

Fair spreads news about need for foster parents

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CAMARILLO, Calif. - Thousand Oaks resident Justine Jones has wanted to be a foster parent since she was a teenager.

“I’ve always known there was a need, and I always knew I wanted to help fill it,” said Jones, now 26.

At Saturday's Hope4Kids Adoption and Foster Fair at the Camarillo Community Center, Jones learned how great the need is for connecting youths with foster parents and parents.

"There are more than 1,000 kids in foster care and only 250 homes," Jones said. "So for a lot of kids, there is no consistent, nurturing environment."

The fair, led by Raising Hope Inc., Living Oaks Community Church, Ventura County Children & Family Services, and a variety of community partners, coincided with 5K and 10K runs. Proceeds will be donated for activities for foster youths, such as sports, music, art and driving education, event organizer Tami Barnett said.

"The idea behind the fair was that there are 1,200 children who need homes in our community, and often people do not realize what a foster child is or where they are," Barnett said. "It is easy to ignore the need that is out there if we don't actually see it."

Between 2005 and 2015, there has been a 36 percent increase in the number of children placed in foster care, according to Ventura County's Human Services Agency. Nearly 40 percent are from birth to age 5 and 68 percent are Latino.

About 47 percent of youths in the foster care system enter it because of neglect.

Barnett said some people believe they are not eligible to become foster parents.

"Virtually anyone can be a foster parent," she said. "The first step is to attend an information session with Ventura County Children & Family Services."

Prospective parents and foster parents had the chance to watch 15 foster youths in Ventura County talk about themselves Saturday through video on nine tablet computers and eight phones spread across tables. The technology was donated by Microsoft.

Jones, who grew up in a single-parent home, said a lot of potential foster parents are intimidated because they don't have all the information on how to become one.

“It’s hard to find a place where you can talk to social workers, get educated about the adoption and foster parenting process and take the first step of becoming a foster parent,” she said. “This fair was that place. Also, I have never met a child in foster care. These videos were the closest I’ve come to doing so.”

Miguel Aguilar, 21, was a foster youth ambassador at Saturday’s fair.

“One of the things we’ve been lacking the most is foster parents,” Aguilar said. “This fair is an example of how the county is doing a better job of opening itself up to the community and asking for help and support.”

Aguilar’s father left when he was 3. His mother gave him up for adoption when he was 13 after she remarried.

“I grew up looking like my dad,” Aguilar said. “Because of that, I brought up a lot of old memories that she did not want to remember.”

Aguilar lived in six foster homes and five shelters in Moorpark.

“I didn’t have the basic understanding of love, because my parents didn’t give me that,” he said. “It took a while to trust people, and it happened because of so much support I received over the years from supporters, fellow foster youth, court-appointed special advocates and foster parents.”

Today, Aguilar, who is studying engineering in college, said he knows one expression of love.

“It’s that selfless act of opening up your doors to let a stranger live in your house,” he said. “I love it.”

http://www.vcstar.com/news/local-news/camarillo/fair-spreads-news-about-need-for-foster-parents_03820569