Former foster youth forges positive path

Blanca Guerra hugs a foster youth graduate, Thursday, during the Solano County Foster Youth Graduation Celebration at the Paradise Valley Golf Course in Fairfield. Guerra was kicked out of her house and left homeless at 13. She later lived in a foster home and recently graduated from Solano Community College. "I wanted them to have fun and make sure they take it all in," Guerra said. (Aaron Rosenblatt/Daily Republic)

By Susan Winlow
From page A1 | June 24, 2013 | Leave Comment

FAIRFIELD — When Blanca Guerra was 13, she said she was kicked out of the house and left homeless.

She spent nights in the Suisun-Fairfield Cemetery on Union Avenue behind the columbarium – the wall where cremation remains are kept. It gave her protection from the wind. Sometimes she slept in the park on Second Street.

“I remember it was so cold at night,” she said.

A chaotic family life, physical fights, drugs, drinking, scrounging for food at friends’ homes, foster care and street gangs were the norm for her.

Today, Guerra is a youth advocate for the county’s foster children with Child Welfare Services. She’s a self-confident, driven college student/graduate of 22 who knows where she wants to be in a decade but also isn’t afraid to acknowledge that she’s still a work in progress and still has struggles to overcome.

Her message is a simple one: If she can begin to pull herself out of a troubled life, so can others.
“I’ve been in juvenile hall. I’ve been in foster care. I’ve been through all that ...” she said. “You can get to where I am. Sooner or later you have to let go of your past in order to move on to the future.”

Saki Cabrera, the Human Services program coordinator at Solano Community College, watched Guerra open up, learn to trust and gain self-confidence during the time she had her in the Human Services program. She saw her become a more “approachable” woman with less of a fighting instinct.

“She’s on the path to making wiser decisions for herself and right now, that’s all you can ask for,” Cabrera said.

She’s also watched Guerra walk a tightrope between what she wants for her future and keeping “ties to those she loves.” Guerra’s older sister has battled drug dependency issues over the years and her brother has gang ties. She’s separated from her husband, who is also incarcerated. Guerra grew up hanging out with mostly Sureno gang affiliates.

“I was involved and around it because (some of) my family was,” Guerra said of her own gang ties.

Guerra is close to her siblings – she also has a younger sister who lives in the Bay Area – and said they are her “everything.”

**Changing course**

As she relaxes in her modest, tidy apartment close to downtown Fairfield, she talks about her past in a factual “don’t feel sorry for me” tone, but there is an underlying wistfulness in her voice at the same time.

She said she was a physical child, prone to fighting. When she was on the streets at 13, there was one fight in particular she called “gruesome.” The girl’s family pressed charges and Guerra ended up first in juvenile hall and then foster care. She bounced through several foster homes in Vallejo and Fairfield.

At 15 she tried to move back in with family members, but it didn’t work and she ended up back in juvenile hall and more foster homes. In fact, she said, she walked herself to Child Welfare Services.

“Right where I work now,” she said, with a rueful smile.

About that time she “checked herself,” she said. Wanting more from life, she quit drugs, drinking and tried to stay out of trouble. She stopped hanging out with certain groups.
“I was very troubled but I knew I wanted something better for myself,” she said.

Guerra got involved in a youth program with the Workforce Investment Board that gave her job experience.

Despite maintaining a job ever since, she’s caught in a mire that befalls many former foster youth with no financial support and forced independence: She struggles to find housing she can afford. After graduating from Armijo High School in 2009, she aged out of the foster program. She received some housing help for a couple of years after high school graduation, but it still remains a struggle for her, she said.

The foster youths she mentors have the benefit of Assembly Bill 12, she said, which allows aging out of the system at 21 – older and better equipped to go it alone.

“When I was 18 it was really different,” she said. “That law wasn’t in place. I wish it was. I’m really glad (it’s) in place (now) – that way they won’t have to go through the struggle I went through.”

Despite some continued struggles, life is on the upswing for Guerra. She just completed her certificate in Human Services from Solano College. She has about a year or so to go on her associate degree and plans to transfer either to the University of California, Davis, or California State University, San Diego.

“I never in a million years thought I’d be attending college, let alone graduating,” she said.

Meanwhile, she continues to be a tenacious advocate for the county’s foster care youth. Her passion is evident as she talks about the children she helps on a regular basis and her desire to become a social worker. And while she mentors foster children, she’s found some mentors of her own in a Soroptimist group from Vallejo – Josie Hodson, a Benicia resident, in particular.

“She’s the one I call all the time,” Guerra said. “I want someone to just talk to sometimes.”

Hodson said she and the others in her Soroptimist group were “smitten” with Guerra when they met her during a foster youth event in January. Like Cabrera, she watched Guerra’s confidence grow and said that being around professional women with higher education has been a plus for Guerra.

“She had some confidence because she has been a youth advocate but I saw it grow as we took an interest in her,” Hodson said.

The Vallejo Soroptimist group developed a mentoring program with Guerra in mind. It’s called Round Pegs, Square Hole Assistance Program. Guerra is the first recipient and the
program will pay for college tuition and books for a four-year period, “as club finances allow,” Hodson said.

Hodson said there is no doubt in her mind that she will someday watch Guerra graduate from a four-year institution. Guerra’s determination matches Hodson’s belief.

“I’m going to be successful,” Guerra said. “I’m going to have a house, a good job. All I want is to be successful.”

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