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Oceanside teen earns top statewide honor



When Julie Hernandez first enrolled with the Boys & Girls Club of [Oceanside](#) as a sixth-grader in 2011, things got off to a bad start.

Suffering from extreme shyness and social anxiety, Hernandez felt overwhelmed by the roomful of strangers and longed to escape to the “quiet little shell” of her bedroom. Through the club, however, she eventually found her voice, her confidence and the direction for her future.

With those words in a speech last month, the now-17-year-old college student was named the Boys & Girls Clubs of America’s 2017 California State Youth of the Year.

Hernandez, who overcame some childhood challenges to graduate from high school a year early with a 4.6 grade point average, said that without the Boys & Girls Club she could never be where she is now.

“They helped me find my personality and realize that I have a purpose in this world,” she said. “I can grow up and do something amazing and they were the ones who helped me find out who I am and who I want to be.”

What she wants to be is a biomedical researcher developing medications and vaccines for future generations. Mike Hollins, senior program director at the Boys & Girls Club of Oceanside, said if that's what Hernandez wants to be, then it will happen.

"All the goals she set for herself in school, she achieved," Hollins said. "So I believe that whatever she puts her mind to in the future, she can accomplish. So far, so good."

Hernandez was born in Houston and moved with her parents to Oceanside when she was 4. Around the time her brother, Marcos, was born nine years ago, her parents split up and her father moved back to Texas. To support her children, Hernandez's mother, Kimberly, worked three jobs. Julie, then still in grade school, spent her afternoons and evenings taking care of her little brother and, often, her grandmother.

"It was tough to even see my mom at all during those days and I felt like I was co-parenting my brother," she said.

The more time she spent at home, the more anxiety she felt at school. Her stress level and self-consciousness peaked when she entered sixth grade at Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School in Oceanside in fall 2011.

"I had social anxiety and intense stage fright and I couldn't make eye contact with people. When I would talk to older people I'd get all clammy and break into a really bad sweat," she said.

That was the same time she started attending the after-school program at King Middle School, which was run by the Boys & Girls Club. She was so uncomfortable in the program during the first few months she felt like she was in shock.

Right away, Hollins recognized Hernandez. Their families had lived in the same neighborhood and Julie had played with his son when she was little. He could see that Hernandez was struggling so he pushed her into several programs that forced her to interact with other kids and adults.

Hernandez joined the Keystone Club teen program, became a manager for the club's "snack shack" and took part in the Optimists' oratorical contest, which involved writing and presenting a short speech for an audience. Before long she also joined clubs for performing arts, yoga and STEM (science, technology, engineering and math).

"We brought out her competitive nature and it helped her come out of her bubble. She made a lot of friends and everyone looked up to her because she was a leader," Hollins said. "She's very driven. Sometimes she pushed herself too hard and I had to encourage her to slow down a bit and relax."

Hernandez said Hollins, who she calls "Mr. Mike," is more than a mentor to her. He's also been her father figure for many years: "He's someone I can go to for advice or help and he's always been one of my strongest support systems."

After three years enrolled in the Boys & Girls Club program as a student, Hernandez came back in 10th grade as a volunteer tutor, something she's continued to do ever since.

Hernandez — a straight-A student since seventh grade — didn't feel challenged by public school classes so while at El Camino High School she started taking summer courses at MiraCosta College, where she liked the rigor of coursework and seriousness of the students. She graduated from El Camino in June 2016 and is now finishing her first full year at MiraCosta. Her goal is to transfer next year to either [Stanford University](#) or UC Berkeley to finish her upper division work in chemistry.

She pays for her schooling with grants and numerous scholarships that she won in high school, and works as a paid tutor to make extra money for books. Because she doesn't have her driver's license yet, Hernandez gets rides to and from school from her mom and friends. But when she can't get a lift, she often walks the nearly 4 miles to and from campus.

Hollins said he began encouraging Hernandez about four years ago to compete for the Boys & Girls Club's youth awards. The process involves writing and presenting a speech about how club programs have influenced her life, and taking part in a group interview. In May 2016, Hernandez was named the Oceanside site's Youth of the Year and in March she was named San Diego County Youth of the Year.

That honor took her to the state competition in Sacramento on April 25, where she beat out eight other contestants for the California title and a \$5,000 scholarship. Now she will move on to the Pacific Region finals on June 8. If she wins there, she will compete at the national competition, which comes with a \$25,000 scholarship, renewable over four years.

While her life is very busy these days, Hernandez said she loves to go back to the Boys & Girls Club as often as she can to volunteer her time and tutor. Whenever she visits, she looks for children who are as shy as she was when she started.

"I see these quiet kids who are off to the side, trying not to be noticed, and I go up to them and say hello," she said. "I want to show them that there's someone else who has noticed them, who sees them and wants them to feel welcome. I tell them 'you'll be fine here. This is where you belong."