

Gita Sankano Shares Personal Story Vignette and Framework for First-Generation College Success

Attorney and housing finance professional Gita Sankano offers a concrete framework for navigating higher education when you're the first in your family to attend college.

Annapolis, Maryland Aug 31, 2026 ([IssueWire.com](https://www.issuewire.com)) - Born in Harlem and raised in the Bronx, Gita Sankano sat in her high school guidance counselor's office staring at a stack of college applications. No one in her family had filled one out before. The forms asked about financial aid, test scores, recommendation letters, and campus visits. She didn't know where to start.

That moment, Sankano says, taught her the most important lesson of her educational journey: asking for help is not a weakness. It's a strategy.

Today, Sankano holds a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science, a Master's degree in Public Administration from CUNY John Jay College, and a Juris Doctorate from the University of Maryland School of Law, where she graduated Cum Laude in the top 20 percent of her class. She now represents the D.C. Department of Housing and Community Development in complex affordable housing finance transactions.

But she got there by building a network of mentors who could answer the questions her family couldn't.

A Four-Part Framework for First-Generation Students

Sankano's path through undergraduate, graduate, and law school revealed a pattern. The students who succeeded weren't necessarily the smartest or the most privileged. They were the ones who learned to seek guidance, work while learning, stay focused on the goal, and keep moving forward.

She breaks it down into four actions that any first-generation student can take.

Find mentors early. Sankano reached out to professors, advisors, and professionals in fields she found interesting. She asked specific questions: What classes matter most? How do you pay for graduate school? What does a day in your job actually look like? Those conversations filled in the gaps her family couldn't.

Work while you study. During graduate school, Sankano worked as an auditor at the Metropolitan Transportation Authority headquarters on Wall Street. The job taught her how organizations function, how to meet deadlines, and how to manage competing priorities. It also paid bills. Balancing work and school is hard, but it builds skills that matter after graduation.

Pursue recognition and responsibility. In law school, Sankano served as Associate Symposium Editor for the Business & Technology Law Journal and Staff Editor for The Authority National Affordable Housing Law Digest. She won the Dean's Fellow scholarship for academic performance and took first place in the Paul Cardish Writing Competition. Those roles opened doors. They also proved to her that she belonged.

Keep going forward. Sankano credits her mother, a hard-working woman who never gave up, with teaching her this lesson. There were moments when the workload felt impossible, when the financial pressure mounted, and when it seemed easier to quit. She stayed.

What Comes After the Degree

After law school, Sankano clerked for the Honorable Michael W. Reed at the Court of Special Appeals in Maryland. She then spent five years at a large law firm, counseling mortgage banking clients on loan transactions sold to secondary market investors like Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. She coordinated closings across the country for lenders financing multifamily housing projects and health care facilities under FHA insurance programs.

Her expertise now covers complex structures involving Low Income Housing Tax Credits, Historic Tax Credits, tax-exempt bonds, secondary financing from state and local sources, bridge loans, and mezzanine financing. She advises the D.C. Department of Housing and Community Development on legal issues related to affordable housing policies, programs, and initiatives.

None of that would have happened without the mentors who helped her navigate the application process, the scholarships that recognized her work, and the decision to keep moving forward when the path felt unclear.

Advice for Students Starting Out

Sankano has spoken about her experience at events including the Smiling Coast Women Conference, where she served as keynote speaker. Her message is consistent: if you're the first in your family to attend college, you have control over your destiny, but you don't have to figure it out alone.

She encourages students to be specific when they ask for help. Don't just ask how to succeed. Ask how to write a resume, how to prepare for an interview, how to apply for financial aid, how to choose a major. Specific questions get useful answers.

She also tells students to look for work that teaches skills beyond the classroom. The audit work she did during graduate school had nothing to do with law, but it taught her how to read financial documents, manage deadlines, and communicate with colleagues. Those skills carried through her entire career.

And she reminds students that progress is not always visible. Some semesters feel like survival. That's normal. What matters is finishing.

About Gita Sankano

Gita Sankano is an attorney who represents the D.C. Department of Housing and Community Development in affordable housing finance transactions. She holds a Juris Doctorate from the University of Maryland School of Law, a Master's degree in Public Administration, and a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from CUNY John Jay College. She lives in the Washington, D.C. area.

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