

5 Years

Casa Valentina

5 Year Report



Casa Valentina

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Promoting Independence For Youth Leaving Foster Care



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Letter from the Board Chair

Dear Friend,

We are delighted to be celebrating Casa Valentina's fifth anniversary! In the five years since we opened our doors, we have helped more than 74 youth transition from foster care to independent living.

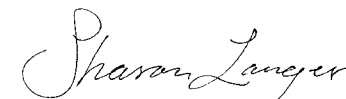
Like any five-year-old, Casa Valentina is now entering a time of growth. Earlier this year, we joined with Camillus House and Our Kids to open Emmaus Place, a residential program for young men who have aged out of foster care. Recognizing our unmatched experience and success working with this population, Our Kids contracted with Casa Valentina to provide Emmaus Place residents with the services and support they need to achieve their goals.

Some of our other accomplishments include:


- **Developing a program model that follows promising practices in the field.** We have created an outstanding program that offers affordable housing and comprehensive support services to former foster youth. Our low staff:client ratio allows our skilled professional social workers to provide each resident with intensive, one-on-one attention to help them reach their goals.
- **Creating an innovative life skills curriculum** that addresses everything from mental and physical health to nutrition, financial literacy, self-esteem and relationships. One of the most important, and most appreciated, pieces of our program, our life skills meetings help residents to gain the skills that they need to succeed as adults.
- **Building a vibrant network of community partners,** who provide residents with many of the services they need – such as health and dental services, financial management advice, and life skills training – on a pro-bono basis. (Please see page 16 for a listing of our partners.)

We are also moving forward with a new initiative serving young mothers aging out of foster care – perhaps the most vulnerable group of youth leaving the system. They struggle to both meet their own basic needs, and to effectively care for their children. Our new program offers these young women and their children affordable apartments in safe neighborhoods, and the support they need to help them become fully functioning mothers, form secure attachment relationships with their children, and retain custody.

Over the past five years, we have changed more than 74 lives; in the future, we will change many more. We could not have achieved this without your support, and we appreciate your continuing assistance for the next five years and beyond.



Sharon Langer




Since 2006, Casa Valentina has welcomed 50 young women into our residential program for youth who have aged out of foster care. We have served 17 additional clients through our non-residential program in Miami Gardens, and seven in our new residential program for young men, Emmaus Place.

Academic Support

Supporting our residents in achieving their academic goals is one of the most important parts of Casa Valentina's mission. Our clients understand that education is the key to their futures, and we provide a wide range of services to help them succeed in school. One hundred percent of residents receive some sort of tutoring, and Casa Valentina staff regularly monitor residents' academic progress. This even includes helping them select and purchase their school books, and attending their parent-teacher conferences!

Our program works. Over the past five years, 96% of Casa Valentina residents have been enrolled in school, compared with 50% of all former foster youth in Miami-Dade County. More than 60% of Casa Valentina residents earned high-school diplomas or GEDs, compared with just 39% of former foster youth county-wide.



Casa Valentina residents have taken advantage of 925 hours of tutoring since we formalized our individual academic support program in 2007.



Health & Nutrition

During their time in the dependency system, many foster youth's physical and mental health needs go unmet. Residents often enter our programs with existing health concerns, or state that they have not seen a doctor (or dentist, or ophthalmologist) in years. Casa Valentina has established a network of providers who understand our residents' situations and can provide the treatment they need, very often on a pro-bono basis. We refer all residents to the appropriate health care providers and transport them to their appointments.

In the health education arena, a committed group of physicians and nurses regularly presents on topics including wellness and personal care during our life skills meetings. We have provided all residents with medical wellness kits including over-the-counter medications and other supplies.

As a result, we are proud that our residents are now becoming more responsible for their own health care needs, making their own doctors' appointments and getting themselves to the appointments, and taking proactive steps to stay healthy.

Casa Valentina's life skills curriculum includes regular sessions on diet and nutrition.

This includes learning to make healthy food choices, and to prepare nutritious meals. Most of these young people have never helped a parent or caregiver cook a meal or bake a cake. Some have never even accompanied an adult to the grocery store to shop for wholesome foods. Without this modeling behavior, they tend to select "heat-and-eat" prepared foods, fried foods, and other less healthy options. Additionally, we provide a healthy dinner to our residents at each week's group life skills meeting. Our program manager also takes groups of residents to the gym at the University of Miami for regular exercise sessions.

Casa Valentina residents have had more than 300 doctor and dentist appointments over the past five years. Many were treated for free, or paid greatly reduced fees. We thank our network of providers for this support.



Casa Valentina staff has arranged more than 250 life skills workshops over the past five years. Topics include everything from financial literacy to cupcake baking, from managing transitions to hair, image and beauty.

Life Skills

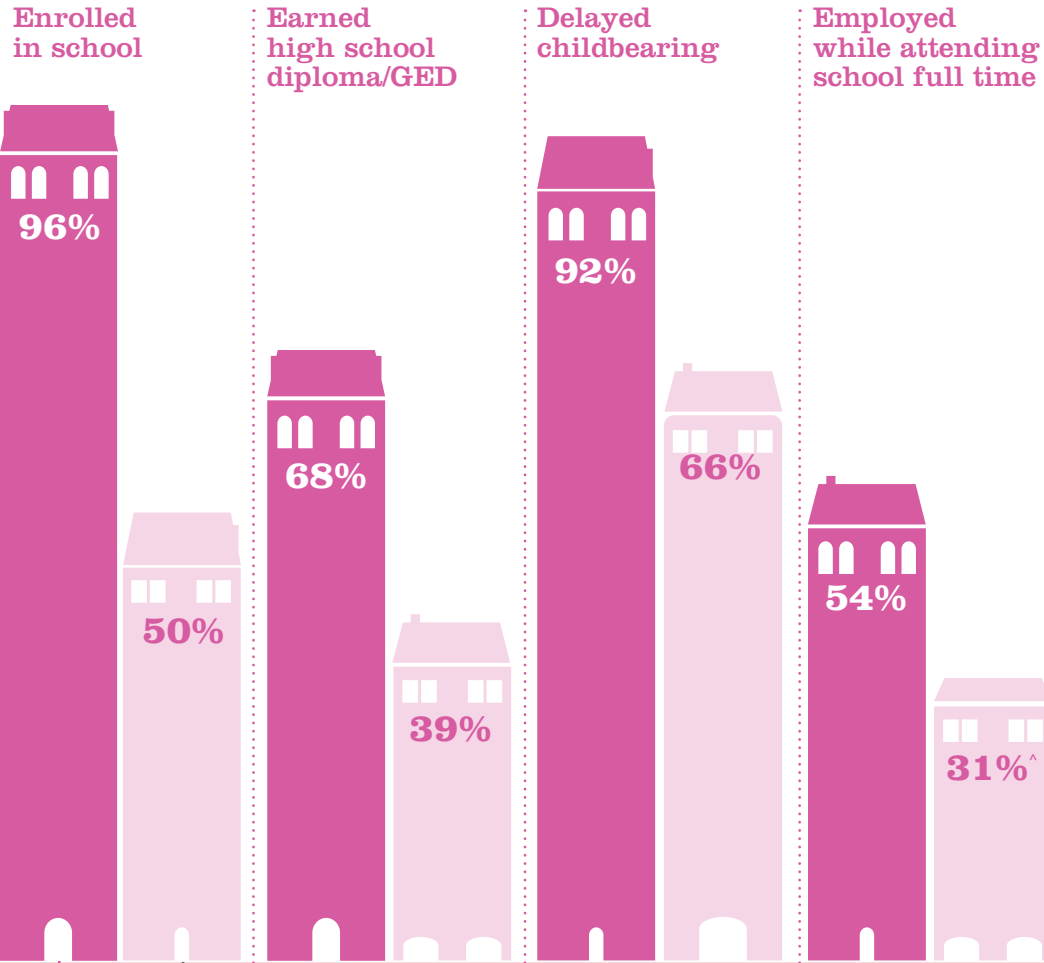
It is impossible for youth exiting foster care to anticipate and prepare for everything they will have to do to live on their own. Paying bills, managing their health, buying and preparing food, cleaning their apartments, finding transportation, taking care of forms and paperwork related to school, jobs, and their place of residence... The list is endless, and incredibly daunting.

When they join our program, many young people have never managed their own money, cooked a meal, or done a load of laundry. They have never sat down with a parent or caregiver to discuss personal health or relationships. Casa Valentina's life skills curriculum addresses these topics one at a time, giving residents the knowledge and confidence they need to succeed.



Casa Valentina program staff have driven more than 35,000 miles over the past five years, taking residents to doctor appointments, job interviews, school meetings, and other important engagements.

Outcomes



Former foster youth in Miami-Dade County[#]

Casa Valentina residents^{*}



Alicia is known for her sharp sense of humor. The Casa Valentina residents, and staff, look forward to hearing her hilarious take on any situation. But when it comes to reaching her goals, she is extremely serious. Alicia just graduated from Corporate Academy North Senior High, a specialized program focusing on business and entrepreneurship skills. Alicia has worked hard in school since she joined Casa Valentina in March 2010. She entered foster care at age 15 after being removed from her biological home. She spent the summer working as a camp counselor for at-risk youth, hoping to serve as a role model for them; she is now enrolled at Miami Dade College, planning to pursue a career in construction management. Alicia's class motto is: "Yesterday We Followed, Today We Lead, Tomorrow We Conquer!" We look forward to seeing how she makes those words come true...

Partners & Donors

Over the past five years, these organizations and individuals have provided support to Casa Valentina. From offering financial assistance to donating time, expertise and services to our residents, their support is invaluable to our work. We thank all our partners and donors. You inspire our residents, and you inspire us.

Community and Funding Partners

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By the time **Pauline** aged out of foster care on her 18th birthday, she had lived in seven different homes and attended more than 10 schools. As she struggled to adjust to all the new schedules, new classes and new rules, she fell far behind in her studies. When she moved into Casa Valentina, finishing high school seemed like a distant dream... With lots of hard work and support from Casa Valentina tutors, Pauline graduated from Miami High in 2009. She is now a student at Miami Dade College, taking a challenging course load including advanced math and science courses. Pauline is close to completing her AA and AS degrees, and has already been accepted to Florida International University, where she will pursue a Bachelors degree in forensic science. She is studying hard, and getting ever closer to her next dream: becoming a crime scene investigator.

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Tamara had already been on her own for almost three years when she came to Casa Valentina. Like her childhood, her life after aging out of foster care was marked by uncertainty. She was homeless for almost two years, and was a victim of domestic violence. When she found Casa Valentina, she felt like “a kid at Chuck E. Cheese” – eager to take advantage of all that the program has to offer. Tamara has been particularly inspired by the life skills sessions on nutrition and wellness. She started exercising regularly using the Insanity exercise program. She committed to making healthy food choices, and modified her diet. As a result, she lost 40 pounds – and looks and feels better than ever. Recently, she decided to go vegetarian. Does she miss eating meat? Tamara says she’s “not turning back – no way!”





In just a short time at Emmaus Place, Carl is already making excellent progress toward independence. He recently earned his GED, and enjoyed celebrating this accomplishment with family, friends and the Casa Valentina staff at a special dinner. Carl was placed in foster care at age 14, after spending years taking care of his biological mother, who will very ill and could not work or care for herself or her children. He is taking advantage of the services on offer at Emmaus Place to work through the physical and psychological injuries from a very serious automobile accident that left two of his best friends paralyzed. His future goals are to become a computer technician.

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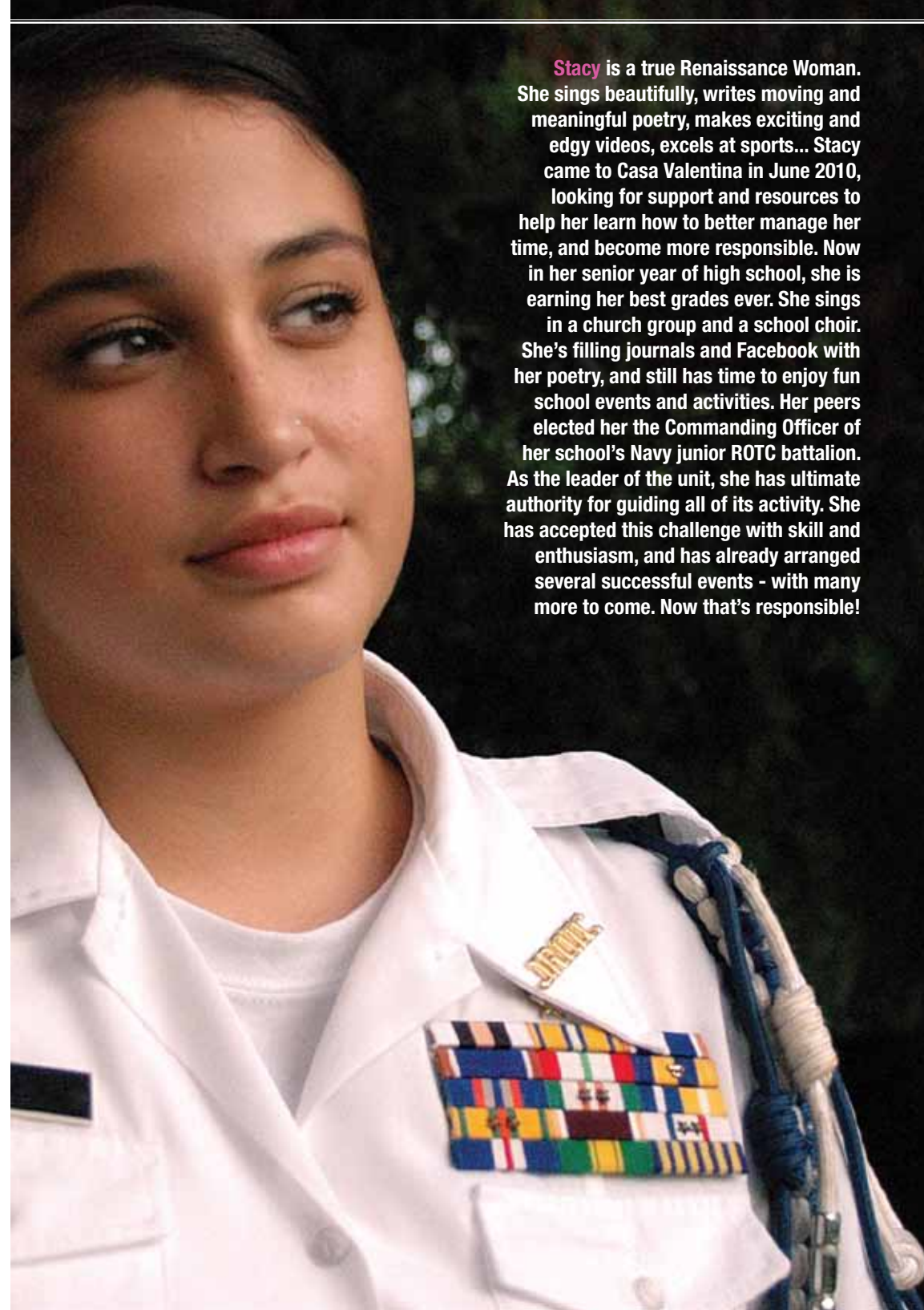
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Rosalind Zacks
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(*) Due to space constraints, this list includes only monetary donations of \$50+ made between Oct. 1, 2006 and Oct. 1, 2011. We sincerely apologize for any errors or omissions. Please contact us with corrections at 305.444.0740.



Stacy is a true Renaissance Woman. She sings beautifully, writes moving and meaningful poetry, makes exciting and edgy videos, excels at sports... Stacy came to Casa Valentina in June 2010, looking for support and resources to help her learn how to better manage her time, and become more responsible. Now in her senior year of high school, she is earning her best grades ever. She sings in a church group and a school choir. She's filling journals and Facebook with her poetry, and still has time to enjoy fun school events and activities. Her peers elected her the Commanding Officer of her school's Navy junior ROTC battalion. As the leader of the unit, she has ultimate authority for guiding all of its activity. She has accepted this challenge with skill and enthusiasm, and has already arranged several successful events - with many more to come. Now that's responsible!

Board of Directors

Our committed and involved Board of Directors, many of whom have supported Casa Valentina since its inception, is an amazing resource for our organization. These tireless advocates for youth are always available to do everything from mulching the yard, to providing organizational vision, to celebrating milestones with the residents, to baking cookies for our annual luncheon.

They identified the need for a program to support girls aging out of foster care, raised the seed money to start Casa Valentina, and have remained our driving force. Our Board has done a tremendous job of spreading the word about Casa Valentina and our accomplishments, and calling upon their personal and professional contacts to help the residents. They are our greatest strength.

Sharon Langer,
Chair

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Casa Valentina is partially funded by The Children's Trust. The Children's Trust is a dedicated source of revenue established by voter referendum to improve the lives of children and families in Miami-Dade County.