

# The Seattle Times

Permission to reprint or copy this article or photo, other than personal use, must be obtained from The Seattle Times. Call 206-464-3113 or e-mail [resale@seattletimes.com](mailto:resale@seattletimes.com) with your request.

## From homeless to Harvard: graduate sets sight on success

By Esmeralda Bermudez  
*Los Angeles Times*

LOS ANGELES — Khadijah Williams stepped into chemistry class and instantly tuned out the commotion.

She walked past students laughing, gossiping, napping and combing one another's hair. Past a cellphone blaring rap songs. And past a substitute teacher sitting in a near daze.

The 18-year-old settled into an empty table, flipped open her physics book and focused. Nothing mattered except homework.

"No wonder you're going to Harvard," a girl teased her.

Williams is known as "Harvard girl," the "smart girl" and the girl with the contagious smile who landed at Jefferson High School 18 months ago.

What students don't know is that she is also a homeless girl.

As long as she can remember, Williams has floated from shelters to motels to armories along the West Coast with her mother. She has attended 12 schools in 12 years; lived out of garbage bags among pimps, prostitutes and drug dealers. Every morning, she made sure she didn't smell or look disheveled.

On the streets, she learned how to hunt for a meal, plot the next bus route and help choose a



BRIAN VANDER BRUG / TPN

Khadijah Williams, center, models her senior graduation cap and gown to her mother, Chantwaun Williams, left, and her sister Jeanine, 11, at her mother's storage unit in Los Angeles.



BRIAN VANDER BRUG / TPN

Khadijah Williams is going to Harvard despite being homeless and attending 12 schools in 12 years.

secure place to sleep, survival skills she applied to her education.

Only a few mentors and Harvard officials knew her background. She never wanted other students to know her secret, not until her plane left for the East Coast hours after her graduation Friday evening.

"I was so proud of being smart, I never wanted people to say, 'You got the easy way out because you're homeless,' " she said. "I never saw it as an excuse."

In her college essays, she wrote, "I have felt the anger at having to catch up in school ... being bullied because they knew I was poor, different, and read too much. I knew that if I wanted to become a smart, successful scholar, I should talk to other smart people."

Williams was in third grade when she realized the power of test scores, placing in the 99th percentile on a state of California exam. Her teachers marked the 9-year-old as gifted, a special category Williams, even at that age, vowed to keep.

In the years that followed, her mother, Chantwuan Williams, pulled her out of school eight more times. When shelters closed, money ran out or her mother did not feel safe, they packed what little they carried and boarded buses to find housing in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Ventura, San Diego, San Bernardino and Orange County, staying for months, at most, in one place.

She finished only half of fourth grade, half of fifth and skipped sixth. Seventh grade was split between Los Angeles and San Diego. Eighth grade consisted of two weeks in San Bernardino.

At every stop, Williams pushed to keep herself in each school's gifted program. She read nutrition charts, newspapers and four to five books a month, anything to transport her mind away from the chaos and the sour smell.

At school, she was the outsider. At the shelter, she was often bullied. "You ain't college-bound," the pimps barked. "You live in Skid Row!"

In 10th grade, she realized that if she wanted to succeed, she couldn't do it alone. She began to reach out to organizations and mentors: the Upward Bound Program, Higher Edge L.A., Experience Berkeley and South Central Scholars; teachers, counselors and college alumni networks. They helped her enroll in summer community-college classes, gave her access to computers and scholarship applications and taught her about networking.

When she enrolled in the fall of her junior year at Jefferson High School, about five miles southeast of downtown Los Angeles, she was determined to stay put, regardless of where her mother moved. Graduation was not far off, and she needed strong college letters of recommendation from teachers who were familiar with her work.

This soon meant commuting by bus from an Orange County armory. She awoke at 4 a.m. and returned at 11 p.m., and kept her grade-point average at just below 4.0 while participating in the Academic Decathlon, the debate team and leading the school's track and field team.

"That's when I was really stressed," she said of that time.

Williams graduated Friday evening with high honors, fourth in her class. She was accepted to more than 20 universities nationwide, including Brown, Columbia, Amherst and Williams. She chose a full scholarship to Harvard and aspires to become an education attorney.

### Questions not asked

There are questions about her mother that Williams is not ready to ask, answers she is not ready to hear. How did her mother end up on the streets? How come she never found a stable home for her daughters? Why wasn't there family to turn to, no father, no grandparents? And what will become of her little sister?

"I don't know. I don't know," is often her response. Ask personal questions about her mother and the fire in her eyes turns dim. She knows when she arrives in Cambridge, Mass., she will need to seek counseling.

She knows she was born in Brooklyn to a 14-year-old mother. She thinks her mother may have tried to attend school, but the stress of a baby proved too much. When Williams was a toddler, they moved to California. A few years later, Jeanine, her younger sister, was born.

She has chosen not to criticize her mother. Instead, Williams said she inspired her to learn. "She would tell me I had a gift; she would call me Oprah."

When her college applications were due in December, James and Patricia London of South Central Scholars invited Williams to their home in Rancho Palos Verdes to help her write her essays.

When they went to return her to the shelter, her mother and sister were gone.

She accepted the Londons' invitation to spend the rest of her school year with them.

In their hilltop home, Williams learned a new set of lessons. The orthopedic doctor and nurse taught her table manners, money management and grooming.

She won't be the first homeless student to arrive at Harvard.

Julie Hilden, the Harvard interviewer who met with her to gauge whether she should be accepted, said it was clear from the start that Williams was a top candidate. But school officials had to make sure they could provide what she needed to make the transition successful.

They plan to connect her with faculty mentors and potentially, a host family to check in with every so often. She will also attend a Harvard summer program at Cornell University to take college-prep courses.

"I strongly recommended her," Hilden said.

### Around strangers

Williams expected to feel more connected after nearly two years at Jefferson, to make at least

one good friend.

Students flock to the smart girl for help with homework and tests and class questions. She walks through campus tenderly waving and smiling and complimenting everyone she knows.

But when prom pictures arrive, they show her posing alone. In her yearbook, hundreds of familiar faces look back, but the memories are missing.

"It's a nice, glossy, shiny, colorful yearbook," she said. "But it feels like they're all strangers. I'm nowhere in these pages."

In the past six months, she saw her mother only a few times and on Thursday tried to find her. She headed to a South Los Angeles storage facility where they last stored their belongings.

She found her mother sitting on a garbage bag full of clothes.

"Khadijah's here!" her sister Jeanine yells. Her mother's face brightened.

She explained the details of her graduation, the bus route to get there and gave her mother a prom picture.

There is no talk of coming home for Thanksgiving or Christmas.

Proudly, Williams modeled her graduation cap and gown and practiced switching the tassel from left to right as she would during the ceremony.

"Look at you," her mother says. "You're really going to Harvard, huh?"

"Yeah," she says, pausing. "I'm going to Harvard."

Copyright © 2009 The Seattle Times Company