[Snap Judgment intro]

**Glynn:** Do you know what is wonderful, terrifying, enlightening, scary, all wrapped up in one hormonal package? Growing up. Growing up is the greatest story ever told. So, at Snap Judgment, we went back to high school, senior year. And a few years ago, we brought you this story following three high school seniors in San Francisco, California, as they launched out into the world. A lot of people told us they love this piece. So, we're bringing it to you again. But listen at the end, because this time, we've got updates about the kids, now young adults, that we follow in this piece.

The school is Mission High. It's right in the middle of this crazy time and place, a school where both wealth and poverty sit side by side. And we chose it because more than anything, it's a school with heart. A team of Snap producers followed three Mission High School seniors for a year as they hurdled toward adulthood. We begin with our own Anna Sussman. Snap Judgment.

**Anna:** I am walking up to Mission High School, and kids are leaving. Lots of blue jeans, lots of tank tops, lots of candy. And I'm looking for Chandra, who is our friend, who works down in the Wellness Center. Hey.

**Chandra:** Oh, hello. How are you?

**Anna:** Good. Our friend, Chandra Shivakumar, runs the Wellness Center here at Mission High. Can we go down to the Wellness Center? Is that right?

**Chandra:** Yeah, let's go on down.

**Anna:** It's a place down in the basement, where kids come if they're feeling overwhelmed or if they're having trouble at home. Wellness down this door. There's a room full of thrift store couches, punching bag, fresh fruit on a desk, a basket of condoms outside a counselor's door.

**Chandra:** See, you got this nice sign here. Looking for someone who will listen when you need someone to talk to, the wellness program is here.

**Anna:** Yeah. And that's you.

**Chandra:** Yeah. Covers up all the mold.

**Anna:** They have a mindfulness club and a surf club. Chandra has worked for 10 years to make this a place that helps kids feel safe and supported. There's always some kids down here hiding for a few minutes from the world, eating junk food and joking with counselors. He introduced three Snap Judgment producers to three kids that are Wellness Center super friends, kids that have had some serious trauma thrown at their young lives and who have fought back to keep on track. We're going to follow these three kids through their whole senior year as they cross over from kids to adults, and get ready to step out into a San Francisco that's moving very quickly at a time when making it seems particularly daunting.

**Wrestling Coach:** Here are the morning announcements. Bling-bling tutoring is happening today after school in room 322 from the wrestling coach.

**Anna:** Okay. So, our first kid, Damaris, is the poster child of Mission High School. Really, there's a poster in one of Mission's hallways. It's a headshot of Damaris for the youth leadership club. She's also captain of the Debate team and President of the black student union.

**Brantin:** But she's not just some Goody Two Shoes.

**Damaris:** I'm over here like, "I got to be a Becky and be nice."

**Brantin:** No.

**Damaris:** [laughs]

**Anna:** Our producer, Adizah Eghan, spent the year with her.

**Adizah:** Damaris is outspoken, and she wears her hair natural, in a teeny-weeny afro.

**Damaris:** I love to laugh, I love to smile and do what a teen does. Ooh, do-do.

**Alex:** Uh, you tracking me.

**Damaris:** Oh.

**Adizah:** Damaris has two best friends, and they always meet up at lunch because Damaris is often too busy with clubs or work after school.

**Damaris:** Looks like we're on time.

**Adizah:** Ever since she was a little girl, Damaris has wanted to be a lawyer. So, college is a really important first step for her. She's basically crafted a master plan. College, then law school, then success. So, this year, senior year is everything.

**Damaris:** Truth be told, I just want good grades, get my life together, and get the hell up out of California. I want to go to school on the East Coast. I think it's good to go out and explore somewhere different, somewhere that you're not so accustomed to.

**Adizah:** Damaris has lived in San Francisco her entire life. She lives in an affordable housing complex with her mom in a neighborhood called Potrero Hill. The neighborhood is gentrified. It's the kind of place where you can get a $16 cup of coffee. And Damaris doesn't see herself here anymore.

**Damaris:** I'm tired of San Francisco. People say, "Oh, well, there is a big economic boom going on, and there's just so many opportunities." But it's like, I'm not a techie. I want to have a career where I can go out there and actually make change. That's who I am. I feel like San Francisco can't really help me achieve that goal. It's like, we can't afford nothing if we even want to stay home. It's just can't get no job. It's like, bleh.

**Adizah:** But in order to leave San Francisco, Damaris needs to get a scholarship to a good college on the East Coast. It's pretty much all she ever talks about that and how she's so afraid of getting stuck here in the city that community college is not an option for her.

**Damaris:** With all this pressure and having to think about college and what you want to do, but also maintain what's going on here in high school, it's stressful as hell because then you're like, "I can't bounce it all at once."

**Adizah:** She's got all these people rooting for her and she's terrified of letting them down, especially her mom. She's hoping Damaris will be the first in the family to go to a four-year college.

**Damaris:** She's always been adamant on going to college, going to school, like, doing something productive. There would be moments where she was like, "Don't work the rest of your life like me and your sister. You need to get out of your mama house." Looking at my family, seeing how everybody's just working for their lives or seeing how everybody's just stuck, there is pressure involved because I want to do better. I want to make my mom proud. I want to make my family feel proud. Trying to live up to somebody else's expectations is not easy.

**Adizah:** Damaris's mom got pregnant young.

**Damaris:** It becomes like that stereotypical thing. My dad was like a paralegal. He ended up--

**Adizah:** Her family was getting by. But at some point, her dad felt like he just wasn't making quite enough money, especially with a family to support in San Francisco. So, he made a choice. He pulled an illegal side hustle, and he landed in jail.

**Damaris:** My dad was in and out of jail a lot. I was just with that narrative of like a single mom trying to do good for her kids.

**Adizah:** Damaris is trying to do good for her mom.

[intriguing music]

**Anna:** So, what does that look like?

**Adizah:** Trying to do go for her mom?

**Anna:** Yeah.

**Adizah:** Well, she gets good grades, she gets decent grades, she does all these extracurriculars, and then she's got to make money. So, she makes all her own money for herself.

**Anna:** So, she has a job on top of it?

**Adizah:** Yes.

[sounds]

**Damaris:** Is the case looking streaky, because I feel like it is?

**Adizah:** It's after 10:00 on a Wednesday night, Damaris is polishing the ice cream case at Bi-Rite Creamery, an ice cream parlor next to Mission High. She's just about to finish her shift. Damaris is working five nights a week. She gets off around midnight and class starts every morning at 08:00 AM.

**Damaris:** [laughs] I can't be too [unintelligible [00:08:35] as I put myself through this predicament. I was being greedy. I said I want me a fatter paycheck, so I decided to work Monday through Friday.

**Adizah:** Damaris needs the money. She has to pay for the SAT, the ACT, and her college applications. She's also saving up for college itself. Remember, Damaris is still 17.

**Damaris:** I feel angry when you have to pay all this money, and put in all this time and effort to apply for colleges and do what's necessary, and yet, it's not even guaranteed that you're going to get in. You're overwhelmed, you're exhausted, you're tired. It's like, "What am I doing? Are we good? Yeah, we got the okay, wait for me to get the hell up out of here."

**Adizah:** It's almost midnight and normally, Damaris walks the one mile from the ice cream shop to her home. But tonight, I offer her a ride home. She's reluctant to accept. She doesn't want to be a burden. Seatbelt on?

**Damaris:** Oh, no. [laughs] Thank you for the ride. I really appreciate it.

**Adizah:** No problem.

**Damaris:** Okay.

**Adizah:** So, normally you walk home?

**Damaris:** Mm-hmm.

**Adizah:** Do you feel safe?

**Damaris:** I don't know, just recently, there's been like a lot of prostitutes, and I would look at stuff like that. I look at the homeless camps or little tents that be in where I walk at.

**Adizah:** Walking past these tent cities at a time when she's thinking so intensely about her own future success and failure, Damaris's mind starts to race.

Speaker 4: I look at them, and it's one of those things where it's like, "I don't want to end up like this. I don't like seeing this. I don't want to be around this no more."

**Adizah:** What I was worried would happen did. Damaris gets so busy with work. She has to miss a debate meet, and she can't keep up with her schoolwork, and she just starts to crack a little and then a lot.

**Damaris:** I had counselors saying, "It makes no sense. You're such a smart girl. You should have a 4.0. Your attendance needs to better, and you know you could do better. Why aren't you like this?" There's that part of looking at my family, seeing how everybody's just working for their lives or-- [crosstalk]

**Adizah:** In September, she was able to rattle off exactly what she wanted. And now, a few months later, she seems scattered, exhausted, and unsure of herself.

**Damaris:** I thought senior year was going to be, we're all happy, we're good to go. Like, we're motivated.

**Adizah:** And then the envelopes start trickling in, and they're small.

**Damaris:** I got rejected from UC Berkeley, UCLA, CSU, long beach, damn near Sac State. There's just little things like that. These rejection letters, and not getting scholarships and stuff. My main fear is that I'm not stable.

**Adizah:** So, when Damaris's 18th birthday comes around, she's not in the mood for any kind of attention. It's your birthday. How do you feel?

**Damaris:** I don't know how to feel. I mean, I'm 18. I'm pretty much a young adult now. I'm in the real world. So, it's been like a rough month and a half. I didn't do everything I wanted to plan to do. I felt that, what's the point anymore? You get to that stage where it's like, "Damn, what really have I accomplished in life?" And I'm like, "Damn."

**Male Speaker:** I got on white. Come on. And I got a blue jean on top of that.

**Adizah:** Later that day, I walk with Damaris into her economics class.

**Male Speaker:** Happy birthday, Damaris. 18, today. Is it true?

**Female Speaker:** Why did you do that?

**Unison:** Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday dear, Damaris. [laughs] Happy birthday to you.

**Adizah:** By the time they end the song, Damaris has a grin on her face. She looks a little embarrassed, but also appreciative.

**Male Speaker:** That is why I did--

**Adizah:** The next time I'm at Mission High, I pass by that poster in the hallway, the one that's for youth leadership with the headshot of Damaris. Well, just below the poster is the door to the college counselor's office.

**Daphne:** Hi, how's it going?

**Adizah:** When I look inside, I see Damaris. She's crying.

**Damaris:** [unintelligible [00:13:22]

**Daphne:** How are you? You need a hug?

**Damaris:** I need Jesus. [crosstalk]

**Female Speaker:** [laughs] You got Him already.

**Daphne:** What's going on?

**Damaris:** [unintelligible [00:13:37].

**Daphne:** We're almost done.

**Damaris:** I don't mean nothing. I got to give them money. I'm going to be broke. I don't go to prom no more. I'm so tired.

[upbeat music]

**Anna:** What happened to Damaris?

**Adizah:** She's going to fail AP Environmental Science.

**Anna:** Can she beg her teacher to take makeup work?

**Adizah:** No, the teacher is not taking any more makeup work.

**Anna:** So, what can she do?

**Adizah:** She doesn't really know what to do. So, she's at her counselor's office right now trying to figure out how she can maybe drop the course or if there's any other options. But really, this counselor, Daphne Davis, she's her last hope.

**Anna:** What does it mean if she fails Environmental Science?

**Adizah:** She might not be able to go to college.

**Daphne:** You got to remember all these other students out here looking at you. That's why I'm going to give it to you, sometimes. You're not going to like what I say to you, but you know it's going to be real, okay? So, that's never going to change, no matter if you call me and you 52 and I'll be 35, of course. [laughs] You said what?

**Damaris:** [unintelligible [00:15:06]

**Daphne:** All right, I'm sending this off right now regarding AP Environmental Science, and hopefully, they will give me the okay on this one. Okay.

**Damaris:** Thank you so much.

**Daphne:** You are very welcome, babe. Love you.

**Adizah:** Damaris walks out of Ms. Davis's office into the hallway.

**Damaris:** Everybody else is doing this and that or Instagram. It's like people going to prom, I'm not going to prom. Or, then it's like, people excited for graduation. "Hell, [beep] don't even know if she was going to graduate on time." It's little things like that. We just sit here like, "Okay. Life is not what I expected it to be right now."

**Adizah:** On top of all that, Damaris worries that the few colleges she got into will take away her acceptance letters.

**Glynn:** When Sanp Judgment returns, Damaris has 1ft out of the door, but no idea where she's going. We'll find out what happens when a high school student has no place to call home. Stay tuned.

Welcome back to Snap Judgment, The Senior Year Mixtape episode. We're taking you inside the world of three graduating seniors at San Francisco's Mission High School. They're gearing up to launch into a pretty terrifying world, but in the meantime, they have to fight off their own demons. Snap Judgment.

[tense music]

**Anna:** In last year's yearbook, there's a junior voted most likely to be a movie star. In the yearbook picture, Brantin's looking at the camera skeptically with arched eyebrows and pouty lips. He's hard to miss, but he had a problem that year, his junior year, of not showing up at school. Chandra was actually searching for him for weeks.

**Chandra:** And all of a sudden, one day, he shows up in my office like, "Oh, how are you? How's it going?" He's like, "Well, it's not that. Just I was just on BART, and there was this jerk on BART calling me all these like racist, homophobic stuff. And then he said, "Oh, yeah, but that's not even the bad part." He's like, "Well, that same guy stabbed me. I'm okay. The paramedics showed up. They bandaged me up real. Look, here's the cut."

**Anna:** Brantin came out really early. He was in 7th grade. So, whether it's at school or on the train, he's pretty used to taking crap for being gay or for being black or for both, and he's used to fighting back. This year, his senior year, our producer, Eliza Smith, met him in September.

**Eliza:** Do you feel like you hear homophobic comments from the young freshmen who come in too?

**Brantin:** Not a lot. It's more like they're using gay as a slur.

**Eliza:** So, how do you deal with that, you hear that [unintelligible [00:18:21]?

**Brantin:** Okay. What you guys are saying is not cool. Yo, my girl, how are you? How you see me like forever, how are you?

**Anna:** As Brantin walks through the halls and out onto the front steps of Mission High, he waves at almost everyone and calls to them.

**Brantin:** Hey, honey.

**Anna:** Sometimes, he's teasing. Other times, he's yelling out a compliment.

**Female Speaker:** You know everybody.

**Brantin:** I only know few people.

**Female Speaker:** You just said hi to 10 people on the hallway.

**Brantin:** Only the problem is, I'm really bad at names. I'm so bad at names.

**Anna:** Brantin's actually had a very tough couple years. Two years ago, when Brantin was a sophomore, he'd been living at his stepdad's house with his mom and siblings. Then his mom and stepdad broke up, all of a sudden, Brantin and his little brother and his little sister and his mom were homeless.

**Brantin:** I was really not happy about that. It was tough. It was very tough.

**Anna:** First, they moved in with family members, staying only for short spurts, so that they wouldn't burden anyone. They slept in living rooms, on couches.

**Brantin:**: There was no space for us, or we're taking a lot of space, or we're taking a lot of food. So, we just moved to place to place to place.

**Anna:** In San Francisco, you need to put down at least $5,000 for a one-bedroom apartment. That's first and last month's rent, plus a security deposit. Brantin's mom was looking for a place for her and her kids. She had a job, but couldn't get enough money together.

**Brantin:** We finally moved into the shelter. We definitely didn't feel welcomed. Like, the people who are supposedly "helping us" was definitely not helping us, were very rude. It didn't feel right. It felt more like a prison than anything. I had no privacy, and that killed me. I was always like, "I want to be on my phone. I want to talk on the phone with people that I want to talk to, but I can't, because the shelter, you look like you slept in the exact same room." You would just hear crying. You would hear people arguing or something, just stuff. You would just hear people just conversating.

**Anna:** He only had the clothes that would fit in a suitcase under his bed. There was no laundry, so it was hard to stay clean.

**Brantin:** They gave us five-minute showers, which was not enough.

**Anna:** And then there was the uncertainty. Brantin didn't know when they would find a home again. They lived in the shelter about half a year until Brantin's mom found them an apartment in an affordable housing complex. He had his own shower, his own room, his own space again.

**Brantin:** I was just so used to just having to be misplaced. That was like, "Okay, how long are we going to stay here? How long is it we're going to be here until something happens and we're back on the street?" So, for a while, I was on edge. I didn't even want to call my room a room because of that. I want to have my own spot and then just be comfortable. I want to have my own nice stuff. For me, it doesn't have to be great. It's just I want my own stuff and I want my own place to call myself home.

**Anna:** Mission High is as close to a home as Brantin has right now. He's been homeless, he's been harassed on the street, stabbed. He's always been able to come back to Mission High, but he knows it's coming to an end.

**Brantin:** Me and my best friend had a list of things that we want to get done before high school would even end. It was just like, get an apartment, have a job. I was super, super, super afraid of college. So, I'm worried about like, "Oh, my God, how I'm going to pay for it? Oh, my God, how I'm going to do this and that?" I'm planning it. Senior year, I probably just turning 18. I'm going to have mixed emotions about and I'm like, "Okay, that's a big number. That's a legal age of an adulthood, and I'm not sure if I'm ready for that."

**Anna:** Brantin is literally taking notes on how to be an adult.

**Brantin:** I was supposed to take notes with my mom of life lessons. When I turn 18, I know what's up? What is insurance? How does that work out? Okay, explain that to me. So, when I get my insurance, I know what to say.

**Female Speaker:** Stop it. [crosstalk]

**Anna:** Eliza would see Brantin about every two weeks. And every time they talked, he would tell her how freaked out he was about turning 18. And then before he was ready, the day came.

**Eliza:** I didn't want Brantin to show up at school on his birthday feeling anxious. I wanted to do something nice for him. So, on his birthday, March 24th, I got him a cake. And Chandra and I put together a makeshift party down in Wellness.

**In Unison:** Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you.

**Eliza:** We didn't have any forks or knives, but it didn't matter. The kids were already attacking the cake with their hands. There was chocolate frosting everywhere.

**Unison:** Happy birthday to you. Yay. [applause]

**Female Speaker:** You don't like this?

**Brantin:** This is triggering but thank you.

**Female Speaker:** Oh, I don't want to make you cry.

**Chandra:** Are you legal now?

**Eliza:** Damaris comes down to Wellness to celebrate with Brantin. She gives him a hug and hands him a Sunday from the Bi-Rite where she works.

**Damaris:** You better have sugar diabetes. You better drink some water. When you die, we're going to coach you, we're going to smell like some cake. Just hella chocolate and cake.

**Anna:** Can you believe it?

**Brantin:** I'm 18?

**Anna:** You're 18.

**Brantin:** I'm 18. I'm even 21. [Anna laughs] It's nothing special. It's not you're still a baby, but you're an adult. So, it's like, I don't know, that's fun.

**Anna:** Brantin's 18. He didn't change overnight like he thought he would. In fact, he's just as anxious as he was yesterday.

[intruding music]

**Glynn:** When Snap Judgment returns, we'll meet a senior whose road to high school was longer and more dangerous than you could ever imagine. In fact, you're never going to whine about your life again, when Snap Justment returns. Stay tuned.

Welcome back to Snap Judgment, The Senior Year Mixtape. We're at Mission High in San Francisco, and we've introduced two Mission High seniors. Damaris, the poster child who's on the brink of failing AP Environmental science, and Brantin, who's got all the charisma in the universe, but is terrified of stepping out into the real world. But we've got one more student for you to meet. His name is Alex.

**Anna:** In the Wellness Center in Mission High, there's usually some kids hunting for free snacks, hiding from a class they just can't face, and there's usually a student crying to a counselor. Upstairs, there's kids in classes or flirting in the hall, kids studying the library, and there's Alex. Producer, Liz Mak is going to take it from here.

**Alex:** Okay, I want this song in my background, okay? Background of the show, I want this one. I'm about to play.

[song]

**Liz:** It's around 03:00 or 04:00 today, and Alex brings me to one of his most cherished high school hangouts. Okay, so, tell me where we are right now.

**Alex:** We are the weight room at Mission High School. We're about to go crazy.

**Liz:** What kind of crazy? Alex is a regular here. So, regular that his classmates at Mission High actually call him, the buff guy. He is this tough kid who goes through life who goes through the way he lifts weights. He has this determination and laser focus.

**Alex:** Today, I'm going to do chest and legs. I'm going to work my thighs, so I'm going to do some squats.

**Liz:** Wait, you have a tattoo?

**Alex:** Yeah, I got two.

**Liz:** What does it say?

**Alex:** This is a quote. It says, "I am the architect of my own future."

**Liz:** This tattoo is huge. It's across his whole chest incursive and it says, "I am the architect of my own future." And it's been a touchstone for Alex for the last four years. He's been living mostly on his own ever since he got here, and he's had to do everything by himself. Like, when I go with him to the orthodontist one day.

**Orthodontist:** -From then and now, you are-- [crosstalk]

**Liz:** Alex is getting his braces checked today. He has to pay the balance for these appointments every month, but he's behind on his payments.

**Orthodontist:** Because you have a balance, and in order for us to see you, you got to be current with that balance.

**Alex:** Okay.

**Liz:** So, he puts down $500, half of it in cash. This isn't money from his mom or his dad. Alex pays for everything on his own.

**Alex:** It's only like $200, like $180 every month, school.

[tense music]

**Liz:** If you're wondering why a high schooler is paying for orthodontist bills by himself, it's because Alex is here alone. A few years ago, when he was 16, he came to the US from El Salvador. He had no friends, he had no family he could count on, and he didn't speak English. While his classmates were worried about earning good grades and getting into college, he was trying to figure out how to make enough money to eat.

**Alex:** I was doing bad. I was trying to get out of my situation, trying to get out of this life, trying to kill myself, basically, because I was like, "Why me? Why I'm having this life?"

**Liz:** After a year or two, he eventually made some friends, but they didn't get what he was going through. They were high school kids, and they saw his life and thought that being on his own with no adult telling him what to do sounded great.

**Alex:** I was like, "No, that's not what I want. You don't know what I'm suffering though. I got to wake up every day to work, and I come to school because I want to."

**Liz:** Does it make you mad that you can't just be like a regular teenager?

**Alex:** Yeah, all the time. Yeah. I have like a 40-year-old's life and I'm just 19.

[intriguing music]

**Liz:** Alex just said he lives like a 40-year-old when he's only 19. But at the same time, he also lives the life of a senior in high school. And this year, things are looking up. Alex has a best friend, Jamie. He has a girlfriend at school, and he started to plan out his future. He wants to go to college. He wants to become an engineer, but there's still this one thing.

**Alex:** It's being over six months already.

**Liz:** Alex is waiting. After he came from El Salvador, and got a job, figured out the language, and saved up, he got a lawyer, and he filed paperwork to ask for asylum, basically to get permission to stay here in the US legally. What happens if you get denied? You don't think about it?

**Alex:** Yeah, I had that in my mind though, but I don't want to think about it. That's not an option for me. Well, I will try. I can get nothing in that way. I will try another way, I can get denying that way, I will try many ways. I don't give up so easy though until I get it.

**Liz:** A few years ago, Alex lived in El Salvador with his four younger siblings, his mom and his stepdad. They had just opened up an auto body shop.

**Alex:** We were doing good.

**Liz:** It was a small business, and they had so little money that they split the shop in half with a clothesline and hung a blanket over it. Alex and his family lived and slept in the back behind the blanket. Alex's stepdad wasn't really the kind of guy you could rely on when it came to running the auto shop.

**Alex:** He wasn't even showing up for days.

**Liz:** So, Alex and his little brother, Ronaldo, started running the shop themselves. They'd manned the shops, and fix power steering, kind of muddled their way through it. Alex was just 16 at the time. He was actually there at the shop one evening when these men came in.

**Alex:** Like 05:00 PM. 05:00 PM in the evening.

**Liz:** These were gangsters saying that in order to protect the business, they'd need a tax from the auto shop. Basically, unless they paid up, the men would make trouble.

**Alex:** Either you pay us or some member of your family going to die. At that point, I was only me there, right? All my family is behind a blanket.

**Liz:** Because Alex was the only one there, they told him he was responsible. They said, he'd have to pay them $300 a week, that's US dollars, in order to stay alive.

**Alex:** So, you were scared like, "What's going to happen?"

**Liz:** Did you think you were going to die?

**Alex:** Yeah. There's no way we can get $300 a week every week.

**Liz:** There weren't any other options. He had to escape to the US. His mom decided she was going to go with him. So, the two headed north with the group crossing through Mexico. When they reached a Mexican town at the border, they tried to cross into the US through the woods in the earliest hours of the morning. Alex walked in a line of people. That's when they heard helicopters overhead. And the coyote, the one leading the group they were in, stopped the line of people following him, saying he'd go and check it out. He told them to wait.

**Alex:** And then pass 30 minutes, 40 minutes, an hour, two hours waiting there. It's already daytime. It's already like 08: 00 in the morning. And then everybody starts saying, "They left. They left us." Anybody getting freaking out like, "What can I do?"

**Liz:** They didn't know which way the border was, and they were scared of getting caught by the agents on patrol. So, when they saw some heading their way, they ran.

**Alex:** Everybody started running crazy. You see people running everywhere like little ants. It was that crazy. So, I got separated with my mama.

**Anna:** You have to imagine this panic and this confusion with all these terrified people running everywhere. And in the commotion, Alex and his mom were split apart. Alex isn't sure how, but his mom managed to make it to San Francisco. Alex didn't. At the border, he was taken to a shelter in Harlingen, Texas. He was 16 years and he was alone. He was there for three months until the shelter managed to make contact with some family in the United States, who Alex didn't even know.

**Liz:** When Alex was released, he met up with his mom in San Francisco. They were able to stay with distant family and started their life together here in the US. His relatives wanted Alex to get a full-time job, so he could contribute to the household. But Alex wanted to get an education, so he went to Mission High during the day and then worked jobs at night, busting tables. That's how his life in the States was, until one day, when his mom left. She didn't even tell Alex where. And soon after, his relatives told him he had to leave too. What do you miss most about your family?

**Alex:** What do I miss? I don't know, I never had one. I don't know, I'm just here by myself.

**Liz:** Do you really think you have no feelings about it? You don't feel like you feel mad at your mom or sad or anything?

**Alex:** Mommy? Mom? I don't even remember to have mom though, until you brought it out today.

[somber music]

**Liz:** Alex told me once that he actually saw his mom on the street in San Francisco. He says she saw him too, but they kept walking. They passed right by each other without saying hello. I asked him once, "What it's like to be without your family during the holidays?" So, what was your Christmas like last year?

**Alex:** I was by myself in my room and that's it, sleeping.

**Liz:** What about the two years before that?

**Alex:** The same thing. Yeah, by myself.

**Liz:** How do you feel about Christmas?

**Alex:** Yeah, I kind of be sad though, but I just face it. Christmas is about a family, right? I don't got that.

[upbeat music]

**Anna:** In the spring, Alex tells us he has news. He got a letter about his immigration status.

**Alex:** I just open it up. He says, "Okay, Alex. Okay, [unintelligible [00:36:22]."

**Liz:** He's mumbling, but the verdict, Alex can stay. So, what's it like to read that?

**Alex:** Good, happy, release. Best feeling ever. I don't know, you're happy. You're so happy. Let's say there's chances, opportunities that you cannot take advantage of it, because you don't got no papers. But when you got the papers, you got so much opportunities, like, you can do anything you want. Now I feel like I can do anything.

**Liz:** So, do you have it with you?

**Alex:** I have my work permit.

**Liz:** What's it like to hold that?

**Alex:** I can kiss it. It's good. You know how many millions people want this? I got it, right? That's the feeling I feel.

[upbeat music]

**Liz:** He can get an ID, a Social Security card, and he can apply for scholarships, which means he can go ahead with plans for college. So, with the big question settled, Alex can finally enjoy what's left of senior year.

[song]

**Anna:** Here's Alex. A couple of months ago, he didn't know if he was legal to stay in the US. Now he's on the dance floor of his senior prom.

**Liz:** With a radio producer following him everywhere, hanging onto his every word.

**Anna:** After prom, seniors get swept up in end of the year nostalgia. Everyone's feelings are very big and full, and it's a very tender moment in life. Then they have to turn towards the door and make their first big adult decisions. Damaris managed to drop the AP Environmental Science class, and one week before graduation, she picks a college.

**Damaris:** Notre Dame deneur, de Namur? Notre Dame, some, some, some.

**Female Speaker:** Is that in the city?

**Adizah:** Notre Dame de Namur is a Catholic school with about 1,700 students. It's not on the East Coast. It's just outside San Francisco, and it's the school that gave Damaris, the most money.

**Damaris:** I had to accept Notre Dame because it was like, "Yo, I'm not hearing nothing. I have to make sure I'm going to be in college."

**Adizah:** So, how do you feel about like, you were like, "I want to get out of San Francisco. God." Technically, you're getting out, but not that far.

**Damaris:** I'm irritated. Like, I wanted to leave California so badly, but it was like, you know what, I got to feel at least somewhat blessed at the fact that I still got an opportunity to get my education, because it's like I was not expecting to feel so uncertain, because ever since middle school, I knew what I wanted to do. I'm going to be a lawyer, I'm going to have a good life, and I'm going to have a family. But as time progressed on and I seen what happened, my own personal actions, it was like, "Oh, I'm not doing what I really said I was doing." My exit was not as graceful as I had plans for it to be. I tripped out the coupe. [laughs]

**Anna:** Brantin got into one college, San Francisco state. He sat with his acceptance letter for a month, unsure what to do. And in May, he picked up the phone, and called his counselor at the college, and he told her that even though he'd been accepted and he wanted to go, he felt like he just couldn't.

**Brantin:** And then she was like, "I totally understand. This is where you can go to community college and always transfer whenever you're ready. It's just at the moment, I can tell you're not mentally prepared." And I'm telling her, "Yes, I am not mentally prepared."

**Eliza:** Do you wish you were going to college?

**Brantin:** Of course, I do. I really wish I wasn't a mess right now and not accepted about them growing up. I'm a bird. It's okay. It's okay.

**Eliza:** You said, I'm a bird. What does that mean?

**Brantin:** Just like, you know how the time that they're like in adulthood, that's when they learn how to fly. Imma grow slowly, I take my time. I wanted to take baby steps from here on out, and hopefully for the best for me.

**Female Speaker:** Joe was like, "Girl, what do we feel [unintelligible [00:41:05]?"

**Joe:** At home.

**Female Speaker 5:** That's my favorite answer. [laughs]

**Anna:** On the morning of graduation, the kids have come back down to the Wellness Center. They're giddy, spraying too much perfume, readjusting gowns and sashes, taking pictures.

**Damaris:** So, I have on the African American student sash over a yellow twinkie gown. I will stand by that. This thing is the twinkie yellow. So, I'm feeling good. I'm ready to go. I want to keep it pushing. I want to go. I'm ready. I'm ready.

**Liz:** Alex is here too. While Damaris and her friend are getting ready, the three of them are taking pictures together. Alex standing next to girls in high heels.

**Alex:** This is the end of a high. Just it's hard though. It's hard to explain.

**Liz:** Were you ever like, "I'm not sure if I'm going to make it?"

**Alex:** Yeah. Most of the time, yeah. That's why I'm excited though, because I made it. I'm happy, because I made it on my own.

**Anna:** Tell me about Alex and the signs.

**Male Speaker:** I was it took me by surprise. He came up and said, "Look, I'm hoping that some of you guys could make signs for me." And I was like, "Signs for what?" He's like, "For graduation, I want signs. Signs that say congratulations, Alex" I thought, "Oh, wow, [chuckles] I hadn't done this before, but I've never had a student ask for it." And then I realized there's literally nobody else that is going to be there for him. For a 19-year-old boy to come up and say, "Can you make a sign saying congratulations," yeah, that was really sweet. There's no way we were going to mess that one up.

**Chandra:** So proud of you, man. Look at you. Ready to graduate.

[laughter]

**Chandra:** I got to mess up on it a little bit, but I wanted you to have something at least. I'm kind of sorry.

**Female Speaker:** Hang that in your wall.

**Female Speaker:** Yeah.

**Chandra:** That's all yours, man.

**Alex:** Thank you.

**Chandra:** We'll be holding it up as you walk.

**Alex:** Thank you.

**Anna:** The kids pile into the elevator, which they haven't gotten to do until this moment because it's off limits for students. They push the button and they look up, waiting for the doors to close and the elevator to take them up to whatever comes next.

**Alex:** Bye, guys.

**In Unison:** Goodbye. Bye.

**Female Speaker:** Hurry up,Alex. Let's go.

**Female Speaker:** You're going to lift your ride to the elevator. Come on.

**Female Speaker:** Come on, Alex. Alex.

**Alex:** I love you, guys.

[crosstalk]

[intriguing music]

**Glynn:** Now, it has now been five years, five years since we spoke to these kids, now young adults. Anna Sussman took a trip back to Mission High to hear some updates.

**Anna:** We are walking up to Mission High five years later. Thank you. How are you?

**Chandra:** [unintelligible [00:44:23] Nice to see you.

**Anna:** You too.

**Chandra:** Yeah. Welcome, welcome. Come on in. Good old mission. We're still here doing our thing.

**Anna:** The very first thing he told me before we'd even gotten up the stairs and into the door, a Mission High, was that they are very, very short-staffed staff.

**Chandra:** I think every district in the country is dealing with staff shortage and turnover.

**Anna**: So, without teachers or with a different substitute every day in class, kids are leaving class a lot, and they make their way down to the Wellness Center. So, does fewer teachers mean more kids in the Wellness Center?

**Chandra:** Yeah, pretty much.

**Anna:** Chandra now runs the Wellness Center like he always did, but he also runs the front desk here and the Surf Club and the Financial Literacy Club, the Mindfulness Project, the Self Defense Group, and a Creative Writing club. Is everyone doing double duty, the whole school?

**Chandra:** Yeah, a lot of people. A lot of folks are covering classes that they don't teach. So, now I'm doing double duty, so I just manage the front and triage kids who come in.

**Anna:** So, I can't interview him in the private office, because he needs to be manning the front desk at the Wellness Center. So, we sit here and talk. Okay, so, what are the other big differences that you can--?

**Chandra:** Yeah, COVID was tough, obviously, again, affecting everyone around the country. These teenagers, the anxiety, depression rates went shooting up. We've got a bunch of kids who still have never been back at school. Hi, how are you doing?

**Anna:** There's a constant stream of kids coming down here to the basement on the day I'm here. One girl is teared up and flanked by two friends and asks for a counselor. Chandra calls out to a Spanish speaking therapist in the next room, and she comes over and waves the girl into her office. Other kids just come down, flop down on the couch, look at their phones.

**Chandra:** This is Christian.

**Anna:** Hi, Christian.

**Christian:** Hola.

**Anna:** How's it going?

**Christian:** I'm good. Hi.

**Chandra:** He's a local.

**Christian:** Hello.

**Anna:** Some say they're coming down to get tea.

**Chandra:** Hey, what's up, Nola?

**Nola:** Nothing.

**Chandra:** Here, come say hi.

**Nola:** Hello.

**Anna:** Hi, we're doing a radio story about the Wellness Center.

**Nola:** Oh, hi.

**Anna:** What's your name?

**Nola:** I'm Nola.

**Anna**: What do you like about the Wellness Center? Or, not even, what do you think about the Wellness Center? You can be honest.

**Nola:** What do I think about the wellness center? I like it. It's a really nice place where you can just come and chill for a few minutes in the middle of the day. A lot of times, school can be really overwhelming. You're here sitting around for like seven hours a day. So, it's nice to come down and have a break, have a little conversation just to heighten my mood a little bit and then go back to class. I'm here almost every single day. [laughs]

**Chandra:** Multiple times.

**Nola:** Multiple times a day. Yes. He saves my face a lot.

**Anna:** What grade are you in?

**Nola:** I'm a senior.

**Anna:** Amazing.

**Nola:** I know.

**Anna:** What do you feel like you want to do next year?

**Nola:** I want to go to college. I want to be a nurse. So, yeah, hopefully, I get into a nursing program.

**Anna:** Good job. Yeah. Nola seemed well aware that even though she was graduating this year, the door will always be open at the Wellness Center. So, when you leave, you're not really leaving.

**Nola:** I'm aware. Yes. [laughs]

**Anna:** Okay. Thank you, my dear.

**Chandra:** Alex brought us lunch last year. He's doing well. It was really fun to see that.

**Anna:** What did he you bring?

**Chandra:** Quesadillas. Yeah, from local taqueria I used to take him to. Every other week, we'd go to the same place, I'd buy him lunch. Yeah, he brought us lunch this time.

**Anna:** Alex is driving a cement mixer, but he's on the road a lot, so he didn't have time to chat with us. But the good news is, Chandra says, he's making a good salary and seems happy. Actually, Chandra and some folks at Mission High helped get him that job after he graduated.

**Chandra:** So, that's our challenge. That's an interesting and fun challenge is to help these kids find their role, their path in life, and to see kids who find it and make their way. I still get Facebook messages like, "Thank you for what you did for us. We were homeless. I was sleeping in a car. Wellness was one safe space I had." Hey, what's happening?

**Anna:** We couldn't track down Brantin. The most information we got was somebody said they ran into him at a coffee shop a few years ago and he was doing well, but that's all we know. But we were able to find Damaris.

**Damaris:** Hello. My name is Damaris Bonner. I am 24 years old, and yeah, I'm here today. [laughs] I don't even know where to start. Let's see. I went off to college. And at the beginning, I was doing great. As you can imagine, I was on student government, I was in BSU. I was doing all the things. I was on the dean's list. I was that girl for a minute, and then just things started to spiral. Found out and I was diagnosed with atypical depression at the time.

**Anna:** A year or so into college, Damaris said she was diagnosed with depression, and she felt like she just couldn't handle school, and all the demands she put on herself.

**Damaris:** It was like the universe just fell on top of me. To an extent, I didn't care anymore. I was like, "What's the point of everything?" So, I didn't finish.

**Anna:** Damaris didn't finish college. Actually, the college she went to went out of business during the pandemic, and she never went back anywhere else. And then it was actually a Mission High School teacher who called her up, and told her he thought he'd found her a job at an organization teaching young kids about food and gardening and farming. So, instead of going to law school, Damaris started taking groups of school kids to the farmers market.

**Damaris:** But it made me take a step back and realize like, "Look, there's other things that are more important." And having the top of the jobs, having the most money ain't it. I do feel like teaching students and being within just like the education field is where I need to be.

**Anna:** All right, I'm going to play you some tape of yourself.

**Damaris:** There is pressure involved, because I want to do better. I want to make my mom proud. I want to make my family feel proud. Trying to live up to somebody else's expectations is not easy.

**Anna:** From where you sit now, what would you tell yourself then?

**Damaris:** Be nice. I really don't want to cry. I don't. But just hearing that, I'm like, "I wish I was so much more kinder to myself. I wish I could hug her and let her know, like, it's okay if you don't succeed in everything. It's okay. Everything's going to be fine. You might fuck up, you might fall on your ass, but it's okay. We are on nobody's time. We are on our time and it is fine. It's perfectly fine." Being present, being at peace, being happy, that's what truly matters.

**Anna:** Damaris is looking for more work and she's going back to college. She only has two semesters left and she'll get her bachelor's degree.

**Damaris:** I want to just be content. I want to be able to make enough money to meet my basic needs, to be satisfied, to take care of my dog, take care of myself, eat good food, and just be in community with folks. So, for me, my long-term goals are to just be happy and content.

[intriguing music]

**Glynn:** To all the graduates of Mission High School and everyone about to graduate, Snap Judgment is sending you big love. Thanks to everyone who participated in this project with us. We appreciate it.

A very special thank you to our heroes, Damaris, Alex, and Brantin. Big thanks as well to Chandra Shivakumar and Mission High Principal, Eric Guthertz. You want to talk about heroes? You want to talk about people walking the walk with these kids? Talk about people loving on these kids no matter what? That's what these folks do, day in and day out and we thank them. We're going to have pictures and whatnot, stuff from the amazing Mission High School on our website, *snapjudgment.org*.

The original score for this hour was by Pat Mesiti-Miller and Renzo Gorrio. The story was produced by Adizah Eghan, Liz Mak, Eliza Smith, Mark Ristich, and Anna Sussman.

And even though this is not the news, no way this is the news. In fact, you can go back to high school 20 years later and once more get shoved into a locker with your lunch money stolen and you would still not be as far away from the news as this is. But this is PRX.

[music]

*[Transcript provided by* [*SpeechDocs Podcast Transcription*](http://www.speechdocs.com/)*]*