

Our Graduation

By Daniel Rivera

“This isn’t just my day, it is my family’s day, it is my mentor’s day and a day for each and everyone who helped me get here.”

As I sat in my seat listening to our student speaker, I began to wonder how I made it to this position. How did I go from being homeless to sitting with 400 students awaiting my Bachelors Degree? I had everything working against me yet I was somehow able to get through it all and make it to the most important day in my life; My Graduation. My journey to this day wasn’t just unconventional, it was a marathon through a mine field forcing me to constantly dodge explosions and holes that I could fall into and get lost in.

I never really thought that my life was that difficult. I thought everyone went through drug-addicted mothers, fathers they never knew, homophobia, homelessness and drug abuse. It wasn’t until I was older that I realized that the odds were stacked against me. By the time I was 14 I had been arrested, had run away from a group home, tried almost every drug that came my way and had been living on the streets for two months. I bounced around from group home to group home with each one ending in termination because of my outlandish behavior stemming from a broken home and a feeling of worthlessness caused by my parent’s abandonment. After being terminated from my 4th group home because of homophobic ideals that the staff possessed, I realized that something had to change. If I kept acting this way I was never going to get to college and obtain a degree, which had been my dream since I was a child.

I went back to the group home, followed the rules and had a more positive attitude which allowed me to finish on the highest status. After my graduation from the group home I came back to San Jose and began the journey to make it to the day where I could finally be seen as a success. With the help of the Bill Wilson Center, my mentor

Pam and the SVCF YES Program I was able to gain the knowledge and resources I needed to fill out college applications, pick which college was going to be the best for me, and figure out how to pay for it. With the help of these programs I was able to get a full-ride to UC Santa Cruz and their continuous financial and emotional support assisted me on my journey to this day; My Graduation with a degree in Sociology.

Financial resources are not the only tools that I gained from my mentor and the YES Program. These two programs also gave me emotional support. About a year ago the father that I had never met contacted me right in the middle of finals. The support of my mentor and other people around me enabled me to finally meet him, his wife and my two sisters. I told him I needed to finish my finals before I could meet him and it was at that moment that I realized I had finally grown up and had gained the skills I needed to make my own decisions, important decisions, life changing decisions. This decision showed me that I was finally focused on getting an education and nothing was going to deter me from achieving my goals and I would finally gain the closure I had been seeking my whole life. It was an emotional time, but it put one more person in my corner rooting for me



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to succeed, and there was one more person driving me to be a success. Although our relationship isn’t quite a father-son relationship we continue to talk and see each other and over time I hope to feel comfortable with my new-found family.

As I sit here in my chair listening to the speaker make jokes about the cost of books and the dining hall food, I can’t help but beam with pride at the accomplishments that I have made. I turn back and see my mentor, my friends, my grandfather and my father. It has been a long journey with constant obstacles and mine fields along the way that threatened to throw me off track. However, the Bill Wilson Center, and the Silicon Valley Children’s Fund’s YES Program gave me the tools I needed to get over those obstacles. This isn’t just my day, it is my family’s day, it is my mentor’s day and a day for each and everyone who helped me get here. We all worked incredibly hard to get me to a point in my life that many people thought I couldn’t achieve. This isn’t just My Graduation, this is Our Graduation! ✨