Ahmeed Turner, the chapter director of Say Yes Syracuse, says Say Yes Syracuse Scholar Yanira Gonzalez “is not a person who looks at all the reasons why something can’t happen.” He adds: “She is optimistic about what she can do to make something happen. She is just really, really positive.”

This fall, Yanira enrolled at Syracuse University where she is a double major in political science as well as citizenship and civic engagement, with a minor in global securities studies. She is also the first member of her family to enroll in college.

In reaching that milestone, Yanira faced any number of obstacles, not least that her biological father abandoned her at birth.

And yet, her mother, Miriam, and her husband, Luis -- who would raise Yanira as his own daughter and later adopt her (around Father’s Day) -- would provide Yanira with no small amount of inspiration. Both dropped out of high school, but resolved to return to earn their GED’s before Yanira graduated from Henninger High School in 2017 – a goal that they achieved.

But Yanira said she never would have dreamed it would have been possible (or affordable) for her to go to college without the efforts of Mr. Turner, and Say Yes Syracuse.

It was Say Yes Syracuse that arranged for Yanira to receive a last-dollar scholarship to Onondaga Community College in fall 2015, as well as enrollment in a Say Yes pre-college program the summer before (it is called the Summer Success Academy), where she learned time management and other essential skills, while taking college-level courses in English and Psychology.

Two years later, she had earned an Associate’s Degree in Criminal Justice, with honors.

Her next goal? To graduate Syracuse University and enroll in law school, with the ultimate objective of working as an immigration lawyer.

“What made me want to go to SU was that I am never satisfied with myself,” she says. “I always feel like I can do better. If I could reach the stars, I would.”