Imperial Valley graduates/foster youths celebrate accomplishments through Project ACE

By ROMAN FLORES
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"I worked every summer since I was 14 but I couldn't afford a car," the 22-year-old Calipatria resident said in her address to the crowd.

"My (older) sister hasn't been able to finish school because she helped me out, even though she was pregnant," Lopez said, full of emotion.

Yet Lopez and her three sisters — all who lived in the same foster home in Calipatria and are attending universities — are just a few examples of the success stories of foster youths who have gone on to pursue higher education or enter the work force.

Five college graduates and a dozen high school graduates of the class of 2011 were recognized at a recognition ceremony for Project ACE (Accessing Careers through Education).

Project ACE — which has existed since 1999 — is a partnership through the Imperial Valley Regional Occupation Program and the Imperial County Department of Social Services.

The program exists "to help (foster youths) overcome any obstacles they might have through graduation and after high school," said Project ACE program manager Luis Torres.

"Most students go to one high school but many foster youth end up going to more than one high school while moving from foster home to group homes and vice versa," he said.

"So that's why we have this, to acknowledge them (for graduating) and hopefully inspire them to go to college," Torres said. "Basically we're celebrating them. It's all about the youth."

And the new grads acknowledge the help they received through the program in the forms of academic counseling, housing, life skills training, vocational training, job-seeking help and motivation through the program's staff.

"They pushed me to work harder in school, to get good grades to be better and succeed in life," 19-year-old Calexico High School graduate Bernardo Reyna said.
Reyna said school was tough with his three sisters separated from him and his brother, who lived in the same foster home with him in Calexico since Reyna was 14 years old.

Yet, Reyna said being part of Project ACE events and being in sports helped build his self-confidence.

"I did accomplish what I wanted to. I did good in sports and (my) grades," he said.

"If it wasn’t for them I wouldn’t have done it and be where I am now," the incoming Imperial Valley College student said.

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Captain Justicia at 9:59 PM June 25, 2011

We need to do a better job of supporting programs such as ACE and foster youth. Think about the reasons children are removed from their homes: physical abuse, sexual abuse, drug abuse by the responsible adults, neglect. All are obstacles to learning. Before these children are removed from their homes, they attempt normalcy with their friends and in school.

No one want to be the kid with the black eye, or hungry, or wear the same clothes, day in and day out, or "smell" suspicious. But that is what these children endure. Some give up; however, some exhibit incredible resilience, such as those mentioned in the article.

Those that would "starve the beast" of such programs or the fragile safety net we as a caring society provide are deluded. We either address the problem right now as responsible adults, take charge, or we address it later, by building better and bigger prisons.

Incidentally, I would encourage pro-lifers to step up and take in foster youth. Place actions behind your rhetoric if you care so much about life.