

Posted on Thu, Jul. 01, 2010

Young grad's homeless odyssey brings tears to City Hall

By Matt Bokor / Editor
GablesHomePage.com



Miami Herald Coral Gables

Homeless only a few weeks ago, a shy young scholar evoked tears and received far-ranging tributes at the start of the Coral Gables City Commission meeting on Wednesday, June 30.

Jessica Herrera, 18, led the chamber in the Pledge of Allegiance, which was followed by the recent NBC 6 segment that documented her odyssey as a homeless student for most of her senior year at Coral Gables Senior High.

Despite the challenges, Jessica graduated this spring in the top 10 percent of her class with a 5.5 GPA and a package of scholarships to Florida International University.

As word of her achievements spread, so did an outpouring of support, culminating with her appearance at City Hall to recite the pledge.

"As we head into the Fourth of July weekend, if you want to know what America is all about, here it is, standing in front of you," Mayor Don Slesnick said with tears in his eyes. "Jessica, congratulations."

Vice Mayor William H. Kerdyk Jr., chairman of the Bank of Coral Gables, presented Jessica with a decorative box stuffed with letters of support, which streamed in from across the United States and Mexico. Donors have sent some \$6,600 into a special account for her, Mr. Kerdyk said.

"This is very compelling story," he said. "I see a lot of tears in the audience here. ... Jessica, this is a small tribute for everything you've done, and congratulations for everything."

Coral Gables attorney Alfonso J. Perez, president of the Academy of South Florida, then presented Jessica with a brand new Asus laptop computer. He was joined by Kerrie Martinez, student services, Academy of South Florida, and Katie-Britt Greenway, corporate relations, Academy of South Florida.

"It's overwhelming how generous everyone has been," Jessica said afterward. "I just want to thank everyone. It means a lot to me."

While several teachers knew of Jessica's plight, the community was unaware until the [Coral Gables Community Foundation awarded Jessica with the Lady Suzanna P. Tweed Scholarship](#). (Lady Tweed died in 1999 at age 99. With no children of her own, she left a legacy to help deserving students continue their education.)

Instead of a routine scholarship announcement, Jessica's story aired on the 6 o'clock news and endeared her to people across town and across the country.

"It brought such clarity to the foundation and what we do," said Andria Hanley, who as executive director of the Coral Gables Community Foundation took Jessica under her wing. "Jessica is just an incredible young woman."

A U.S. citizen born of Nicaraguan parents, Jessica will soon be attending freshman orientation at FIU. She recently moved out of the Homeless Assistance Center and into the home of a friend's family. Her own parents face deportation.

"I want to thank the Coral Gables Community Foundation again for the scholarship," Jessica said. "It's one of the many blessings that I have received over the year. I am really grateful for everything. And the opportunity to say the pledge today, it was really awesome."

If you would like to make a donation to Jessica, please make a check to:

Jessica Herrera Account 10013175
Bank of Coral Gables
2295 Galiano St.
Coral Gables, FL 33134

© 2010 Miami Herald Media Company. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.miamiherald.com>