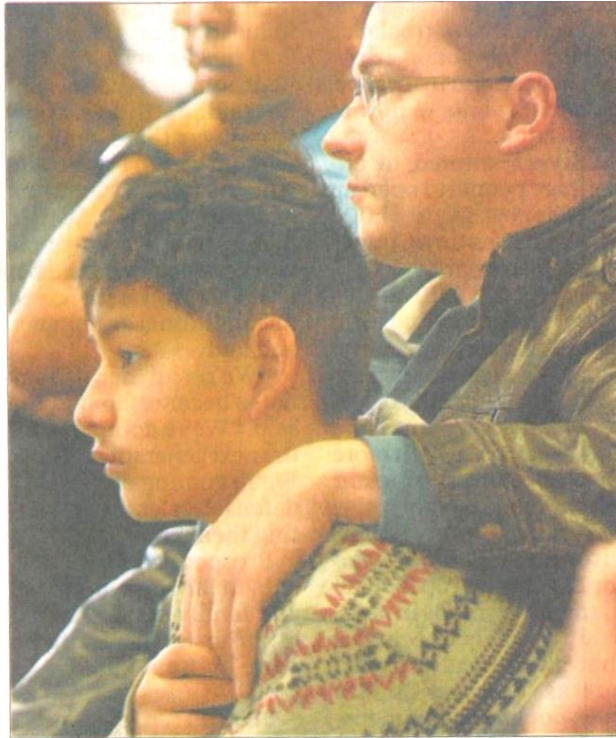


Local

Sunday, January 24, 2016



CHUCK KIRMAN/THE STAR

Cedric Reichling and his son Leo attend Saturday's town hall informational meeting focusing on foster parenting.

Foster care fills void, panel says

■ More help needed in area, audience told

By Jeremy Foster
Special to The Star

JudyAnn Miyara remembers entering the foster care system at age 10 and feeling as if a dark cloud were hanging over her head.

Placed in the system because of neglect and abuse, she and her sister found themselves inside their first foster parents' home a year later, wary of what was to come.

"I was given this grand tour of the house and

told I was going to be part of the family," said Miyara, of Newbury Park. "It was a life-changing experience."

She was among six panelists Saturday during a town hall meeting at the Ventura County Human Services Agency who shared their stories with prospective foster parents and caregivers.

Organizers said the goal of the meeting was to educate people about the need for foster parents, caregivers and mentors and encourage them to help provide the housing, healing, support and guidance that can give

children in the system a sense of normalcy.

Miyara, 28, said she felt close, supported and loved by those who took her in.

"It was especially important for me when I was a teenager," she said. "I definitely needed someone to teach me how to balance a checkbook, obtain a driver's license and insurance, how to pay bills — how to be an adult."

Miyara wanted to encourage people to open up their homes. Nearly 1,000 youths in Ventura County are in foster care.

There are 200 active foster parents and 300 relative caregivers county-wide. The agency is aiming to recruit 200 more, especially in Ventura and Oxnard, from which more than 80 percent of foster youths in the county come.

Ventura County Supervisor Steve Bennett, who for 12 years has opened up his home to youths in need, said it was inconceivable that an area as prosperous as Ventura County does not have enough foster homes. He and others encouraged people to help however they can, even as foster parent ambassadors spreading the word.

"Almost six of 10 youth placed in foster care are separated from their siblings," he said. "That speaks volumes about how big the need is. Every adult in this county is responsible in some way to take care of the defenseless."

Panelists ranged from foster parents to foster youths to Ventura resident Lisa Olguin, who had lost and regained custody of her children.

Olguin, who on Saturday marked her fifth anniversary of being alcohol- and drug-free, told attendees she was frightened when her two girls and boy were placed in a foster home.

"I didn't know what you guys were going to do to them, even though I'd left them for so long," she said. She and the foster parent caring for her children built a partnership with the goal of reuniting her with her children.

"I met with her to see them get haircuts, celebrate birthdays and get awards," Olguin said. "She taught me parenting skills and inspired me to do better as a mother because I wanted to be just like her."

Camarillo resident Erick Alvarez was placed in foster care at age 10.

He recalled weeping for hours after he was placed in his first foster home.

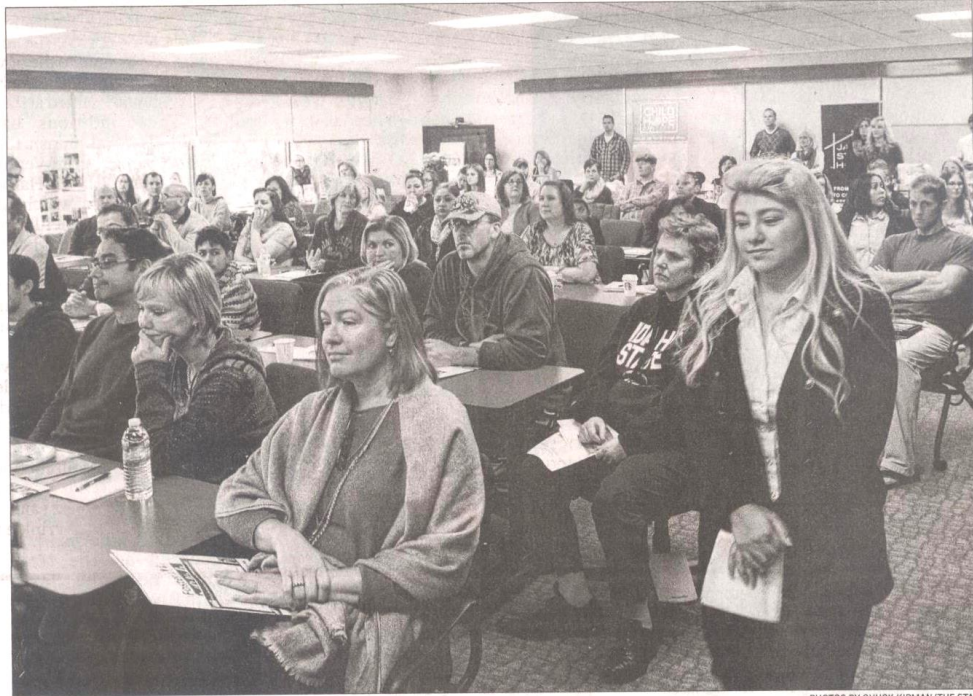
"I locked myself in this bedroom and just cried," he said. "I didn't know why I was there, why my parents weren't there and who to blame."

Alvarez, now 21, called foster parents "miracle workers" and said that from them, he received unconditional acceptance and love.

"We're all here today not to become famous," he said. "We're doing this for the next generation of kids. We're coming alongside a defenseless child and letting them know it's OK."

Prospective foster parents must show financial and family stability. Visit <http://fostervckids.org> for more information.

BELOW: Former foster parent Don Anderson wipes away a tear after speaking at Saturday's town hall informational meeting, as foster mother Liz Thiele listens. The event was at the Ventura County Human Services Agency offices.



PHOTOS BY CHUCK KIRMAN/THE STA

JudyAnn Miyara (right) was one of six panelists at Saturday's town hall meeting on foster parenting.

