



Rosa, 10, who is a sixth-grader at Guardian Angel parochial school in Chelsea, and Isabella, 17, who is a senior at Avenues School in Chelsea.

Photo: Stefano Giovannini / Stephen Yang

METRO

# How two Girls tell two different stories about growing up in NYC

By **Dana Schuster**

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In West Chelsea, on 26th Street and 10th Avenue, two worlds intersect.

On one side of the street is Avenues, a 6-year-old, über-elite, \$50,000-a-year private school attended by the likes of Suri Cruise and the offspring of tech millionaires.

On the other side is the Chelsea-Elliott public housing projects, home to thousands of residents, many of whom live below the poverty line. A new documentary, [“Class Divide,” premiering Monday on HBO](#), delves into the disparate worlds just across the street from one another — and the children who inhabit each of them.

“The kids in the projects don’t want to just be hemmed in . . . And the Avenues kids feel that they don’t want to just be living in a gilded cage . . . even if the bars are gold,” the doc’s director, Marc Levin, tells The Post. “They don’t want to live in segregated worlds.”

Two young women who appear in the film — Isabella Simonetti, a senior at Avenues, and 10-year-old Rosa DeSantiago, who is growing up in

the projects — talked to The Post about their daily lives.

## Rosa, age 10: Sixth-grader at Guardian Angel parochial school in Chelsea

I live in the Chelsea-Elliott projects, which has six apartment buildings and runs from 25th to 27th Street and from Ninth to Tenth Avenue. The best part of growing up in the projects is that you learn how to live as a poor child. The bad thing is, you suffer a lot and you see a lot of things you're not supposed to see at this age. Like shootouts and all that stuff. We lost a good friend of ours a long time ago, Dante. It was really sad. Thank God I'm on the 20th floor, so I don't see it, only hear it. But I feel safe. My mom has been living there for 25 years with my three brothers. Our family doesn't do trouble. Ain't nobody going to touch me.

Six months ago, I moved to the Bronx part-time with my dad, who is on disability since he got shot in the leg many years ago. He hasn't worked in a while. He has so much pain, but he can also tell when it's going to rain! I split my time between his one-bedroom apartment and my mom's two-bedroom apartment in the projects. At my dad's, there's a curtain in the bedroom and there's my side of the room — which is bigger, obviously — and his side of the room. At my mom's, I sleep in bed with her. When I'm in the Bronx, I wake up at 5:30 or 6 a.m. to my cell's alarm clock, and have a granola bar or a croissant with an Ensure.



Rosa lives in the Chelsea-Elliott projects at 10th Avenue and 26th Street in Chelsea.

Photo: Stefano Giovannini

I'm in sixth grade at the Guardian Angel School, a Catholic school in Chelsea that goes until the eighth grade. [Editor's note: Tuition is \$4,385 a year and Rosa receives partial scholarships.] I've been in Catholic school since I was in kindergarten. I like it. Not to be mean, but the majority of kids in public school, they're not on the same level as me. My three older brothers went to public school, and my mom says it was a bad experience. It was really important to her that I get a better education. I wanted to go to Avenues for a while, but not anymore. I don't feel like the kids are going to be like me.

### 'My three older brothers went to

To get to school from my dad's, I usually take the 6 train express from Parkchester to 125th, then transfer to the 4 or 5, then back to the 6, and get the E train at 51st Street and take it to 23rd Street and walk to school. It takes me about an hour. My dad comes with me. When I stay at my mom's, I can sleep in until 7:15 a.m., which is nice.

**public school, and my mom says it was a bad experience ... I wanted to go to Avenues for a while, but not anymore. I don't feel like the kids are going to be like me.'**

- Rosa

All my classes are hard, but I really like math; we're learning about ratios now. In social studies, I'm learning about Greek mythology, and in science, I'm learning about the cells of the body.

My mom works as a nursing assistant in an addiction center. She doesn't make that much, so I qualify for free lunch. Today I had chicken and fries with water.

My uniform is a plaid skirt, a white blouse and sweater. You can wear acrylic nails, but you can't wear them long. After school, my parents give me money to grab a slice of pizza and a soda. Then I go to the city library on 23rd and Seventh and do my homework. At 5 p.m., my dad comes to take me home on the train. Sometimes I play basketball with kids in the Bronx — my school doesn't have sports — after doing my homework.



Rosa on her way to school in Chelsea.

Photo: Stefano Giovannini

We usually get takeout dinner from a Spanish place or cook soup or rice and beans and steak. We don't go to restaurants, because they're too expensive. After dinner, I watch Netflix on my cellphone in my room. My dad pays for my phone — everyone has one these days! I've had one since I was like 7 years old. I love "Vampire Diaries," "Orange Is the New Black" and "Pretty Little Liars." I fast-forward through the parts I'm not supposed to watch. I'll read Percy Jackson books or comics, too. I'm not a kid who likes to be on my phone 24/7 because it's unhealthy for the brain. I usually go to bed around 10. If I have a lot of homework, around 11.

I want to be a neurosurgeon when I grow up. I'm going to graduate from Columbia University. Oh my God, let me tell you girl, the first thing I'm going to do when I graduate from Columbia is party with my friends. It's going to be a celebration! It's going to be hyped. The second thing I'm going to do is thank my mom and dad for all they've done for me — especially my mom, who works so hard to help pay for my school.

### **Isabella, age 17: Senior at Avenues private school in Chelsea**

I've been at Avenues since the eighth grade. Before that, I went to the Clinton School for Writers and Artists, a public school you have to test into. It's near Union Square, but it used to be in Hell's Kitchen when I went there.

I'm an only child and live with my dad, a lawyer who works for Reuters as a legal writer and editor. We have a two-bedroom apartment in the West Village. My mom passed away eight years ago; she was a law professor.

I decided to go to Avenues because there was no public school I really wanted to go to or was that passionate about. Public schools are different — they're a much larger environment. Here, I get a much more personal education, which is good for me, and I'm lucky that my family can afford it.

**'Everyone at Avenues is pretty well-off, but there are some people who wear that on their sleeve and brag about wearing designer clothes.'**

- Isabella

I usually wake up at 6:40 a.m. by alarm and grab a bagel on my way to school. I take the E train to Avenues by myself. It's about 30 minutes. I've heard other people say their parents tell them to walk on the other side of the street from the projects when heading to school, but I've never been told that.

I'm taking a journalism class this year as an elective, and I really like that. I'm also taking a modern Middle Eastern history class that's interesting.

Starting in the 11th grade, you're allowed to go out for lunch — we have a badge system at school where you badge in and out — but I usually just eat in the cafeteria. Lunch is part of our tuition. We eat a lot of potatoes. I don't know why, maybe they're cheap! Sometimes it's hamburgers and french fries. There's always a salad bar, but I usually make myself a sandwich.

We have a dress code, not a uniform — you have to wear black and white and whatever accessories you want. They're not as strict as they used to be. I normally wear black jeans and a white button-down shirt.

Everyone at Avenues is pretty well-off, but there are some people who wear that on their sleeve and brag about wearing designer clothes, and how they take private cars to school every day, and their apartments, and their houses in the Hamptons. There are other people who are more humble. When you go to Avenues, if you're upper-middle class you can seem poor to some people, so it skews your perspective a bit.



Isabella Simonetti, 17, who has been at Avenues since the eighth grade.

Photo: Stephen Yang

School for seniors gets out at 2:15 p.m. I go to cross-country practice for the Avenues team on the West Side Highway, Monday through Thursday. It ends at 4:45, and then I go back to school and do my homework. Sometimes my teachers will stay after school, so if I have questions I can ask them. I also work on the school newspaper, the Highliner, which I founded in the 10th grade.

I take the train back home around 6 p.m. and do more work. I usually have between three and four hours of homework a day. My dad and I eat dinner around 8 p.m. We usually order in sushi from Japonica, a Japanese restaurant near our apartment, or get prepared meals from Whole Foods. I'll do some more homework after, and FaceTime with my friends or iMessage them on my computer.

**'Even if I get into my first-choice college, I'm sure I'll find something else to be stressed out about.'**

- Isabella

When my homework is done, I watch TV on my computer, a Macbook Air, which all Avenues students get on loan. I usually watch silly shows like "Gilmore Girls" because it just helps me not think. I also knit. I just started knitting a scarf. My friends make fun of me for doing it.

I'm probably going to apply to the University of Pennsylvania, early decision, but I'm not really sure. A lot of people at my school tend to keep their top choices private, because it can be so competitive. They don't want people gossiping about whether they did or didn't get into a certain school.

I'd say the hardest part of the college process for me, at least, was the standardized testing, because our school doesn't really prepare us for that. At Avenues, we're more focused on "process" versus "final answer," whereas standardized testing is just "final answer," and that's unfortunately a big part of the admissions decision. It took me a lot of effort and time to end up getting a good score.

A lot of people think once you get into a good college, you're set, but that's not the case. Even if I get into my first-choice college, I'm sure I'll find something else to be stressed out about.



Isabella at Avenues School in Chelsea.

Photo: Stephen Yang

My dream job would be to do travel writing. I'd like to start my own publication. I'm not personally concerned with being as good as my parents or being better than them. I'm more concerned with being able to do what I want to do and do it well.

I think going to public school when I was younger gave me some perspective — I don't think I'd want to send my kids to Avenues from kindergarten onward. But that depends [on whether] it changes at all — if it becomes more diversified or remains the same.

I'd love to see Avenues increase the financial aid that is given out and open up the school more to the community. When the documentary was filming, I met a few kids from the Chelsea-Elliott housing projects and showed them around our school. I know if I were in their position, I would be frustrated. But they weren't resentful. They were just open and honest.