Event focuses on youth success

Teens share stories at NMSU criminal justice conference

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LAS CRUCES - "I'm striving to be a success story," 17-year-old Roman Garcia said Friday as he spoke of overcoming his turbulent childhood, drawing applause from the dozens who attended New Mexico State University's annual criminal justice conference at Hotel Encanto in Las Cruces.

Garcia, a junior at Centennial High School, was one of several guest speakers at the conference, now in its fourth year, which is sponsored by NMSU's criminal justice national honor society, Alpha Phi Sigma.

The theme for this year's conference was “juvenile rehabilitation,” a topic that is familiar to Garcia.

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At age 5, Garcia said he started witnessing physical abuse in this family's household. By 7, he found the courage to report the abuse to a school counselor. He was referred to the Ween and Seed Safe Haven on North Tornillo Street, which soon became his refuge, his escape from the violence at home.

At 8, he moved into a foster home and believed better days were ahead. But that wasn't the case. He said he was abused in the foster home, which left him "broken." He again turned to mentors at the Weed and Seed program for guidance and support.

Garcia then returned to his family's home, but by eighth grade, he said his mother had kicked him out. "I felt alone, I felt all by myself," he recalled.

Soon after, he reconnected with his father. Their relationship, however, quickly soured as his father became abusive.

Garcia said he briefly turned to drugs before seeking help from the Weed and Seed program. "I don't know where I would be if it wasn't for this program. It's a haven - that's what it is. That's where I felt safe," he said.

Garcia acknowledged his past behavior could have landed him behind bars. But he never saw the image of a jail cell or even set foot in a courtroom. For that, he credited his Weed and Seed mentor, Felipe Briseño, for intervening before he got into more serious trouble.

And that was the goal of this year's conference: Finding ways to divert youth from entering the criminal justice system.

Third Judicial District Judge Fernando R. Macias, who spoke as part of a panel, said the key to keeping youth "out of the system" is by implementing preventive measures at an early age.

"By the time a child reaches kindergarten, we know who we are at the greatest risk," Macias said.

"Our success is always going to be mixed if we're waiting to act with 14- to 17-year-olds, to divert them at that point," he continued. "I've really come to the conclusion that if we took the millions of dollars that go into therapy and channeled them into working with children from kindergarten to the third grade, or pre-kindergarten, we wouldn't have the issues that we have right now."

To address the issue, Macias said, political leaders will have to devote more resources to programs that help at-risk youth, and schools, agencies and organizations will have to work more closely together to support youth in communities throughout Doña Ana County.

"Until we're ready to share in the community the responsibility of raising some of these children, we're going to have to have these conferences, and we will hear some success stories," he said. "But let me assure you that 30 years ago, we were having these same conferences and having these same discussions. That's not to discourage you - that's to suggest that there are answers. But it requires a demand on political leadership to really rethink the way we distribute our resources."

After the discussion, Garcia said he wants to see more resources channeled into the Weed and Seed program. "It's a wonderful program," he said, "but now the budgets are being cut, and I have yet to hear why or where this money has gone."

Garcia, who said he plans to run for mayor of Las Cruces in the future, added: "This program guides you in the right direction, and I've made it this far without being incarcerated."

About 100 people attended Friday's conference, according to Xeni Lopez, the president of the Alpha Phi Sigma.

Guest speakers also included District Attorney Mark D'Antonio and District Judge Marcos F. Bayer.

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