

'Businesses with Heart' give Ventura County foster children a break

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(Photo: CHUCK KIRMAN/THE STAR)

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Andres Fernandez offers free meals to foster children at his grilled cheese and Cuban-themed restaurants overlooking Ventura Harbor.

In Camarillo, the Rest for Less store gave mattresses and beds to foster families who lost their homes in the Thomas Fire. Around Ventura County, the Chipotle restaurant chain has hired almost a dozen foster youths.

These establishments are part of "Businesses with Heart," an effort to develop a broad base of support for hundreds of foster youths in Ventura County. The businesses offer vital connections to the community, a bit like an extended family, said county Supervisor Steve Bennett.

"There's not enough support for foster children in any community," he said. "We need more support. We need to keep kids from falling through the cracks. For that to happen, we need as many people as possible to step up."

Close to 40 businesses and nonprofit organizations have joined the program since its launch last summer. They offer a break on auto repairs, haircuts and restaurant meals but also provide internships, job shadowing, dancing and fishing classes. But more are needed, especially in the eastern part of the county and the Santa Paula-Fillmore area, said program coordinator Jaci Johnson.

The initiative has brought more attention to the cause, she said.

Frog comeback: [Rare California frogs breeding in the Santa Monica Mountains](#)

“It is bringing a level of education and awareness to the community that has been otherwise untouched,” Johnson said. “It allows us to strike up a conversation with business leaders, business owners and staff to raise awareness of what foster care looks like in their communities.”

The businesses support the needs of caregivers and foster youths, plus they raise the level of awareness about the need for quality homes, she said.

She started recruiting businesses by approaching merchants she knew.

“It grew by word of mouth,” she said. “Now I have businesses contacting me.”

A 17-year-old girl who is going to Ventura High School’s prom benefited from the program Friday at La Rouge Salon & Beauty Bar on Main Street.



Salon trip is a highlight for foster girl headed to prom

It was the first time the girl had ever had color professionally applied in a salon, she said as stylist Marcie Venard added caramel highlights to her curly brown hair at no charge.

“It makes me feel better about myself,” she said.

Her foster mother, Miranda Gonzalez, said the free service helps with all the things the teenager needs for graduation and prom.

“To do stuff like this, that obviously wouldn’t be the first priority,” she said.

The businesses get a free mention on a website devoted to foster care recruitment, resources and training that is called www.fostervckids.org. More than 10,000 visitors go to the site each week, Johnson said.

The site offers direct links to the businesses' websites. Their names are also posted on the fostervckids Facebook page and on some email blasts sent to caregivers.

"We are able to promote any events they have, plus they get the good feeling of well-being, doing the right thing and setting a good example," she said.

Fernandez said that's the real benefit for him.

Foster care is a cause he understands because his parents took in a 9-year-old foster child.

The boy stayed until he was 13, rooming with Andres' younger brother at their home in New York.

A day out can relieve some of the discomforts for a family trying to adjust to a new living situation, Fernandez said.

"Anything you can do to give them a little bit of peace for that day," he said.

His family would take the boy named Clifford to a mini-amusement park.

"I think these kinds of things alleviate the tension," he said. "There's always a lot of tension, especially in the beginning."

Foster parent Natalie Torres sees the prime benefit as helping youths get into the community and feel a part of it. She accepts a lot of teenagers into her Ventura home, but they find it difficult to get jobs, she said.

She's noticed a couple of businesses in the program will educate kids on how to get a job, teaching them what to wear and how to present themselves, she said.

"It is more of an opportunity for our little ones to grow up," she said.

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