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The High School Kinship of Cristal and Queen

By [SARA RIMER](#)

The Dominican boys in the back of the freshman English class at the high school in Washington Heights were making fun of the timid African-American girl, Queen Bond. One of the boys got down on one knee in front of her as if he were Romeo — they had been studying “Romeo and Juliet” — and delivered the final crushing insult.

“He was saying something about that I smelled,” recalled Queen, now 17. “I just put my head down. I started crying.”

Then something remarkable happened, she said: “Cristal stood up.” Cool, streetwise, 4-foot-11-inch Cristal Pimentel.

“This short, like, two-foot-tall person is standing up to these guys who are up to the ceiling,” Queen said. “She’s screaming, getting angry, waving her arms. She stood up, she defended me. No one ever stood up for me in that way.

“I’m, like, ‘Wow, this girl is the most beautiful person.’ ”

For four years now, Queen and Cristal have been a team: two teenage girls who are striving to make something of themselves in the face of tremendous adversity.

They graduated together yesterday from the High School of International Business and Finance, a duo who beat the odds in a school system where despite improvements, only 50 percent of high school students graduated on time last June, according to state statistics.

Cristal, who is 18, is the first person in her family to earn a high school diploma. Queen is the first of seven children — she has two older brothers — to graduate.

How they did it is a story of two outsiders who found each other in one of the small schools the city has turned to in an attempt to break up large high schools that, with graduation rates of 25 to 40 percent, became known as factories of failure.

Queen and Cristal’s school, with roughly 700 students, is one of four high schools in what had been the severely overcrowded, failing George Washington High School, in a predominantly Dominican neighborhood. The two girls are exactly the kind of students that Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) and Schools Chancellor [Joel I. Klein](#) are trying to find ways to reach.

Michele Cahill, Mr. Klein’s former senior counselor for educational policy, said the administration found that

too often, students like these two were likely to be viewed as lost.

“By the time they got to high school,” she said, “there was a pervasive view that for students like Cristal and Queen, because of their poverty combined with their poor skills, high school graduation was too high a bar.”

Cristal’s first language is English, but her parents are Dominican immigrants, and she says that she somehow ended up in classes in English as a second language until the eighth grade. “I thought I was stupid,” she said.

By the time Cristal and Queen were freshmen, their math and reading skills were well below grade level, and school administrators considered them “at risk”: at risk of failing and dropping out.

The high school, with graduation rates higher than the citywide average, turned out to be a place where they discovered talents and aspirations they never knew they had. “They turned on the switch,” Cristal said. “It’s like my brain opened up.”

Cristal was initially assigned to Washington Irving, a large school downtown where she said she felt lost. She left with a “safety transfer” after being attacked on a subway platform near the school and testifying against her assailant.

She arrived at her new school in November of freshman year. “Everyone was saying, ‘Oh, you’re the new girl,’ ” she said. “I’m, like, ‘Yeah, I’m the new girl, get over it.’ ”

Queen, meanwhile, was struggling to adjust as one of only a handful of African-Americans in a predominantly Dominican school.

“I was afraid to be that stereotype: the crazy African-American girl,” Queen said between classes the other day as she and Cristal talked about their friendship.

Once Queen began standing up for herself, Cristal said, the other students began to accept her.

It was not until they were juniors that Cristal told Queen her story. As a little girl, Cristal said, she watched, terrified, as her father beat her mother, and as both parents descended into drugs. She was 12 when she landed in the foster care system, and ever since, she had been getting herself and her younger sister to school while they bounced around. They have been in 10 foster homes, each move involving the humiliation of dragging their things to the street in suitcases and garbage bags so the social worker could drive them to the next home.

“Oh my God, I cried when she told me,” Queen said. “To be rejected like that, and still have kindness in her heart to accept me.”

Last September, Cristal threw a surprise party at the school for Queen’s birthday. Afterward, Queen and Cristal’s other friend, Julianny, went to Cristal’s apartment to help her carry her bags down the five flights of stairs for yet another move, in Washington Heights.

Cristal has spent years talking things through with her and Queen’s honors English teacher, Carol Smith, who is also the assistant principal for humanities. “Ms. Smith made me feel that everything that happened wasn’t

my fault,” Cristal said. “She said I was a shining light, that I’m a great person.”

Whatever Ms. Smith and the school offered, Cristal and Queen grabbed. R.O.T.C. training for discipline. Saturday classes. Extra tutoring. Writing 15-page research papers. Reading literature: “Hamlet,” “The Catcher in the Rye,” “To Kill a Mockingbird.”

“Oh, my God, ‘To Kill a Mockingbird,’ ” Queen said. “I love that book.”

Both girls blossomed in the performing arts, joining the choir and the theater group. They never missed a chance at a school trip — with free tickets — to a Broadway show.

Cristal, whose big voice Queen compares to Whitney Houston’s, sang a solo at graduation. Queen has carved out an identity as an actress and comedian. “Whenever I’m having a bad day, I have to call Queen,” Cristal said. “ ‘Queen, can you come over and make me laugh?’ Queen is the funniest person.”

Queen and Cristal are graduating with B-plus averages and glowing teacher recommendations. But getting into college was a huge hurdle, from how to pay for it to how to crack the SAT.

“Ms. Smith bought us books with her own money to help us with our vocabulary for the SAT,” Queen said. Both girls’ scores were around the school’s median score of less than 1000 out of 2400.

The girls applied to many four-year state and city schools, but by mid-June all Queen and Cristal had were rejections. Then on Tuesday, Cristal learned that she had been accepted at the State University at New Paltz, where she had applied through the state’s Educational Opportunity Program, which offers grants, and special consideration, to qualified economically disadvantaged students.

Lisa Chase, the director of the program at New Paltz, said she was impressed by Cristal’s strong high school record, writing samples and recommendations, as well as the drive she had shown in overcoming obstacles.

Cristal’s reaction: “I was screaming and crying. I fell on my knees to the floor, I was so happy.”

Queen, meanwhile, has more pressing worries than college. Her father, 42, who supports the family by working overnight shifts as a security guard, had a stroke two weeks ago. He is now recovering at their home, at the northern edge of Harlem.

Queen was planning to go to Bronx Community College. Inspired by Cristal, however, she submitted a last-minute application through the Educational Opportunity Program to New Paltz.

She worries about being parted from Cristal. “I’m so used to her being my support system,” Queen said. “I love her so much.”

Said Cristal: “I consider Queen, my other friend Julianny and Ms. Smith to be my family. That’s the closest I’ve gotten to a family that cares and loves me.”

