

Where Are They Now?

“I would not be here today if the staff at Optimist hadn’t stepped in to help guide and advocate for me. I learned so much from Optimist.” -Sandra (Sammie) Martinez



Optimist Youth Homes & Family Services has been part of the Los Angeles community for over a century. Recently, one of our former residents came back to see us and share her story. Meet Sandra (Sammie) Martinez:

I had just turned 13 when I was brought to Optimist. In 1980, I was placed in the Transitional Day Treatment Program where we were picked up from home at 6am and returned after 6pm.

When I came to Optimist my grades and attitude were all F's. I was a gang member and runaway at the age of 12, sniffing paint, smoking PCP, drinking alcohol and in and out of juvenile hall. Looking for a way to escape from my alcoholic, abusive mother, I decided to participate in Optimist's program. My twin sister and I were the first females in the program and I was intimidated and scared.

After a few months, I started to take interest in school and began participating in individual counseling sessions. Things were great for a while but I struggled with my home and gang life and was sent back to juvenile hall several times. My probation officer Bill Robinson, my counselor Ray Vasquez, the director Chuck Hapel, and psychologist Bob Osterman all advocated for me to return to Optimist each time.

When I became pregnant, the staff at Optimist was supportive and helped me any way they could. I got a job on campus with Kelly the janitor and then off campus at a

senior center. Olivia the OD (Officer of the Day) was like a second mother to me. She helped answer baby questions and taught me how to care about myself more. Christy, the head of the kitchen, fed me so well because she knew we didn't have food at home.

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When I graduated in 1984, I decided I wanted to be a probation officer. Unfortunately that never happened due to some bad decisions which landed me in prison. However, I kept all the helpful people I encountered and their teachings with me and when I was released I made a decision to give back and make amends within my community for all the pain and trauma I caused.

Now, at the age of 51, I am sober, work for an organization called Gang Intervention Youth Development and have been volunteering in my community for 15 years. I also volunteer in three California prisons with men and women who are doing life. I live my life full so when I leave this world I will be empty with nothing else to give. I am forever grateful to Optimist Youth Homes & Family Services.



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