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Fostering new lives

Latino agency's mission is finding stable homes for abused and neglected children

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Fifty children does not seem like a large number.

Not considering the fact that on any given day about 6,000 children up to age 8 are in foster care in San Diego County.

But 50 is extraordinary in some ways.

That's the number of Latino children placed in foster homes by a nonprofit agency named La Cuna since it began operating in May 2005.

The agency, whose name means “the cradle” in Spanish, places Latino children, from newborns to age 5, in stable Latino homes.

These children will fare better with foster parents who share their culture and language, the agency believes. Its small staff works hard to find and train these parents and then offers them a host of support services after a placement is made.

The goal is for the youngsters to have one stable home during their most formative years, not be bounced from house to house.

The agency's 50th placed child, Jordan, had been in two foster homes before La Cuna placed him last month with Helen and Andrés Rodríguez, who live in San Diego.



MARCOS GONZALEZ
Two-year-old Jordan with Andrés Rodríguez.

“He's a typical 2-year-old,” says Helen, a native of Tecate, Mexico, who has four children and one grandchild. “He's energetic and very loving.”

As La Cuna celebrates its milestone placement, its board of directors, headed by former San Diego police chief David Bejarano, looks to the future. The agency, which is funded by private donations and grants, has a long list of needs.

“An enormous amount of work goes into each child,” says the agency's director, Rachel Humphreys. “You do the work now so that they become physically and emotionally healthy citizens later on.”

And the need for foster homes is as urgent as ever.

An average of 800 Latino children up to 5 years old are in county custody on any given day, taken away from their parents because they have been abused or neglected.

Started small

Humphreys began developing the agency in 2003, supported by a diverse, grass-roots board of directors.

She wrote grant proposals in the bedroom of her North Park house and held board meetings and focus groups in her living room.

“To this day, people use my cellular phone number to contact La Cuna,” she says.

The exhaustive application process ended in mid-2005, when the state issued the agency a license.

These days, the agency works out of a 1,300-foot office in a building in North Park. It has a core staff of four, which includes a marriage and family therapist and a social worker with a Ph.D. in psychology. Three of the four are bilingual.

State officials expected that La Cuna would initially place eight to 10 children a year, given all the work that's involved.

At 50 placements, the agency has exceeded those



MARCOS GONZALEZ
Helen Rodríguez with her foster son, Jordan, the 50th child placed by La Cuna since May 2005.



MARCOS GONZALEZ
Rachel Humphreys, La Cuna director, spends time with one of her foster mothers, Marisa Ramirez.

expectations. That success includes the placement of several groups of siblings, which the agency works to keep together.

The foster-care system gives the biological parents an opportunity to regain custody of their children if they improve their parenting skills and their lives sufficiently to provide a stable, safe home for them.

The agency staff has learned how important a role foster parents can play in this process.

Staff members now coach foster parents how to become “padrinos,” or godparents, to the biological parents, helping them to become good parents.

That's what the Rodríguez family is doing with Jordan's biological mother. She sees him once a week, and the director says the outlook for reuniting the family is promising.

About 65 percent of children placed by La Cuna are eventually reunited with their parents or immediate family members such as grandparents, better than the county average of 60 percent, the director said. The rest of the children are adopted by their foster parents.

The foster mother of the first child the agency placed, 5-month-old Larissa, wanted to adopt her. She argued in court that the child's biological family had not done enough to provide a good home for the girl.

But a judge disagreed, and the girl was returned to her family after spending a year with her foster parents.

“Although Larissa didn't wind up as well as I had hoped, I draw comfort from knowing I gave her the love she needed at such an important time in her life,” said the foster mother, Zara Marselian.

Humphreys said she, too, was disappointed by the ruling. Even so, she stressed that Larissa had been lucky because she lived in just one foster home, which gave her an emotional stability not possible for many foster children.

The future

La Cuna faces the same challenges today as the day the agency began operating: raising money and finding quality parents.

The agency uses public service announcements on Spanish-language media and works with community groups and churches to search for potential parents. Once they are recruited and thoroughly screened, they are trained. And after they receive a child, the staff provides lots of hands-on support.

The director says that each placement costs the agency \$10,000.

The Children's Advocacy Center, based at the University of San Diego Law School, said the outcomes of children in the foster care system are bleak, “resulting in significant long-term implications for the state due to incarceration, welfare, homelessness, etc.”

Humphreys notes that to incarcerate one person alone costs \$80,000 a year in this state.

“It's a good deal to invest early.”