

FR1ENDS of the CH1LDREN

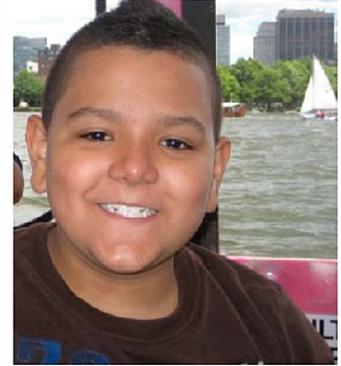
Boston

Manuel's* Story

My name is Manuel. I am 19 years-old, and I have been an Achiever with *Friends of the Children* since I was 7 years-old.

Even though I am still young, I have had an interesting life journey. I was born with a rare condition that makes it hard for me to breath. Ever since I was a baby, I have had to wear a vibrating machine every night that makes sure that my lungs can work properly. All of my organs are also on the opposite side of where they should be. That might sound scary and worrisome to you, but I really enjoy confusing people when I put my hand on my right chest when they ask me where my heart is!

My family worked really hard at keeping me safe, but my health issues are challenging. When *Friends of the Children* chose me to be a part of the program, school was a real struggle for me. I didn't know my ABC's and you could Just forget about me doing any math. I also had a hard time building relationships with other kids my age or adults. *Friends of the Children* and my mentors helped me with my homework and took me to new places to try new things. I started to improve in school and began to have more confidence to make friends.



Seven years ago, I met Jesse, the professional mentor assigned to me. I didn't know it back then, but he would become one of the most important people in my life. Jesse cares about me in ways that not many people in my life do.



When I first met Jesse, I was really struggling to convince my parents to let me be more independent. I understand why my parents worry. Because of my illness, being outdoors can potentially make me sick. On top of that, we lived in a neighborhood where there's a lot of street violence. So I spent a lot of my time in my house and not going anywhere.

When I learned about a local program that allows youth to build their own bicycles, I knew that was my opportunity. For someone like me who has a tough time breathing, riding a bike might not sound like a good idea. But I knew that it would make me healthier, and give me a way to gain my independence. Jesse helped me with my application to the program, and helped me practice for my interview. I am proud to say, I finished the program and now have a job as a youth cycling instructor!

Jesse really helped me build my confidence to try more and more every day. The highlight of the year was when Jesse and I participated in the 25-mile Rodman Ride with Team Friends. That was a good day!

Jesse is more than a mentor. He's like a brother to me. When I was hospitalized twice this year and had to miss 31 days of school, I was very upset. But Jesse was there. He would visit me at the hospital to keep me company and bring me my homework so I wouldn't fall behind in school. When I would get restless in my room, he and I would take walks around the hospital. He would text me bad jokes to bring me out of a bad mood. That's how much he cares.



12 years ago, I was a scared little kid who really struggled with everything. Now, I am really hopeful for my future. I am enrolled at the Benjamin Franklin Institute of Technology (BFIT), and while I still bike, I upgraded to a pick-up truck that I love to tinker with. I know Jesse will be there to support me every step of the way even though I am technically an alumni. I also want to take this opportunity also thank my parents for taking such great care of me. I know you sacrifice a lot to make sure I have what I need to be healthy. Thank you. And Jesse, thank you for being the best mentor! Thank you to everyone who is here tonight to support the organization that has changed my life!

