



## From the Voice of Youth

This spring, the Youth Ambassador Initiative supporting the Prevention and Early Intervention division of the Department of Family and Protective Services, also now the Family Support Services division in Chapter 137 of the Human Resources Code, launched its first writing contest, designed and led by youth, to raise awareness on issues they face. The youth ambassadors identified two winners from the submissions for this contest: Sophia from Bexar County Boys and Girls Club (a grantee under the Statewide Youth Services Network) and Miguel from Raymondville ISD Youth Advisory Council (a grantee under the Community Youth Development program). These two youth were selected as winners due to the passion, vulnerability, and honesty that came through in their essays.

Throughout the submissions, readers get a glimpse into how youth are adjusting to post-pandemic life, as well as insights into the supports they receive from programs in which they are involved. A key thread between the submissions is how youth are overcoming challenges regarding feeling stuck in their circumstances and finding the motivation and discipline to overcome that challenge.

Sophia shared how she overcame adversity by never giving up. She described using persistence to overcome hurdles, whether that is with academics, athletics, or at her STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) club. This perseverance served Sophia well as she transitioned to high school. While the adjustment was difficult at first, she didn't give up. Sophia's persistence to make the best out of her high school experience led her to the Boys and Girls Club. She described the experience in her essay, stating, "When I was there, I felt accepted. I felt wanted." Further, she shared how it impacted her thought process, going from "What am I doing here, why am I alive?" to "I am breathing, so I should go be alive..." Sophia's message on perseverance and finding one's space certainly resonated with our Youth Ambassadors.

Miguel also discussed overcoming difficult situations, stating "I truly believe hard times are often blessings in disguise meant to strengthen you no matter how much they hurt." In his essay, Miguel shares how this mindset helps him stay motivated through tough or mundane tasks in order to achieve his goals. He also shared advice for those struggling with motivation in difficult times: "...in life, if you never take a step back to think about what you are doing, how can you expect to fully understand and see the full picture of what you are trying to accomplish? Remaining motivated through challenging times is not easy, but the right mindset can make all of the difference."

While Sophia and Miguel were selected as winners by their peers, two other youth shared their perspectives as well. Ava, of Houston, shared her experience at a charter school and finding balance between focusing on what needs to be done as a high school Senior and the desire to graduate and move on to the next stage in her life. Ava shared that having a strong support network of teachers and friends helps keep her focused and motivated. Another tip for staying motivated that she shared is to add music, a show, or something else you enjoy in the background so that that unwanted task becomes a bit more fun to do.

Jana, also of Houston, shares how high school was a blur due to the COVID-19 Pandemic and the realities of virtual school. During this time, without the normal structures of school in place, motivation and discipline were hard to come by at times. Coming back from remote education and learning that she was not on track to have an associate degree by the time she graduated high school was a major setback. Jana overcame this by working hard to keep grades up and using the experience as a learning opportunity saying, "there may be room for error, but there will always be more room for improvement."

The essays highlighted here are an example of the wisdom and insight gained from the life experiences of youth. While numerous challenges face youth in our communities, they have the skills and insights to overcome obstacles they face. Youth voice and their experiences should not be forgotten, but instead elevated to guide those supporting youth.