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Loving foster home rescued North Haven student

By Ann DeMatteo



NORTH HAVEN — It doesn't need to be Thanksgiving for Ovidio Chaparro to be thankful.

"I'm thankful for everything," said Chaparro, a no-nonsense North Haven High School senior who says he could have had a life behind bars — or at the least, of not doing the right thing — if the state Department of Children and Families didn't intervene and place him in loving foster homes, especially the one he's in now.

"It's the environment that affects the way you portray yourself, the way you represent yourself," said Chaparro, 18, who was born into unfortunate circumstances, but doesn't look back. "I've had to mold myself into the person I am today. Yeah, I struggled. But I'm not the only person who has struggled."

He said he doesn't worry about what happened in the past, and tries to solve problems by looking "outside the box. I always have a reason for something. I have to look at both sides. It keeps me learning. Every day is a new thing, a new challenge."

For the last two years, Chaparro has had the help and steady home life he's always yearned for when DCF allowed him to live with a school friend and his mother, in what DCF calls a special study placement.

"In my house, he's not a foster kid," said Ledvia Masferrer, who accepted Chaparro into her family. He has been friends with her son, Dale Quijada, also a senior at North Haven High, since they attended North Haven Middle School.

Chaparro lived in Meriden where he was born and then moved back and forth between New London and Puerto Rico. The state took him and his two brothers from their parents, who had problems with mental illness, substance abuse and domestic violence. He has some contact with his mother and father, and stays in touch with his two brothers. The boys first lived together at the Children's Center in Hamden and then were placed in foster care.

Masferrer's North Haven home is Chaparro's third placement, the second in North Haven. Chaparro said he liked and is thankful for the other family in North Haven with whom he lived, but he needed to be in a situation where he had more private space.

"He wasn't happy and he became my son. They (Ovidio and Dale) became brothers. I don't have any foster kids," Masferrer said. "I couldn't choose a better kid. He's made life complete, having him and Dale together."

"This is home," said Chaparro.

Chaparro will be graduating from high school in December instead of June in order to get six months of hands-on training so that he can attend the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y. Getting the training is a prerequisite to getting accepted.

"I want to be a chef and own my own restaurant," he said.

Right now, he is a part-time dishwasher at Harry's Sports Grill in the Holiday Inn, 201 Washington Ave. He got the job on his own, after approaching the executive chef, Hazen Sturtevant, one day when Chaparro was working at Chef's Equipment Emporium in Wallingford.

"I see a young man who really wants to strive to get out of the lifestyle he's been in," said Sturtevant.

"I've mentored a lot of people and I see something in him. He's perfect for this," said Sturtevant.

Chaparro has earned As and Bs in his college-bound course load at North Haven High School, according to acting Principal Russ Dallai. "Ovidio focuses intensely on academics and working to achieve his goals," Dallai said.

Chaparro said that he reaches out to others and encourages them to stay on the straight path, telling others they can't miss class. He knows that keeping his eye on his goals can only help.

Chaparro also has the respect of his DCF social worker, Willie Taylor.

"He's been a pretty good kid since I've had his case," said Taylor, who has known Chaparro for five years.

"I want to be the hope for others," said Chaparro, explaining that injustices bother him and he would like to see the government do more for youths so that young people can find jobs. He is among a group of youths who meet monthly with DCF Commissioner Susan Hamilton.

"We help make better policies. We're not given the same opportunities while in DCF (as someone who lives with their birth parents) but we advocate for each other. We speak out. You have a voice, use it," he said.

Said his English teacher, Justin Marciano: "Ovidio is a realist. His attitude displays his understanding of the world, and he works hard to better himself and the environment around him. Ovidio's passion is unlike many high school students because he seeks to better the world not just for himself, but for everybody he encounters."