

“EVERYTHING HAS A SOLUTION...GO FORWARD”

Marina's Story

The first thing that impressed me about Marina was her self-confidence. Before the interview I was only told she had been a client in the Mother and Sons program and her two young sons were also in the Save the Dream (Alliance First Offender) program. We were introduced by the Save the Dream worker at the entrance of the Counseling Center and shook hands. Her handshake was firm as she looked directly at me. Yes, I thought, she is self-assured. As her story unfolded, I quickly learned it was not always the case.

Marina related that she was a single mother. Her husband, now in Mexico, divorced her five years ago and left her and their two children to fend for themselves. One son was in the 9th grade and the other in 6th grade. She had several sisters in town as well as her husband's brother, all of whom occasionally visited. She indicated she had not always gotten along well with her sisters. To make ends meet, and barely at that, she worked 6 days a week at a minimum wage job as a cook in a restaurant across town. She does not have a car and has to rely on public transportation. Her workdays average 12 hours, from 10:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. Her children are “latchkey” kids. The older son takes care of the younger one and stays awake until their mother arrives home from work.

Marina became involved very reluctantly with the Alliance as a result of the youngest son brandishing a knife while with his friends in a park. An adult had observed the event, told him to put it away, but he “got an attitude.” This eventually led to a complaint being filed at his school. A school representative went to Marina's house to inform her of the situation and indicated she would advocate for her at a school meeting that was convened to consider sanction against her son. This greatly surprised Marina and was unexpected since her prior contact with school officials had been less than positive. As a result of the meeting and intervention of the school worker, was that Marina was referred to the Alliance Mother and Sons program that was conducted in Spanish. Marina said she had no interest and no intention of participating in the program. She said that “*she didn't want to be in a program that dealt with other people's problems.*” The Alliance Mother and Sons worker failed to make contact at her apartment, so he went to her place of work. “*I cussed him out and told him to leave me alone.*” He came back again, and I guess what changed my mind is that he said “you have to do it for your son.” “*I finally realized he was right. My boss agreed to let me take some time off to attend the meetings so that also made a big difference. The (Mother and Sons) program was 10 weeks long and I got to spend time with my son and learned that other people have problems like mine. I didn't feel so alone,*” she said. “*After the program, I got my diploma, but then a week later my two sons got into trouble for shop lifting. My sons were referred by the Sheriff's office to the Neighborhood Accountability Board on which an Alliance Save the Dream (First Offender) Program social worker was a member.*” The social worker decided to take the case and help the boys complete their community service requirement in order to wipe the slate clean. “*The Save the Dream worker helped them a lot, in school and just talking to them. They cleaned around the school and worked on the school garden.*” The Save the Dream worker

later confirmed that her kids did great, "...they were good workers, pulling weeds, planting, cleaning desks... they could only have learned that from their mother."

When I asked which Alliance services helped. Marina stated without hesitation, "Mother and Sons and Save the Dream both helped my sons, but I think now that I was helped most." Marina drew a deep breath and looked out the window seemingly pondering her next sentence. I remained silent. After a long pause, Marina looked up at me and said, "*I was always very angry about my husband leaving us, about my sister having more things (then me) and not calling, about my need to work long hours and not being able to do more for my sons... I was very, very angry. The Save the Dream worker really helped me with my anger. She and I talked a lot. She would have me write my problems on a piece of paper, then burn it, symbolizing getting rid of my anger. I was always wanting to be a real family. My son would say when I asked him why he got into trouble... he said he was hurt... that his father was never around, that (he) would like to have a family with a father. She helped me understand that my sons and I were a real family, that while we liked to spend time with my sister and uncles, we have to count on ourselves. As a result of her help, my sons and I get along well, we love one another and spend all day Saturdays together starting with breakfast. My older son wants to go into the (military) service to save his money and go to college while in the service. My younger son wants to be a lawyer. If it wasn't for her, my son would have been expelled from school and things would be worst...he would have gotten into more trouble. My kids, thanks to her, are doing well now.*"

Marina continued, *I realize I'm not alone, that I have to define my own life... I have pride and confidence now so I don't wait for my sister to call, I call her...I don't hurt any more...I don't feel alone.*" I thought to myself, what a great interview title, "I'm Not Alone." Marina continued "*I was very frustrated. I was angry at the world. The most important thing I learned was to see my problems from a different way... I learned to do things for my sons, and let some of my problems go (such as anger toward my sister for not calling me). I can count on them (the Alliance)...I don't feel alone... I learned that everything has a solution, and that I can communicate with them (the Alliance) anytime. They worry about me and that means a lot to me and my sons. We're not alone anymore.*"

A dove landed on the fence outside the counseling office and Marina looked intently at it. She smiled. We were both silent. A few moments later the dove flew off. "*Some day soon*" she said, "*my sons will leave, just like the dove, maybe one for the service and the other to college. As long as they do well, don't get into trouble and call me, I'll be happy. I know now that they too will have to define their own lives.*"



I asked Marina what she would recommend to make the Alliance services better. She suggested only that they offer more services in Spanish, and keep after people like herself that are angry and don't want to be helped, at least at the beginning.

"Marina", I asked, "what title would you give this interview?" She thought then she said, *I felt dead and I was born again because of the Alliance. I don't feel alone anymore. So what would I title this interview? It would be **Everything has a solution...go forward.***"