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Program helps ex-gang member and school dropout turn her life around

By Matthias Gafni – "For some people, this was just the end of 14 weeks, but for me this is where my life just begins," a teary-eyed Erica Revuelta told her graduating class.

When the 18-year-old Antioch single parent, former gang member, high school dropout and domestic violence survivor wasn't crying Friday, she was sighing with relief. She had completed her semester with Career Pathways, a Contra Costa County program geared at turning around disadvantaged youngsters' lives.

"I'm surprised I finished, because I never finished anything that had to do with school," Revuelta said shortly after Friday's graduation.

Revuelta was one of 15 graduates feted in Los Medanos College's Child Study Center for completing the course and earning 12 college credits. Although a struggle, she completed the class with her 17-year-old sister Lesli, becoming the first members of their family to attend college.

The Times followed Revuelta's progress through the 14-week class, culminating with Friday's graduation.

Guardian angel

Revuelta spent her early years in Redwood City, before moving to Antioch seven years ago with her parents, four sisters and two brothers.

"When we moved out here, I got really depressed because it was such a big change," she said.

Up until her early teen years, she was a model student, coming home with straight As, her mother said. That quickly changed.

"When I got to high school, I made really bad choices," Revuelta said.

In her freshman year, she stopped going to school and joined a gang. She would get jumped by rival gang members and nearly got arrested after beating up a girl.

"I was being a really bad daughter for my parents. I regret everything so much," she said.

By her sophomore year, she was pregnant and still only 15 years old.

"When I was pregnant, I knew I had to watch over someone else like someone had to watch over me," Revuelta said.

She had her son, Angel, on Feb. 22, 2005. After years of going in and out of Antioch and Prospects high schools, Revuelta now stayed home to take care of her infant son and siblings.

"I was doing nothing with my life, and my son was growing up and I had to offer him something," Revuelta said.

Add to that an ex-boyfriend who got violent with Revuelta.

"He hit me and I ended that relationship," she said.

Fortunately, her oldest sister married a Career Pathways graduate and former gang member. He encouraged Revuelta to enroll in the class. She reluctantly agreed.

First day of school

In September, Revuelta found herself in unfamiliar territory -- a classroom. It had been three years since she regularly attended school.

"She was excited about the program, but at the same time she hadn't been in school for awhile. She was scared," said Stacy Vann, the no-nonsense youth case manager with Career Pathways.

"She was in a state of chaos. She had no motivation. She had problems with authority figures, trust issues ... a lack of self-esteem," Vann said. "She was definitely an in-your-face, I'm gonna question you'-type person."

In many ways, she was the typical Career Pathways newcomer.

In appearance alone, Vann worked on toning down the jewelry, makeup and cleavage. The profanity quickly became the next target.

Revuelta and her sister joined 13 strangers, all coming from challenging backgrounds.

Participants in Career Pathways can range from 16 to 21 years old, with most being school dropouts, foster children, homeless or juvenile offenders. Most of the students reach Vann as referrals or walk-ins, and they must pass an interview process to gauge their readiness.

The youth case manager pulls no punches with the kids, who enter with a rough past and a tough attitude.

"I like to make sure they all know I'm consistent," Vann said. "After they graduate, we can be friends, but during the 14 weeks it's business."

Pathways

Contra Costa is the second county in the state to try the Career Pathways program and the first with a youth-only approach.

Beginning in 2005 with a grant from the Walter S. Johnson Foundation, the program focused on foster children.

"It was so successful, we decided to expand it from the emancipation of foster kids to low-income as well," said Bob Lanter, executive director of the Workforce Development Board

of Contra Costa County, which runs the program.

Since its inception, 63 students have graduated from the program, which has a sister class out of Contra Costa College in Richmond. Each 20-person class costs \$42,000, which is covered by various grants.

The course reintroduces students to school and funnels them into high-growth careers, such as nursing, construction, manufacturing or child development. Four different instructors teach the students math, English and other vocational courses through a full 12-unit semester. Many use the courses to prepare to take the GED.

The program pays for students scholastic basics: books, lunches, transportation, clothing and tutoring.

"Basically, it gets them back on track. For 14 weeks, we give them a chance to find out what they want to do with their life," Vann said.

Post-graduate work

Eight family members live in Revuelta's modest two-bedroom Antioch home. Revuelta's 42-year-old father, Martin, works construction, as the family lives "paycheck to paycheck."

Her mother Maria, 39, shakes her head when describing Revuelta during her troubled past.

"She just talked back. And always to me, because I was the one telling her what to do," she said.

Revuelta's mother fought back tears Friday as she held her grandson and watched her daughters receive certificates of completion.

"I feel so excited. My two daughters graduated," she said. "I thought it would never happen, but it did."

Revuelta, who plans on taking her GED later this month, will remain on the Career Pathways radar. For two years, Vann monitors the students. About 90 percent of this semester's graduates will continue taking classes at Los Medanos, including Revuelta.

Already enrolled in math, English and counseling classes next semester, Revuelta will continue working to become a social worker.

"I want to keep on going. I'm not gonna stop," she said. "The hardest part is getting started."