

Just Call Me Super Mario! By Mario Keener

I always wanted to go to San José State University (SJSU). My parents and I dreamt about it, but if you asked me two years ago where I was going, I would have said “I don’t know.” I was taken from my family on October 12th, 2005 at 7:35 p.m. If you look on my Proof of Dependency card it will tell you October 14th, 2005. I guess it takes a couple of days to believe you are actually in the system again. I knew before the social workers came that my siblings and I would be taken away, so I chose not to run or fight. I stayed at the Children’s Shelter for two months. I denied three placements with foster parents, all of which seemed like great places so that my brother wouldn’t be alone. I also wanted to stay in the same high school because I had been there for three years. I ended up going to, Villa Rosanne (V.R.), a group home. While living at V.R., I was placed on “honors,” the highest achievement level



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anyone had accomplished in five years. Being on honors to me meant being free; I was able to go out till 11:00pm, I could stay up all night, and in a way, I was like a counselor without the pay check. I also inherited an added level of responsibility. I had to be a role model for the other youth there and that meant following every rule perfectly. I stayed on honors for a year and a half, the first person to do so, right up until I left V.R.

I kept my eye on SJSU knowing that college was the way out, a way to save my family from the giant mess we managed to get into. I felt somewhat responsible for being in foster care even though it was because my parents were using drugs. I felt that if I went to college and found a

good paying job, I could ease our financial problems. Everyone in the system told me I was not to blame for my family being separated. Before my father got deported to Mexico, he left me a letter that asked me to take care of the family. “Watch out for your mother, sisters, and brother for me.” Honestly I didn’t know how I was going to do that but I felt my best bet was to continue my education.

In the fall of 2006, I became involved with the Connect Motivate Educate (CME) Society at SJSU. I went to CME everyday to discuss what I needed to do to attend SJSU and be successful. I was accepted to SJSU for the fall of 2007. I was so happy that I cried, knowing that now I can get out of the system, and be a role model for my family. At first getting to school was a challenge because I was still living at V.R. I woke up at five in the morning to eat, shower, and catch the 65

bus to my 7:30am Psych class. With the help of Kahlila Liverpool at the CME Society, I finally received court approval to live in the dorms. I left the group home with great pleasure. I thought about the day I would leave and what I would do and say? I wanted to leave with a grand farewell to symbolize all my hardships, but all that came to mind was the song “I am free... free falling.” I was free falling all right, free falling into what is to be a great future.

I was surprised to see and meet so many people who welcomed me to SJSU. One of these very exciting people was Priya Mistry. I had met her before while I was living at the Children’s Shelter. She remembered me, and heard of my accomplishments, like my art donation to the Children’s Shelter that



YES Scholar Mario Keener

was featured in a museum in Oakland. She reminded me about the YES Scholarship Program! I had completely forgotten about it, so I applied mid-year and was accepted into the YES Program.

I ended up doing alright for my first semester of college, and received a 2.6 GPA. I like to say I got three A’s and one D+ just because it sounds better. I’m currently going into my second semester as a freshman in college. I work as an office assistant on campus. I am also honored to have been asked to do another mural at the Shelter and have made plans for an outline. Connie Hernandez-Robbins, director of CME suggested the theme, “Superhero.” People always tell me “Mario you’re Superman, you take all the weight of the problems, and try to save everyone.”

I am majoring in Psychology so that I can come back and help youth in foster care. I have already volunteered for many events, such as the CME Society’s 5th Annual Luncheon, the YES dinner, as well as the CME Society’s camp for middle school students in foster care. I am writing a book to show other youth that you can go out there and become someone great if you want to. It may be a tough road ahead, but it isn’t a job I can’t handle with the good Lord’s help. I might not be able to help everyone, but that doesn’t mean that I won’t stop trying... just call me Super Mario! ✨