

THE DREAM OF

Magical things can happen when teens are asked to creatively express their dreams of family.

That's what we found out on January 15, when Education for Successful Parenting held its first major event — "The Dream of Family" Showcase.

The event was an outgrowth of ESP's community work. Through innovative school-based programs, ESP provides teens with information and life-skills for parenting, empowering young adults to make healthy and responsible choices before forming a family. The goals are to reduce rates of teen pregnancy, improve preconception health, increase father involvement, and prevent the circumstances that lead to child abuse and neglect.

Inspiration for hosting a public event arose from ESP's classes conducted throughout Southern California during the past five years. In ESP's curriculum, teens are asked to describe their goals for their future family. These dreams become the motivation and the compass for healthier adolescent decision-making. The poignant thoughts and heartfelt longings, which youth have depicted through words and sketches in the pages of the "My Life-Plan for Parenting" student workbooks, have been deeply moving.

Along the way, ESP developed a devoted group of youth volunteers, many of whom share a foster or adoptive experience, and are keenly aware of the importance of being prepared for parenting. Youth together with ESP staff envisioned "The Dream of Family" Showcase as a way to increase awareness of teens' perspectives on parenting, and the value of ESP's preventive programs.

Searching for a suitable venue for the event, ESP found an excellent partner in Westminster Mall. The mall is owned by Simon Property Group, Inc., which also sponsors the Simon Youth Foundation and their alternative education programs for youth. Being family-oriented and supporting at-risk youth, Westminster Mall embraced the concept and generously allocated their indoor Macy's Court. The next question was: Would the event attract an audience for the teens' messages?

"THE DREAM OF FAMILY" SHOWCASE EVENT

More than 500 people of all ages came and shared in the power and emotion of the teens' personal messages about the importance of family at "The Dream of Family" Showcase.

During the three-hour event, 35 young adults ages 13 to 22 creatively expressed their "dream of family" in a variety of artistic forms. Some delivered thought-provoking speeches or poems they had written, and others sang songs about heartbreak and hope. A group of young men expressed "family" through a well-choreographed hip-hop dance, and others performed instrumental pieces. In addition to the performances, there were displays of teens' paintings, poetry, drawings, sculptures and other forms of art.

Several government officials and representatives also attended the event to honor the work of the teens and the mission of ESP. Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez made a special appearance to present a certificate and announce that the organization had been recognized in the Congressional Record. City, county, state assembly and state senate offices presented certificates to

participating youth.

A parent of a teen, Maria Sandoval, later commented, "To be good parents when you start a family — that is a movement that needs to be told. . . . ESP is the leader of this movement. I am so happy to see my daughter so enthusiastic about it and that she is preparing now to be a good mom for the future. This organization is the best thing to happen to her."

A MAJOR MILESTONE

The Showcase was an amazing milestone in ESP's evolution. I founded ESP in 2005, after being a foster mother for 10 years. I was all too familiar with the prevalence and life-time impact of childhood abuse and neglect.

The facts are startling and sad. In the United States, there are about 500,000 children in foster care at any one time. Even more troubling is the fact that child abuse is reported on behalf of 6 million children in the United States each year. And there is no improvement in sight — the volume of reports has stayed essentially the same, year after year.

Haunted by all the children aching for safe and loving homes, I came to realize the future will remain unchanged unless we make a better effort to educate young adults with the information and skills for becoming good parents. Hurt children, yearning for connection, are the teens who are most eager and least prepared to create a family. In turn, they frequently give rise to another generation of hurt children.

It was this urgent need for change that inspired the founding of ESP. Translating health information about children's needs

Photo by Prasad Photography
Enjoying a moment
together are Randi and
Lurae Rubenstein.

FAMILY



Photo by Alex
Centeno

The dance group Ohana at the ESP event. Members include Jackson Nguyen, Anthony Nguyen, Johnny Nguyen, Dominic Abante, Yin Huynh, Johnnie Ho and not included are Tim Kieu.



Photo by Andrew Truong

Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez with ESP Generation Next youth group, including (front row) Shelly Gill and Kathy Pham. Second row, Brenda Sandoval, Silvia Fuentes, Maria Barragan, Cathy Dang, Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez, Randi Rubenstein, Amber Ellis, Mighan Morris and Tyler Sherrill.

into teen-friendly language, the program covers topics such as teen parenting challenges, dangers of prenatal substance exposure, adoption, budgets, shaken baby syndrome and non-violent discipline techniques. The centerpiece of the program is the “My Life-Plan for Parenting” workbook. All materials have been designed to be sensitive to cultural and religious differences, and are accessible to students of all learning capabilities. The program also meets state and national standards for health education.

Since its inception, ESP has conducted

more than 80 classes and instructed more than 2,000 teenagers. The outcomes have been remarkably consistent across all schools and demographics. More than 90 percent of ESP students report they are more willing to wait until adulthood before parenting, and they feel they will be better able to provide, protect and nurture a future family. The positive messages about family and the need to postpone, rather than prevent, childbearing resonate well with foster and adoptive youth hungering for belonging and connection.

During the last few years, ESP has

expanded its program offerings. In 2009, ESP added “Generation to Generation,” a program to help parents of teens initiate family discussions about future parenting — taught in both English and Spanish. Another program was launched in 2010, “From Foster Families to Future Families,” for a blended audience of foster youth and caregivers, facilitating discussion and strengthening mentorship connections.

With our inaugural “The Dream of Family” Showcase, we have now found a conduit for young adults to creatively express the importance of healthy, responsible parent-

Blasphemy

By Amber Ellis

ing, while drawing upon their own life-stories. This was a powerful transition point for ESP. Almost overnight, we were no longer the sole champions of this cause. Like a spark that flew from flame to kindling, the passion to create better beginnings for children has ignited and spread among those who understand the need the best.

The next steps are to expand ESP's reach, and make ESP's pre-parenting education programs available to other counties and states. Like other nonprofits, ESP desperately needs funding for sustainability and growth. We are encouraged by the tremendous momentum we have enjoyed, and we look forward to forging new partnerships to continue our work. Together we can reach thousands more teens, strengthen foundations for future families and create healthier and happier communities.

With timely information and life-skills, every adolescent can plan now to create strong foundations for the future family of their dreams.

Education for Successful Parenting is a 501(c)3 non-profit, based in Tustin, Calif. The organization envisions a world in which all parents are knowledgeable and prepared for their responsibilities and where all children are safe and loved. ESP is supported through private donations and grants to provide classes at no-cost for at-risk youth. Additional information about ESP is available at www.eduparents.org or call (949) 646-6016. ☼

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Randi Rubenstein is the executive director and founder of Education for Successful Parenting. She earned a masters degree in public health from UCLA. As a foster parent for the past 16 years, she has cared for 10 children. She and her youngest daughter Lurae currently reside in Tustin, Calif. She can be contacted at [rrubenstein@eduparents.org](mailto:r rubenstein@eduparents.org).

Unsure of how to start off...

It first starts off with a girl that was lost, hurt, struggled, in pain, suffering, and unsure of love. Who tries to find a family. Still unsure of what to say about family. Man that word. It makes me sick and I want to cry. I have been hurt so much. For others the word family means someone who loves you, joy, happiness, children playing, kids singing, and even screaming to the top of there lungs in the backyard. For me it means dirt. Every "family" I was in I stayed away from them. I told myself I would be a rock I would never let anyone see my true heart. So she got raped and abused. Feeling misused, untreated, disrespected and feeling no higher than a speck of dirt. Walking down the street trying to find daddy and found one who beat her and made her sell her soul. Standing on the corner all lonely with shorts that you feel uncomfortable. And it is all just for \$40-80. Not knowing how to love you.

I call the streets, L.A. home. Where is your family when you need them most. Now you are on the streets and have no one to turn to. So you turn to a bottle and marijuana and a 40. Daddy and momma, all I knew was my hips and thighs can get me here and there. Sad, down and depressed. Man, all I do is cry but I guess I am only human. The things I can only express I only say what is on my heart. Family, marijuana, a bottle? Coming out so hard when she gets found someday somebody takes her in. But she does not like it and wants to turn away. So she runs not knowing where she is going because she is in new surroundings and runs and does not want to ever come back.

But the police finds her and she is back in the home again and yet she wants to run away again she is shocked because the family excepts her back in to there life's so she runs again but instead of getting in trouble in an argument when she get's home they say I love you and where have you been? What!!!!!!??????? She does not know how to respond to that word. I love you eeeeeewwww. Who says that anymore. Now she is stuck now she can't move not even run away anymore because they love her. A family loves her? Somebody wants her? She feels wanted and valued that's all she wanted. A broken girl. Why do they want me? She says why haven't they moved me yet? So I can go back to the streets but not even she can. She wants to go to school? Graduate and this thing she never even dreamed about called college is now face-to-face with her. Called education, books, studying. I have a family now.

All this time and I had no idea this guy, his name is Jesus, My God. Messiah. Daddy. Love. Family, prosperity. Not knowing how confused I can be at times. I stop and realized how blessed she is. RELAX! God will see you through it. He is in control now. Just leave it in his hands and he will work it out. God? School? College? A home? Books? Homework? And this thing called Love? And college? WOW...College... Blasphemy isn't it?

The Dream of Family

by Grace Steedly, 16

If mom didn't get sick
 And dad didn't leave
 Big brother would be visiting
 No more crying
 No more being afraid
 But now I see what I have made
 She's beautiful in every single way
 She doesn't cry like I do every single day
 Her mommy and daddy know how to love her
 And now she's got a big brother
 I know I made the best choice
 Though I couldn't stop crying when I heard her voice
 Even though it's all a haze
 I still remember those October days
 Her inside my belly swimming around
 When she was out she couldn't help but look around
 When she's older there will be no fighting
 But there will be so much hugging
 Many people telling her they love her
 But no one letting go of her
 And when she's under that Christmas tree with her new family
 I know that family is the best any family could ever be.



Photo by Alex Centeno
 Showing his moves
 is Johnny Nguyen.



Photo by Keri Gee Semmelman

Teens with certificates for their submissions. Top row, Mario Punzo, Phoenix Gallegos, Noemi Trevino. Bottom row, Grace Steedly and Rayvin Elmore.

If Teddy Bears Could Talk

By Cassandra Gonzalez

If Teddy Bears could talk
 What would they say,
 What would they tell you
 About the children with whom they play?
 They might tell you things
 You don't want to hear,
 Like Mommy hurt Tommy,
 Or Daddy is who we fear.
 The Teddy Bears of children
 Are not just some toy.
 They're sometimes the only love felt
 By some little girl or boy.
 So when you see a child
 Scared and alone,
 Find him a Teddy Bear
 In need of a home.
 Know that you've done good
 By the deed in your heart.
 You've given the child
 A place for love to start.

Love You Can Breathe In

feature
BY CATHY DANG

I know what it feels like to grow up in
a broken home
And I know it can feel like you're
running on empty and you're alone
My childhood still haunts me today
And if I could, I would change the way
I was raised
But I can only — no, I can only do that
for you

So I swear not to have you until I'm
ready
And I swear to provide you with
everything I can
And I swear to be that person you
believe in
And I swear to give you all the love
you can breathe in

I will do my best to grow into the
person I need to be
So I can prepare to give you all the
tools you need to succeed
I'll dedicate all of my time
To guiding you through whatever
walk of life you choose
I will support you; oh, I'll support you
in every way

I promise to be there for you
So you'll never have to feel alone
I'll protect you and make sure that you
Grow up in a safe and happy home

So I swear not to have you until I'm
ready
And I swear to provide you with
everything I can
And I swear to be that person you
believe in
And I swear to give you all the love
you can breathe in



Photo by Alex Centeno
Performing her song is
Cathy Dang.