has gone, some drive, a connection to their futures.

Fearing that his college-scholarship program could fail before it had barely been established, Hunt knew he had to catch at least a few children even earlier. He set up scholarships at Northwest Catholic High School in West Hartford to keep students on track. Two students attend this year. Three more have been accepted for the fall.

May 2, 2004

Dear Maxie,

I received your third quarter grades a few days ago. I attempted to telephone but could not reach you. Anyway, except for Social Studies, I am pleased that you continue to do honors level work. The absent and tardy numbers are a concern — but we talked about that when we were with your mother on March 15th.

Social Studies from A- to a B to a D. I know you are disappointed. The assessment that conduct/effort were unsatisfactory is just not you. I hope you will turn it around in the final quarter so you don't carry this baggage into the eighth grade.

Overall though you are doing great. You are one of the very best of the young men and women I am staying in touch with. I am very impressed with your maturity and focus on the things you want to accomplish. You are a strong young woman. You wrote about becoming a medical assistant and joining the Air Force in your letter of February 7th. A good plan and you have the ability to achieve those goals. Someday after you finish college and marry, you will have kids who will go to college because you made all the right choices as a student and as a person. You will never accept of yourself less than your best. And you will never let anyone distract you from your goals. I admire you.

What are your plans for the summer? Have you seen Amy lately? Mrs. Lizotte asked about you.

Sincerely, John Hunt

In fine print on graph paper, Hunt keeps detailed notes about each meeting or phone call with his students. In Maxie's file he writes:

3/15 family is thinking about moving to Florida where relatives are; impending eviction from a \$700 a month apartment.

4/29 telephone service stopped.

During a visit to Hartford's Quirk Middle School, Hunt goes over report cards with Jennifer Lopez, center, and Elihanne Arroyo. Elihanne is quick to say she doesn't understand why her math grade is a C- because she gets 80s on all her tests. They talk about the possible reasons why, including talking in class and not doing homework, and Hunt urges her to talk with her teacher. He chides both girls for not being aware that mandatory open houses for magnet high schools they want to attend are fast approaching.



6/8 Maxie wins school awards for Outstanding Academic Achievement, Peer Leader Appreciation, Student Guidance Appreciation, and Qualities of Leadership award. She is given a scholarship to a summer program at [Capital Community College]. Mom had no car so Maxie misses orientation to the CCC "outward bound" program. Instead she may spend summer with father in NJ

Maxie not sure where she will be living 2004/2005 school year Gave her envelopes

Vision appointment scheduled for 6/11 @ 1:30 - lost glasses June 04 - Off to Camden NJ and back.

Aug 04 Off to Philadelphia. Started middle school

Oct 04 In New Britain with aunt - attends Pulaski Middle school

Not mentioned in Hunt's notes is the divorce of Maxie's parents or that, shortly after that, she lost her best friend in a house fire. By January 2005, Maxie, her two siblings and her mother have moved again, the fourth time in seven months.

1/16/05

Dear, Mr. Hunt

Hi, I'm writing to say hi. I can't write much but just that I live in Camden NJ. I have not been going to school for about two weeks because I am not registered in NJ. I think I'm going to Hatch Middle School but we don't have a house yet but we are struggling now but Hopefully we will get better. Sorry I had to leave in short notice but that is another story. I can't believe I left a lot of things behind in CT. I hope I still do good because this place is bad. But if you write to me write under my [mother's boyfriend's] name and just write in back of envelope that it's for Maxie.

Always, Maxie Quinones

PS Please don't forget about me. Mr Hunt I will never forget about you. Because you made a difference in my life. I was blind before now I can see thanks to you and my mother. Thank you a lot. Maxie

He grew up in Iowa during the Depression. When John Hunt was 4, his father died, leaving his mother with three children and a farm they would soon lose. Now, sitting in the living room of his modest home in West Hartford, he talks about his youth.

"We were so damn poor. We lived in houses no better than the worst of where these kids live," he says. "All we had, and it was a blessing, was a mom with a college education."

Hunt's mother found a teaching job, and the family moved to northern Iowa. Hunt became one of only eight students, all boys, in his class in a K-8 schoolhouse. He was a poor speller and reader, and, like the students he tutors at Sanchez, he learned to mask his inadequacies.

"Every day we'd sit around in a semi-circle to read aloud. I knew that Miss Meyer would start at one end one day and at the other end the next. I'd sit as far away as I could from that end, hoping she'd run out of time and I wouldn't have to read. It was my way of protecting myself. The kids always laughed at me."

The wind is blowing, the air chilly, as Hunt walks across the parking lot into Bulkeley High School. Under his arm is a big, white binder with folders on all of his students.

Xiomara Burgos, 15, sits down next to Hunt. She is pleasantly embarrassed. "When they came into my class and announced I had to leave for a scholarship meeting in the guidance office, all the kids say, 'Oooohhhhh, you're so smart.' I liked it. It makes me feel smart."

Her mood changes as they talk grades and what kind of year Xiomara has had. She squeezes her arms around herself as though she were cold. The woman she loved and called mom, who had raised her in foster care since Xiomara was a toddler, had died over the summer. She and her sister were separated. Her sister, who is in Hunt's class at Sanchez, is living with the foster mother's daughter-in-law. Xiomara has returned to her biological mother.

She and Hunt are bent over her report card when the girl