

College-bound inner-city youth find guardian angels

by Jane Clifford

Though it was a warm summer day, Perla Perez wrapped the sweat shirt around her. She couldn't stop hugging it. She couldn't stop smiling.

Across the room, Maria Guadalupe Mendoza's eyes brimmed with tears as her nephew, Lucio Calderson, pulled on his sweat shirt.

COLLEGE PREP - Adriana Sixtos of San Diego was thrilled with all she received at a recent surprise party at Barrio Logan College Institute. Through the San Diego institute, graduates receive many of the dorm essentials for their jump to higher education. CNS Photo by Earnie Grafton. It was a surprise party for Perla and Lucio and four other graduating high school seniors, who also had spent many afternoons in this building, the Barrio Logan College Institute.

Perla, 17, is off to the University of California Los Angeles in the fall. Lucio to the University of California San Diego. Adriana Sixtos, 18, is headed to San Diego State University; Hector Miramontes, 17, to the University of San Diego; and Roxana Flores, to California Sate University San Bernardino. A family emergency kept Pedro Adan, 18, from the party, but nothing will keep him from starting at San Diego State.

All are the first in their families to go to college, except Hector, whose sister Dinorah graduated from the Barrio Logan College Institute program last year.

Maria Mendoza's tears, she explains, are for her sister who would have been so proud to see her son on this day. Maria de la Luz Mendoza died of brain cancer when Lucio was 10. His aunt took him in and made sure he made the most of the past eight years.

"They worked so hard ... so hard," says Jennie Lange, high school coordinator at the Barrio Logan Center

Institute, an after-school enrichment program for students in grades three to 12.

These teenagers have all voluntarily participated in the program for years, riding the bus or trolley from their schools or jobs to get here for tutoring in difficult subjects, workshops on SAT prep and the college application process. They earned scholarships and grants and other aid to cover tuition and books and room and board.

This party was to surprise them with the other stuff - the trunks filled with almost everything that could be on the long list of things needed by an incoming college freshman. It all came from an anonymous group of women (identified here by first name only), who don't want to take credit for what they're doing but do want these kids not to worry about how they're going to get sheets and shower shoes, towels and toiletries, an alarm clock or even a college sweat shirt.

"That makes it real," Lange tells them, her own eyes filling. "That says you're really going."

The two women happened to sit next to each other at a high school awards ceremony and both still marvel at the serendipity of that moment.

Jennie Lange was there to present an award. So was Mary.

"Someone asked me to fill in and award a scholarship," Mary recalls. When Bernice Ramirez got up to get her award at the Preuss School, Mary leaned over and told Lange she had just read a story about the young woman in a local daily newspaper.

"Bernice is one of my girls," Lange told Mary, who looked at the young woman with surprise. Then Lange

explained the Barrio Logan College Institute and how Bernice was about to graduate - from high school and from the BLCI program.

"I told Jennie, 'I don't know what I'm going to do, but I'm going to do something for all six of your girls.'"

Mary contacted women with whom she socialized on a regular basis. She told them about BLCI, about the six young women and about what she had decided to call Warm Dorm, a project to make the girls' dorm rooms warm and cozy and homey.

"I told them it would be a quick turnaround, that we had a week until the BLCI graduation."

All of a sudden, Mary had \$1,400. She did no arm-twisting. Like her, most of the donors had put their own children through college. They knew how expensive the "extras" can be.

"We bought towels and lotions and curling irons," Mary remembers. "Everything was new because these girls deserved new. We headed to Bed Bath & Beyond and told them what we were doing. We ended up with six carts filled with six sets of bedding - from the mattress pads to the comforters and sheets - and they honored all our coupons.

"We bought trunks, hangers, backpacks, alarm clocks, hair dryers, everything they needed," Mary says, pausing to catch her breath. "We bought shower caddies, flip-flops, toiletries. We took it all down and delivered it to BLCI when nobody was going to be there."

Mary says Lange and BLCI executive director Diana Villegas "stood there and cried, and we stood there and cried."

And the day of the big giveaway, Lange told Mary, "the girls cried and the mothers cried and asked if they could come clean our houses."

That was two years ago.

"2006 rolled around and my girlfriends called and asked, 'Are we going to do it again? Don't leave me out.' So last year, we had 10 students - there were six guys and four gals. That changed our shopping a little, but that was OK."

Now, in 2007 there are six, and the two dozen Warm Dorm ladies have donated more than \$2,000 in cash and items for the students.

"We never expected this much," Mary says.

Mary took Karen, Lori and Margaret with her on the shopping trip this year.

"I rope different people into different things," she says of the division of labor for Warm Dorm.

On a recent afternoon, it was Jill's turn. She and husband Jack were at Mary's home to load everything and take it down to BLCI's building.

Jill marveled at the display, filling half of the garage.

"I remember when we sent our daughter off to school," Jill says, smiling. "We collected everything in the guest room and when it was time, she opened the door and said, 'Now, I'm ready.' That's what we want these students to think when they see all this stuff."

She and Jack, who met in college, have a grown daughter and son. Mary and her husband, Dave, have two sons, 25 and 27.

"I just buy and buy and buy and, when I get done, it's magical. I have just enough," Mary says.

The trio lugged trunks to Jack's Ford F150, then back rests and blankets and more, and what didn't fit went into Mary's car, and the little caravan was off.

At BLCI, they were met by Lange and other staff members who helped get everything inside and under wraps for the next day's festivities.

"Oh, how I'd love to be a fly on the wall," Mary tells Lange.

Silence descends in the BLCI office as donors and staff reflect on another year gone by and the future for this

group of graduates.

Mary says she's had trouble keeping the Warm Dorm group small and manageable - "Nice problem to have, eh?" she jokes - but as people hear about Warm Dorm, they want to do something, too.

Mary's all for it.

"Every high school has them," she says of students like Perla and Lucio, Hector and Roxana, Adriana and Pedro. "To me, if it could spread that way, it would be so wonderful."

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