

3 Oxnard children find new life at Mooseheart Child City and School after mother dies

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Teresa Flores is hugged by grandson Paul as her other grandson, Angel, looks on Tuesday at the Oxnard Moose Lodge. Flores sent the brothers and their sister to Mooseheart Child City and School in Chicago after their mother died of cancer two years ago

After cancer claimed the life of Teresa Flores' only daughter in 2003, sending her three grandchildren away to a facility in Illinois was the last thing she thought she could do.

Flores, 64, was in despair. Her daughter, Angelica, had just died after an 18-month fight with cancer, and Flores was now in charge of raising three children all under 10 at the time.

"When my friends first suggested it (sending the kids away), I said no! I couldn't have the idea in my mind to separate the kids," said Flores.

But after visiting the Mooseheart Child City & School west of Chicago two years ago, she changed her mind. "It turned out to be a wonderful place," she said.

The children — Paul, now 13, Angel, 12, and Krystal, 11 — are back here this summer for a three-week break. After that, they will return to Mooseheart.



Teresa Flores, third from left, laughs as she and her grandchildren, from left, Paul, Krystal and Angel, are interviewed Tuesday at the Oxnard Moose Lodge

The school, founded in 1913 by the Moose fraternal organization, is a residential childcare facility for children from infancy through high school whose families cannot care for them, according to its Web site. The school has 220 children from around the nation living in 30 homes on the 1,000-acre campus. Families do not have to pay for food, board or education.

After four years of struggling to provide for the children while living in La Colonia, Flores decided to follow the advice of her friends and members of the Women of the Moose's Oxnard chapter.

Cheryl Volden, a member of the Oxnard group and a friend to Flores, advised her to take the kids to Mooseheart, where children can receive a \$36,000 scholarship to attend a university after graduating from high school.

"Teresa saw that as an extra benefit. She knew she wouldn't be able to provide that future for them," said Volden.

The Moose organization has chapters and lodges nationally and internationally that fund several programs, including Mooseheart and Moosehaven, a retirement home for members of the organization.

Flores, who works as a translator, had struggled to maintain a healthy home environment for the children. She has suffered a stroke, has diabetes and takes care of her 83-year-old husband, who has a heart condition.

Their mother's death caused severe trauma for the children, and that scared Flores. Their grades started dropping, and Flores worried how they would grow up in La Colonia.

"We never had any troubles here before, but the times are very different, it is not the same," said Flores.

Scott Hart, executive director of Mooseheart, said 30 percent of the children there have grandparents as legal guardians. Many times, the child's mother has died or the father has been imprisoned, and the connection is not there for the grandparents to be the parental authority. Often the grandparents are elderly and do not have the physical ability to raise kids, said Hart.

"Grandparents sometimes feel like they are letting their grandchildren down," said Hart. "For some grandparents, it is not a possibility to take care of the kids because they didn't plan for it financially."

The promise

Before Angelica died, her brother Michael promised her he would take care of the kids. When the time came, Michael quit both his jobs and left his 15-year-old son with Flores so he could move near Mooseheart and make the children's lives easier.

On weekends, the three children stay with their uncle in his apartment, said Flores. It has helped them feel more at home, she said.

Paul and Angel live in the "Maryland/Delaware" home, while Krystal lives in the "Minnesota" home. The homes are named after the locations of Moose chapters that pay for their upkeep.

Each home has 10 children and two "family teachers" who act as mentors and guardians.

"All kids of Mooseheart have been in the same boat and know how it feels to be new," Hart said of the transition. "So we have a student mentor assigned to them to get them adjusted."

Transition

Winters are always the hardest at Mooseheart, said Krystal. At 5 a.m., the children are expected to shovel snow from the front doors, and by 6:30 a.m. they start their house chores. School starts at 8 a.m. and goes until midday, depending on the grade level. After school, they are allowed time for activities and homework before the 8 p.m. curfew.

Mooseheart provides whitewater rafting, camping and other excursions. In the two years they have been at the school, Krystal has found an interest in horseback riding, and Paul and Angel have joined the school's band.

Their grades have also improved. "The teachers make us understand things better," Krystal said while older brother Paul nodded in agreement. The classrooms usually have no more than 15 students.

Along with Flores' concern for their education, safety was an important factor in deciding to send them to Mooseheart.

"It is safer," said Krystal.

During their visit here this summer, Flores noticed a great difference in the children's manners. Paul cooked her breakfast — pancakes with blueberries — and every day the children did their chores while their grandmother was at work.

Krystal wants to attend UCLA to become a translator like her grandmother, and Paul wants to apply to USC. Angel doesn't know yet where he wants to go.

Asked what they miss most, Krystal, Paul and Angel all looked at their grandmother.

"I have been wanting to move out there," said Flores, wrapping her arm around Krystal.