



FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT®
FOR HEALTHY LIVING
FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

LUPE'S* JOURNEY



PERMANENT CONNECTIONS YMCA YOUTH & FAMILY SERVICES

THE PROBLEM: DISCONNECTION

In August 2017, YMCA Family Engagement Specialist Nedina started family finding and engagement work for Lupe, an 8-year-old girl who believed her mother was deceased. Nedina was told Lupe had no contact with other relatives and that Lupe's behaviors were so severe that she was not suitable for a home setting. **By the age of 9, Lupe had been removed from 6 placements, had been in 3 different facilities, and was currently living in a group home.** The disconnection Lupe experienced – first believing she lost her mother and then being shuttled in and out of foster care placements and group homes – removed any sense of emotional safety for Lupe. Her behaviors and inability to trust and connect with others were a manifestation of a lifetime of instability and isolation.

As Nedina came to learn more about Lupe's story, she knew that connecting Lupe to family was vital to her well-being and sense of belonging.

"When I first met Lupe, she would sit on the couch and stare blankly. I would try and engage with her, she would grunt, make screams or use babble words. I have experience using creative methods to connect with children and utilized a swing in the Occupational Therapy room to help Lupe self-regulate. While swinging, Lupe would pretend to be on a magic carpet in Aladdin, letting the motion calm her body and mind and simultaneously opening the door for me to interact with Lupe more meaningfully and slowly build a relationship with her." – Nedina, YMCA Family Engagement Specialist (FES)

The YMCA of San Diego County is dedicated to improving the quality of human life and to helping all people realize their fullest potential as children of God through the development of the spirit, mind and body.

THE Y'S RESPONSE: FAMILY FINDING & BUILDING RESILIENCY

Within three months of meeting Lupe, **Nedina discovered that Lupe's mother was not deceased after all.** Her family finding work led her to discover Lupe's mom was actually incarcerated not far from San Diego. Lupe's mother had lost touch with family and responded to Nedina right away wanting to learn more about her daughter. A few months later, Nedina also found Lupe's 19-year-old aunt in Extended Foster Care, who provided connections to other family members, including a grandmother that Lupe had not seen since she was a toddler.

While neither the aunt nor grandmother is able to care for Lupe, they remain committed to playing a role in her life and provide important connections to her family history. A year after meeting and working with Nedina, Lupe started asking more questions about her family, why she was in the group home, and when she would get to leave. Around the same time Lupe's mother would soon be released from prison, and Nedina worked hard to prepare Lupe and her mother, logistically and emotionally, for a meeting. Lupe did not remember her mom before the day they met but said "I always knew I had a mother" and had many questions about her.



The day of the meeting, Nedina watched as this shy little girl hid under pillows on a couch at the start of their visit, not knowing how to act or how to accept the love her mom wanted to give her. Lupe's mom shared that Lupe had another sister and also told the story of her name. Unfortunately, shortly after the visit Lupe's mother was incarcerated again, still struggling with her own traumatic past. Lupe was crushed and didn't understand why her mother left again.

Nedina maintained contact with the mother and encouraged her to write Lupe, which she continues to do to this day. Though another painful experience for Lupe, she now has the love and support of her aunt, grandmother and another supportive adult identified through family finding to help her heal from this experience.

BLINDSIDED BY A SETBACK

Toward the end of the 2018, Lupe was devastated once again as her most promising foster home placement fell through. Though Lupe would have to find another foster family, knowing that she had a supportive network of relatives and adults made it easier for her to process the situation. Nedina was also able to confirm the foster parent's desire to still stay connected with Lupe and advocated to keep her as part of Lupe's network.

At this point, 10-year-old Lupe had experienced 10 failed placements, so identifying a new foster home needed to be done with care.



OUTCOME: THE ROAD TO HEALING

A few months later, Lupe began visiting and bonding with the couple that would eventually be selected as her foster parents. **Nedina was the thread that connected the new foster parents to Lupe's supportive network of adults identified in the family finding process, who are valuable connection for Lupe especially and also for her new foster parents.** Nedina also spent much time engaging, supporting and advocating for the needs of the new foster parents.

After almost two-and-a-half years of living in a group home, Lupe is now in a home setting, something that was deemed impossible before she was referred to the Permanent Connections program. She has moved from a place of disconnection and despair to one of support and hope, and her sense of self and ability to connect with others has increased as a result. She still has much healing to do and challenges to overcome, but with the support and love of her expanded family, she has a fighting chance.



At the Y, we respect everyone who comes to us to share their story – and many are working toward a fresh start in life. So while their stories are true, names and images have been changed to protect their privacy.