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Woman leaves sex abuse in past

By GREG HARDESTY

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SANTA ANA - Move on or give up.

Those were the choices facing the young victim of sexual abuse, a ward of the state along with six siblings - a preteen legally blind in her left eye.

Delma Medrano knew she could give up. No one expected much from her. As many as half of abused foster-care children become homeless once they turn 18, and one out of 10 females ends up in jail within 12 to 18 months after leaving foster care, according to the county.

Medrano never has liked statistics.

In early April, the Santa Ana woman, now 24, drove her Toyota Sequoia to an eye clinic in Newport Beach, whose clientele skews to the well off.

A youthful Dr. Gregg Feinerman, wearing orange-and-blue Puma sneakers and green scrubs, squirted anti-bacterial solution in Medrano's eyes.

Medrano settled in for the \$5,000 eye surgery to meet the vision requirement for her dream job: FBI agent.

What landed her in Feinerman's office was years of hard work and support from adults who came to admire the young woman's drive.

It all started with a decision Medrano made as a young victim of abuse:

Don't give up.

A WAY OUT

Medrano was around 12 when her stepfather began molesting her and her older sister for about a year.

Along with her six brothers and sisters, she spent two years as a ward of the state after her stepfather was found guilty of sexual abuse. Her mother, a swap-meet merchant, was not charged and regained custody.

Medrano looks back and knows she could have made excuses. She knows she could have let despair overwhelm her and drift into trouble.

Instead, she saw a way out.

She knew that if she got good grades in high school, she could go to college, and that if she got a college degree, she could get a good job.

A way out.

So the quietly determined teen pushed herself at Century High School in Santa Ana, participating in soccer, yearbook and Academic Decathlon.

Despite a challenging home life in which she was expected to act as a surrogate mother, she graduated with a 3.5 GPA.

"I knew I probably couldn't afford to move out on my own without a college degree," says Medrano, whose father died of a drug overdose when she was 9. One of her brothers, 21 years old, is in prison for armed robbery, and siblings have struggled at continuation school.

As a former ward of the state, Medrano was eligible for a college scholarship through the Orangewood Children's Foundation, which gives \$6,000 annual grants for four-year colleges.

She applied, on her own. Her mother didn't even know.

A JUGGLE

Medrano got the scholarship, and for two years commuted to UC Riverside from Santa Ana. Although she managed to move out and live with a roommate, she had to juggle weekends at home - helping her siblings with homework, disciplining them - with a daunting course load.

Enter Marty Dutch.

The 45-year-old Newport Beach mom is a founding board member of Orangewood PALS, a group that supports kids who stay at the county-run shelter for abused and neglected children.

When Medrano was at UC Riverside, Dutch and other members of PALS established a mentor program for scholarship recipients. She was paired with Medrano, and immediately saw danger ahead.

"I knew with that commute, and the stresses of her home life, that she needed to make a change," says Dutch, a sales representative for a promotional agency with a daughter, Taylor, 16, a son, Ryan, 13, and a husband, Richard, 46, president of a medical distributor.

"I was in awe of her struggles, that even with all of the things going on at home, she still had the will to get up and go to school," says Dutch, who got involved with Orangewood because of her love of children and youth programs.

Medrano took Dutch's advice to transfer to UC Irvine. There, she found her passion: criminology. She had thought about nursing.

Dutch helped guide her. She recalled a conversation.

"I'm thinking of going into nursing," Medrano told her.

"Why? What's that class you hate?"

"Biology."

"What class do you love?"

"Criminology."

"Do you realize your job can be something you love to do?"

Medrano smiles at the memory.

"I listened to her advice," she says.

She graduated in June 2005 with a bachelor's degree in sociology. It wasn't easy. She eked out a 2.2 GPA.

"You have to move forward," she says. "You can't blame yourself. And you can't be afraid of failure. You have to realize that you can succeed."

A GOAL

Poor vision threatened to end Medrano's dream of becoming an FBI agent. Dutch had read about Feinerman's Operation In-Sight, a nonprofit that assists people who can't afford vision-correction surgery.

"I have never seen anyone try so hard to achieve a goal," Dutch wrote to Feinerman.

"I did a 'flap and zap,' where I reshaped the surface of her eye," Feinerman, 39, says. "The operation took three to four minutes. But it changed this young woman's life."

Medrano, assistant to the director of the Westminster Family Resource Center, plans to apply to the FBI in a year. She is back living with her mother to help with rent.

"I'm lucky to have met people who care about me," says Medrano, who recently toured the FBI office in Long Beach and spent two hours with Special Agent Deirdre Emmes.

"She seems pretty much to have her goals set," Emmes says. "In this job, you need to be a self-starter and self-motivated, and Delma has those qualities. I think she'll be a fine candidate."

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