

Stepping Up: Ruth Lira



Photo by Ben Ailes

When Ruth Lira teaches college skills workshops at the Santa Clara County Children's Shelter, her lessons come from the heart. Lira, a 21-year-old senior at Cal State East Bay, once lived in the shelter. It's the place police took her the night she left her father's house at age 16 to enter the foster care system. Those years in the system showed Lira the importance of having people believe in her. She wants to make sure other foster youths get the kind of support she's had.

"I try to give back to the community and to help others like people have helped me," she said.

For Lira, going to college was never an option she considered. Her goal was to get a job to support herself. Fortunately she was placed in a foster family with different ideas.

"I had good foster parents who pushed me to go to college," she said. "They wouldn't take no for an answer. They said 'you're going. So pick a place.'"

A biology major who wants to become a doctor, Lira is one of 146 former foster youths and wards of the state attending undergraduate courses at Cal State East Bay.

For those students, the odds of getting a college education are pretty slim. About 50 percent of foster youths graduate from high school and only 20 percent of those enroll in colleges, according to a report published in December by the Institute for Higher Education Policy in Washington,

D.C. Studies show the likelihood of those students earning a degree ranges from less than 1 percent to 5.4 percent.

Those are the discouraging statistics Lira battles against in her own life and in her advocacy work. Lira serves on the Youth

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Education Scholarship Advisory Board and the advisory board of Cal State East Bay's newly created Renaissance Scholars Program. Both organizations work to help former foster youth enroll in college and to support them once they get there.

Adjusting to college life isn't easy. For foster youths who have often been physically and mentally abused and neglected, the challenges can be overwhelming.

"When I was younger, I used to think 'why me?'" Lira said. "Now I don't think that."

Her mother died when Lira was a baby and her father remarried. Lira grew up thinking her stepmother was her birth mom. She didn't find out the truth until she was in 6th grade and her stepmother moved out, taking her two children and leaving Lira behind.

"I didn't know she was my stepmom," Lira said. "When she left my father, I was thinking 'why isn't she taking me?'"

In the ensuing years, Lira said, her father abused her physically and mentally. When she was 16, Lira asked authorities to remove her from her father's home.

She first came to Cal State East Bay for the Summer Bridge Program, which helps disadvantaged, first-time freshmen adjust to academic life. She lived in the former Carlos Bee Hall dorms that summer and in the fall moved into student housing at Pioneer Heights.

Foster youths automatically "age out of the system" when they turn 18. That means the state no longer supports them. Lira keeps in touch with her foster family, but she's never asked them for money. She's relied on scholarships and financial aid to pay for school and living expenses. And when she runs out of money, she lives off credit cards.

"People would go out and spend money on clothing and shoes and jewelry," she said. "I had to budget my money for food. I didn't have a car, so I didn't go anywhere."

At first she was excited to be on her own, but as she approached 20 Lira said the reality of being completely self-sufficient finally struck.

"It's very scary," she said. "It finally hit me - it was all up to me. Just before turning 20, I had the worst breakdown in my life. Some foster youth face it earlier. I wasn't sure I wanted to stay in school. I was depressed. I cried about every little thing."

Lira came out of her slump even more determined to get good grades, get into medical school and get more support for former foster youths like herself.

Through the Renaissance Scholars Program, the university's Educational Opportunity Program is raising donations for scholarships, housing and an emergency fund. Lira would like to see additional psychological counseling and tutoring services and, for those who have children, family campus housing.

For a group of students with no one to turn to but themselves, these basic services are critical, Lira said, to increasing that small percentage of university-educated foster youth.

Renaissance Scholars Program

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