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Former foster youth shares inspirational story

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Denise Peralez and Mayra, from left, pose at Child Advocates of Silicon Valley's spring gala Saturday at Juniper Network Aspiration Dome in Sunnyvale. Mayra, a former foster youth, shared her life story and the impact Peralez, a Court Appointed Special Advocate, has had on her life. Photo courtesy of Claudine Gossett (Claudine Gossett)

Milpitas-based Child Advocates of Silicon Valley has had many success stories over the years of providing children in foster care with hope and stability.

At the organization's "In the Valley of Hearts Delight" spring gala Saturday at Juniper Network Aspiration Dome in Sunnyvale, Mayra, a 22-year-old former foster youth, shared her life story and the impact her Court Appointed Special Advocate, or CASA, has had on

her life. Mayra, last name withheld to protect her identity, said she probably would not be alive today without her CASA, Denise Peralez.

Advocates work one-on-one with foster children to provide support, guidance and hope and ensure their emotional and educational needs are being met. As impartial advocates, they speak on behalf of the child in court.

"We're the voice for the kids. That's exactly what we are," Peralez said. "We are the voice for the children who may not otherwise have someone to speak up for them."

Founded in 1986, the nonprofit recruits, trains and matches Santa Clara County foster children with a CASA. In nearly 30 years, Child Advocates of Silicon Valley has served 152 foster children in Milpitas. This year, the organization has served 34 Milpitas children. At the moment, there are 14 foster children in the city on the wait list to be matched with a CASA volunteer.

Born in Palo Alto, Mayra spent the early parts of her childhood in Redwood City. When she was 6 years old, her father went to prison. When it became too difficult for her mother to keep Mayra, her older sister and younger sister and brother in Redwood City, they moved to Mountain View.

One of her mother's boyfriends hurt Mayra and her older sister and went to jail. After a move to San Jose, her mother's boyfriends continued to abuse Mayra and her older sister. Her older sister ran away at 13.

Eventually, Mayra and her siblings were taken to a children's shelter. After moving a couple of times, they were separated into different homes.

Mayra met Peralez as a 14-year-old high school freshman when she was transitioning from foster homes into group homes. She had entered the foster system at 11 years old.

"I basically think I met her at the right time," she said. "At a time I had a lot of people but I felt like a lot of people didn't care. I had a lot of support but I just pushed everybody away. Basically the thing that separated Denise from them is I felt like she always told me she wasn't there to judge me. She never read any of my past files and stuff. She said from where she met me on was from where she wanted to work with me."

Peralez had heard Mayra's story from the girl's lawyer during a CASA training seminar prior to her swearing in as an advocate. Peralez became interested in being Mayra's CASA and sought her out toward the end of 2008.

It took time to build up her trust in Peralez, Mayra said.

After their third meeting is when Mayra began to open up to her, Peralez said.

"You just got to listen to them. That's the biggest thing," she said. "When you get them in a car and they start talking, don't interrupt them. Let them blabber whatever they want to tell you. Let them just keep speaking and pouring their heart out to you because once you get them to trust you there are pretty much no boundaries. There's nothing to stop you."

Mayra said Peralez gave her the voice she has today to speak up for herself. She tries to stand up for other people and Peralez gave her the confidence to encourage others to stand up for themselves when something is not right.

Following several months of meeting with Peralez for a few hours every week, Mayra realized her advocate was there because she wanted to be there.

"It means a lot to have somebody who is part of an organization that they are volunteering to, they're giving their time to," Mayra said. "Not that they don't get back from it. They do get something. They aren't getting paid."

Peralez said she is inspired by what Mayra has been through and the experience has been worthwhile.

"The satisfaction is way more than I can imagine," It's just so rewarding. I've gotten just as much out of this or more."

Mayra said she has learned to have confidence from Peralez and has forgiven her mother, with whom she reunited at 17, for choosing abusive boyfriends over her children.

"I feel like it's wasted time to be mad the rest of my life," she said. "I don't want to be mad."

The pair keep in touch almost daily now and have formed a lifelong relationship.

"The connection is going to be forever," said Peralez, Mayra's godmother from her First Communion.

Married for two years, Mayra and her husband live in San Bernardino County. She works at a fulfillment center for a large online retailer.

Peralez, who has a 35-year-old daughter and 33-year-old son, continues to volunteer as a CASA. She is currently working with a 14-year-old girl.

Mayra said she aspires to be like Peralez.

"Denise is one of the nicest people I have ever known," she said. "She is always there for me, for her family and for the community. She is my role model, my inspiration. "When I grow up, I want to be like Denise."

The gala raised about \$305,000 and had more than 330 guests, according to Lesli Smith, community marketing manager for Child Advocates of Silicon Valley. Organizers had a goal of raising \$300,000.

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