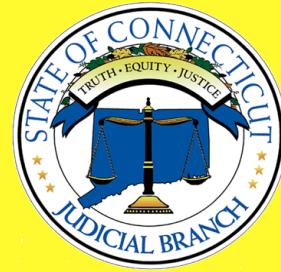


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Making it with the help of GRACE

A young woman's story

"La vida es como un espejo: te sonr e si la miras sonriendo."
(Life is like a mirror, if you smile at it, it will smile back.)



"Di" is a beautiful 19-year-old Latina with a bright, fetching smile and dark, soulful eyes. She exudes confidence when she enters the room at the GRACE Residential Program for Girls on Washington Street in Hartford, and Program Manager Freddnette "Freddie" Watkins-Mendez welcomes her warmly with open arms. "You made it!" Watkins-Mendez shouts out, and hustles Di

into GRACE's open dining area, setting a plate and cup in front of her and offering her the waiting lunch of cheese pizza and soda. Di apologizes for being late—the bus ride from the nearby city where she lives took longer than she expected—but she's glad to have finally made it, and happy to be in the place she calls her "second home." As other staff members pass through the room over the next hour, they also greet Di with smiles and motherly hugs, and want to know how her two-year old son is doing. "He is well!" replies Di with pride.

Before Di's arrival this afternoon, Watkins-Mendez told the story of a much different Di who arrived at GRACE several years ago—disheveled, broken, and full of anger. "She was detained at York [Correctional Institute], she had been to Washington Street [girls' detention], and also spent time at Eleanor House [a group home]. Coming to GRACE was a chance for her to get well." The program at GRACE, operated by Community Partners in Action, Inc. (CPA), has eight residential beds for court-involved juvenile girls as an alternative to detention. When there are vacant beds, 16- and 17-year old girls, like Di, can be screened for placement.

GRACE's program is short-term—two weeks to two months—and

focuses on providing girls with the help they need with self-esteem, anger management, life skills, and dealing with trauma. A daily educational component is also incorporated through CREC Polaris where girls earn credit that can be transferred back to their local school when they return home.

The rooms at GRACE are large and filled with light. The walls are saturated with rich, comforting colors like hot pink, lavender, teal, and chocolate. The girls are encouraged to personalize their own space (within established guidelines), and they also help the staff decorate common areas. Watkins-Mendez marvels at the surprises she finds every day. "They put new things up, changing wall displays with the seasons. There's always something going on!" In one of the common areas, pictures of fashion models—Hispanic, African-American, Caucasian and Asian—adorn several of the walls. "We have the girls talk about their ideas of beauty," Watkins-Mendez said, "and then we partner with community women to come in and help them discover their own beauty, and be proud of it." Di found herself in this supportive and nurturing environment at GRACE at the age of sixteen.

Di said she felt "lost in the world" for most of her adolescence. When she was twelve, there were problems within her family, and she was separated from her mother and her siblings for many months. Between small bites of pizza, and fractured phrases, Di talked about how difficult it was to live without her family. Sometimes, it was hard for her to remember when one event happened in relation to another. A few times, she left a story unfinished as the memory of anger and

helplessness took over. But she never stayed in a dark memory for very long. Suddenly, her face would flower and she would gush like a child, “But, now, I love my Mami! She takes care of my son while I’m working, and we get along very well.”

GRACE proved to be a catalyst for change in Di’s life. She says she was comfortable enough with staff to finally open up and “let out secrets I never let out anywhere else.” At GRACE, she found caring adults who gave the support, encouragement, and information she needed to help put the pieces of her life back together. She learned to take better care of herself, physically and emotionally, and earned her General Education Diploma (GED). When her time at GRACE was over, she left with a few more survival skills than before she went in.

However, life outside of GRACE presented new challenges for Di. She had a romantic relationship, shortly after her release, that led to the birth of her son, but after one day home from the hospital, the relationship ended and she was asked to leave. “I slept in the park with my baby for a couple of nights,” Di said. “I didn’t know what to do or where to go. So, I went back and asked the people at GRACE for help.” Watkins-Mendez, several GRACE staff members, and others in her life (including a teacher from her old high school who had mentored Di over the years), helped her navigate applications for emergency social services for her and her son, and provided support in other ways. A friend helped to get her an interview which led to a job at a nearby dental office as a bi-lingual hygienist’s assistant, and day-by-day, Di built the independent life she lives now. “I have my own place with my son, I work full-time, and I have money saved for a car,” said Di. “My apartment is close to my Mami and my other family, and I can walk to work. I have done a lot!”



Di is positive, and talks about the good things in her life, but she is also a realist. She knows the dangers of the inner city environment where she lives, and struggles out loud about how to handle the violence she sees on the streets every day. “It’s hard to know who to trust; who to be friends with,” she says. “It’s not just me I have to worry about anymore. I have my son to think about, too.” She tells Watkins-Mendez about a chance to move to Florida, where she has family, and the promise of a good job, but she also wisely comments about whether the move would solve her problems, or simply create new ones.

The lunch interview is over, and Watkins-Mendez packs up the leftover food for Di to take home. Hugs and final words of advice are exchanged, and everyone moves to the door for goodbyes. Watkins-Mendez makes Di promise to call and let her know before she makes any final decisions about moving to Florida. Di assures Watkins-Mendez she will. When asked about any final thoughts about GRACE, Di responds, “You know, I’ve been running my whole life. And it was hard. But, I don’t have to run anymore. I know I will always have a home here.”

For more information on GRACE, contact CSSD’s Kelly Stutzman at Kelly.Stutzman@jud.ct.gov or visit the Community Partners in Action, Inc. website at cpa-ct.org

The CSSD Chronicle is a regular publication of information and news about the Court Support Services Division. Questions or comments on this edition, or suggestions for future articles, can be directed to Linda.Grzeika@jud.ct.gov