

## SO HAPPY TOGETHER | New foster agency program focuses on reuniting families



Youth ambassadors Betty and Keanna were among a panel of speakers at a Town Hall Meeting on June 29 at Oxnard College presented by Ventura County Children and Family Services and Homes with a Heart Ventura County. Keanna has lived in 34 different places in 16 years and Betty is currently in the independent living program. Photo credit: Consortium Media.

In 2012, Manny Arroyo's drug and alcohol addiction led to domestic violence in his home, leading to the loss of his three young sons, Damian, Adrian and Fabian.



Manny Arroyo of Oxnard was reunified in 2012 with his three sons: Damian, 12; Adrian, 9; and Fabian, 7. Today, Arroyo works at Ventura County Human Services Agency's Children and Family Services, helping other families through their reunification process.

"It was a downward spiral for our family," recalled Arroyo, 34, of Oxnard.

Through family members and police officers, referrals and reports started coming to Ventura County Human Services Agency's Children and Family Services (CFS). He and his wife were separated, "but I kept going over there, disrespecting the house, so they got removed from her because she failed to protect . . . so my kids finally got removed."

He was put on probation, but decided to run from his probation officer, not following through or turning himself in. On Nov. 25, 2012, he was arrested at his house, "and that was a turning point in my life where I had to decide whether I wanted to be a father and change my life or continue the path that I was going."

His three sons were placed with his ex-wife's father, "and it was really a struggle because the visitation was really difficult for me," Arroyo continued. "There was no communication during the week except one-hour visits twice a week, and that was really tough because I've always been really close to my kids."

During his incarceration, he decided to get help, and his cellmate told him about Genesis Sober Living's program called Dads and Kids.

"He said that would be a great fit for me because they allowed kids to go visit there, and it would help me with my case plan . . . that I had to follow from CFS," Arroyo remembered. "And in that place I found the structure that I needed, the foundation that was going to hold my life together to this day."

### **"It's not too late"**

With help from a social worker at CFS, Arroyo started taking the steps to rebuild his life. This involved getting involved with domestic violence classes, counseling, going to church, "and

things that are required for us to do in order for us to unify. I started working on myself, finding myself, loving myself, and then realizing what I had to do — take care of myself before I could take care of my kids.”

Soon enough, he and his sons were granted more time together, starting with time on the weekends until he got his own place. In 2014, he was reunited full time and granted full custody of his sons, who are now 7, 9 and 12 years old.

Looking back, Arroyo said his “a-ha” moment to turn his life around occurred when he came to visit his sons at CFS in Ventura. That’s when he saw the look on the face of his oldest son who, despite witnessing the trauma in the home, wanted to be at his father’s side.

“He was telling me, ‘Daddy, I want to go home with you,’ ” Arroyo said. “I was feeling so powerless over myself, over my addiction, over my life having no control.” Arroyo’s father was also at this meeting, making Arroyo’s situation feel even more devastating. “Being next to my dad, seeing the tears roll down his cheek . . . I saw my dad cry twice in his life, one when his dad passed away, and that time.”

Going home after visiting with his children during that meeting “was the time I said, I can’t do this anymore. So I stopped running from everything and decided to confront everything I had to confront.”

Clean and sober since 2012, and with his sons back in his life, Arroyo largely credits CFS for getting him back on track, “and letting me know that I had hope, that I could reunify, that it’s not too late . . . just having that communication with someone that was non-judgmental was a big impact for me.”

Today, Arroyo works at CFS, helping other families through their reunification process, going to court with them, giving them resources, helping them communicate better with social workers, and being involved with the quality parenting initiative, as well as assisting families through Parents as Leaders (PAL). When he’s not busy at CFS, he’s with his sons coaching soccer, which all three are involved in; as well as coaching his oldest in boxing, coaching his middle son

with basketball, and coaching his youngest in baseball. He emphasized that he has a lot of help from his loved ones after mending his relationships with them, including his cousins, his sister and his parents, as well as his father-in-law.

“It takes a village and my support is amazing,” he said. “I had burned all those bridges but I mended all those relationships by making amends . . . because I did hurt a lot of people.” Asking for help is one of the biggest things he emphasizes with the clients he works with now. “I tell them they have to ask for help; what’s really helping my kids is the support that they have — their safety net is huge.”

### **Safety of the child**

Protecting children by strengthening families was the vision of Judy Webber, deputy director for Children and Family Services, said Michelle Calder, Children and Family Services program manager.

“Yes, the safety of the child is the No. 1 priority, but you can’t have a healthy child without a healthy family,” Calder said. “It’s within strengthening the family where the child is really going to flourish and Judy has that vision.”

The Ventura County Human Services Agency’s Children and Family Services department strives to strengthen families so that they are able to keep their children in their care whenever it is safe to do so. Over the past year, CFS has kept 153 children out of the dependency court system by providing services to their parents that improve caretaking skills and that help parents draw upon their social supports during difficult times. Children who exit foster care are much more likely to reunify with their parents than be adopted. Indeed, over 2,000 Ventura County children have reunified with their parents over the past decade, returning to families who are stronger, healthier and better equipped to handle difficulties that can arise in all families.

“Our work is not only about strengthening or focusing just on kids,” Webber said. “It’s about family empowerment and having caregivers walk alongside and support our families on their journey to reunification.”

Arroyo's story is common, Calder said. While each family is different, many are dealing with addiction issues, domestic violence or mental health challenges, so having someone at the helm like Arroyo, who has been there and gotten through it, "our parents can hear him so much better than they can hear a social worker."

Perhaps the biggest stigma surrounding these families is that they are bad parents, Calder noted. However, "I think that's been changing for a long time. The same way with addiction — it's more accepted . . . and with recovery, you can't turn the TV on or watch a movie that they're not showcasing 12-step programs and someone who's in recovery."

Calder emphasized that Arroyo is crucial to CFS, serving as a role model who proves that reunification is possible.

"Everything about him is just amazing . . . to be the voice of the parent, because we want to make changes that our parents will see as beneficial to them," she said. "We don't have that information, and Manny does, and he's an integral part of a lot of the changes that we've made."

In Manny's advice to parents who are facing the same challenges he has overcome, he said, "I hope that they hit rock bottom and feel the misery, the loneliness, the sadness, the depression that I had to feel in order to find my inner strength and overcome it. And then I hope that inner strength allows them to humble themselves and ask for help."

### **"We're here to mend hearts"**

As a resource parent with Ventura County for five years, "we had some great support in the county of how to interact with the biological families," said Leeann, whose last name has been omitted to protect her privacy. "Those conversations helped support my husband and I reach out and make those connections, and remember that we're here to mend hearts, we're here to uplift families, strengthen families — it's not an adoption agency. You're in it to help others."

Leeann was among a panel of speakers at a Town Hall Meeting on June 29 at Oxnard College presented by Ventura County Children and Family Services and Homes with a Heart Ventura County, and sponsored by Consortium Media and Public Relations.



Ventura County Supervisor John Zaragoza (right) commends Michael Sanders, a foster parent of teens for about five years, who was a moderator and guest speaker at a Town Hall Meeting on June 29 at Oxnard College presented by Ventura County Children and Family Services and Homes with a Heart Ventura County. As a motivational speaker, consultant, trainer and facilitator, Sanders has been referred to as the “Teen Whisperer” for his ability to understand, relate to and connect with teens. Photo credit: Consortium Media.

The moderator and guest speaker was Michael Sanders from Atlanta, who was a foster parent of teens for about five years. Others on the panel included Lucy, 18, who lived in three different places within foster care and is now reunified with her family; Johnny, 17, who remains in foster care; Yanneli, whose children were taken away after she tested positive for meth following the birth of her second child; Betty, 19, who is currently in the independent living program; and Keanna, has lived in 34 different places over 16 years.

Johnny, who was removed from his home at age 9, said his overall experience since then has been both good and bad, with the good relating to “the specific people who try to get to know the youth so that makes them feel more comfortable. There was one foster care home I was in . . . that didn’t get to know me.” Today, he has a social worker he speaks very highly of, because “she just cares.”

Lucy, who became a foster youth at age 14 and lived in three different places, said the hardest part of her experience was being separated from her two younger siblings, because “as the

oldest, to me they were my babies. I worried if they ate, if they did their homework, if they showered . . . this affected me emotionally.” Overall, she would rate her experience as a C, “because not being placed with my siblings was very hard for me.”

Yanneli, who got clean and sober after having her newborn baby and her 1-year-old removed from her home, said at first, “I was scared, I was depressed, angry at myself.” Plus, “I didn’t know where they were for about three months . . . it was horrible, but it gave me a little push to say, ‘this is where it starts to make a choice, to start my sobriety.’ ” The resource family remained in touch with her through texting, and sending her several pictures a week of her children, “which encouraged me through the whole process.”

To this day, Yanneli remains connected with the parents who took in her children, “because I had a total of three foster families for my kids and they all did nothing but good. I’m still really good friends with all of them. They still come to my son’s birthday parties and Christmases.”

It’s critical for a resource family to stay in touch with the biological parents of the children taken in, Leeann emphasized, because “we know nothing about them; when they come into the home it’s important you know details . . . the only way you’re going to get information is if you’re open with their family. You need that information because it’s about the child — the center of the universe revolves around that child. Everyone must come together and be supportive. Communication is key: you have to keep them involved in the child’s life.”

### **“They need your love”**



Keanna, who lived in 34 different places in 16 years, served as a “youth ambassador” among a panel of speakers at a Town Hall Meeting on June 29 at Oxnard College presented by Ventura

County Children and Family Services and Homes with a Heart Ventura County. A self-taught pianist, she performed a song she wrote during the meeting for about 100 guests. Photo credit: Consortium Media.

Keanna's journey began in Colorado, where she had her first placement, but "the home was very abusive to me and my two brothers." After being removed from the first home, she went to another, "and that started a cycle — it was one abusive home after the other." She came to California at age 5, and lived with her grandmother in Bakersfield, but after two years in her care, "she became abusive as well."

When Keanna went to another foster home, "I didn't want to get close to anyone. I didn't want a relationship with anyone and started pushing people away . . . I went into the home thinking these aren't my parents. I'm not going to be here long. These people are temporary because that's what I was shown."

Leeann added that there's nothing like being a resource family. "If everybody would be licensed and start the process to be a resource family, we wouldn't need shelter homes, we'd have a home for every child. We need that in this county; our youth need it, they need your home, they need your love."

For Keanna, "I thought I was looking for a forever home, and when I was given an opportunity to have a forever home, it wasn't the home that I wanted, which was the connection with the family. Some of you may not be able to offer your home, or in a position to have kids, but there's so much that you can do to give to this community to help us."

Different reasons bring children into foster care, Sanders said, which "usually has to do with abuse and neglect and some kinds of victimization — and in order to keep them safe they're put into foster care."

Looking back on her experience, Betty says she loves her family just like she loves her resource family, and when it comes to families taking kids in, "it's all about people trying."

“Sometimes they can’t really see us behind all the paperwork — that was hard for me because my paperwork looked really bad because nobody wanted me,” she said. “I’d be here and over there, but someone saw beyond the paperwork and I’m here now, and it’s amazing when somebody looks beyond it.”

There are people out there who’ve never felt real love and a human connection, Betty emphasized, adding it makes a huge difference to “be there for someone who’s never felt love and who doesn’t believe they’re worthy of love. You can do that for someone — it changed my life, love changed my life. When you love the people you’re not meant to love, it makes such a difference. You can make a difference, you can change the world. Kids need you, teens need you.”

*For more information, call 805-654-3220; or visit [fostervckids.org](https://www.fostervckids.org).*

<https://www.vcreporter.com/2019/07/so-happy-together-new-foster-agency-program-focuses-on-reuniting-families/>