

# The Bakersfield Californian

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Casey Christie / THE CALIFORNIAN

Fanny Hernandez works hard at Today Cleaners at The Marketplace. She has successfully completed a mentoring program through Garden Pathways.

## MENTORING: Helping others find new lives

BY LOUIS MEDINA

Californian staff writer  
e-mail: lmedina@bakersfield.com

Holding down a job. Knowing how to pay her bills on time. Staying off drugs. Not neglecting or abusing her children. Telling them she loves them. Being happy.

These are all things 33-year-old Fanny Hernandez couldn't do a little more than a year ago.

"I was 10 years old the first time I used drugs," she said recently. "I had never been a mother to my kids."

Now Hernandez works two jobs; has her own apartment where she lives with two of her four children; has managed to pay back a \$4,500 court fine to keep from going to jail; is attending church and staying clean ("That's a drug for me and I gotta read it," she said about her Bible); has successfully completed parenting classes; and has improved her relationship with her kids so much she can go to them and say, "You can talk to me now. It's me being your mom. It's not me being all high and all dumb."

Her eldest daughter, Sabrina Muñoz, 19, who is also a mom, said at first she didn't believe her mother was serious about turning her life

around. Now she says, "I'm happy," about the change she has witnessed in her.

"Now I'm like, 'Mom, let's go here, let's go there.' It's all about us now," she said.

The catalyst to Hernandez's night-and-day life change? Mentors.

Tami Smith, Family to Family Mentoring program manager at Garden Pathways Inc., a community-based nonprofit, said Hernandez came to her program toward the end of 2006, with about three to four months of sobriety and a lot of baggage behind her, including trouble with the law.

She said Hernandez was particularly quiet at group meetings. She would later find out it was because Hernandez was afraid that any details she revealed about her tumultuous personal life might get her arrested.

Hernandez went to group meetings and also received one-on-one mentoring from Garden Pathway staff members.

Executive director Karen Goh also made sure Hernandez heard the empowerment message given to every client who comes through the doors of the center: "You're made for greatness and you have a future. Nothing you've ever done or will ever do will change

that fact."

But more than just encouraging her with kind words, Goh and her staff showed Hernandez they cared about her and believed in her.

Hernandez said that in December 2006, Goh herself set her work aside for a whole afternoon and made numerous phone calls and accompanied her to court in an effort to keep her out of jail.

For their part, Goh and Smith remember how Hernandez basically threw herself on the mercy of the judge, admitting the wrongs she had committed and asking for a chance not to be put behind bars. The fine Hernandez has paid back in full is evidence of that judge's clemency, Goh said.

"She started a process where she could be honest about her past but be positive about her future," Smith said.

Hernandez's honesty landed her her current job at Today Cleaners at The Marketplace. She knew she would flunk the drug test required for new hires the first time she applied for the job and, rather than lie, she was forthright with her employers, she said. They appreciated her sincerity and gave her another chance several months later, when she was able to pass.



Casey Christie / THE CALIFORNIAN

Being honest about her past helped Fanny Hernandez get a job at Today Cleaners at The Market Place

But she wouldn't have been able to believe in herself and others in this way without the help of her mentors, Hernandez said.

"You guys are loving people. You guys

encourage us to keep on going," Hernandez told Goh and Smith at a recent group mentoring meeting at the center. "I've never had people that helped me out so much and never judged me."

Hernandez sometimes gives her testimony at such meetings to encourage new participants in the program. It works. She speaks their language. She has lived as they live.

"I know some of you have had your kids taken away," she says to them. She gives them hope but lets them know change is not easy. "I had to cut everybody loose," she tells them. "My old friends; I don't judge them but I pray for them."

New mentees appear to hang onto every word she speaks.

Some cry freely, like 27-year-old Angela Hall, who has three kids ages 8, 5, and 3.

She goes up to Hernandez after the lecture. Mother-to-mother, mentor-to-mentee, they embrace and cry together.

"I have a wall with my kids and I really want to know how to break that wall," Hall says. She says Hernandez's message gives her hope because it shows her "I can be happy."

## HOW TO HELP

You can become a Family to Family Mentoring volunteer or supporter with Garden Pathways Inc. and help your community in one of the following ways:

- Attend a training to become a mentor and be willing to commit one hour a week of your time over four months to one year to mentor at-risk adults or youth one-on-one, as a group or as part of a team.
- Commit to becoming a "mentoring consultant," to train or support mentoring participants in your field of expertise.
- Volunteer to be a guest speaker or facilitate a group mentoring session.
- Sponsor a mentoring outing or enrichment experience for at-risk youth.
- Donate financially to support mentoring.

For information, call 633-9133, e-mail [familytofamily@gardenpathways.org](mailto:familytofamily@gardenpathways.org) or visit [www.gardenpathways.org](http://www.gardenpathways.org).

## MENTORING:

## Role models crucial for youngsters without anything else

### Woman who was helped as teen goes on to mentor others

BY LOUIS MEDINA

Californian staff writer

e-mail: [lmolina@bakersfield.com](mailto:lmolina@bakersfield.com)

Anita Madden, 31, a fourth-grade teacher at Roosevelt Elementary School, was raised in poverty in Los Banos and Fresno by a single mother who was familiar with hardships.

"My mother didn't have the resources to make things happen or the knowledge," said Madden, who attended Cal State Bakersfield on a track-and-field scholarship and has a master's in curriculum and instruction. "The only way I was exposed to the finer things in life was through the mentors I grew up with. If it hadn't been for mentors in my life, I wouldn't be here today."

Teachers, workers at her local Boys & Girls Club, members of her church, even her coaches were all role models for her: "My high school coaches were just like my fathers because I don't even know who my father is," she said.

When it came time for Madden to move down to Bakersfield for university, she said

a family from her church helped her pack, drove her here from Fresno and assisted her in moving into her dorm room.

Now Madden, the single mother of a 4-year-old boy, is giving back by mentoring others through Garden Pathways Inc.'s Family to Family Mentoring, a comprehensive program that serves both adults and youths.

One of her mentees is a teenage girl in a group home. "It's helping her have the coping skills despite the circumstances she's going through now," Madden said of the experience.

### NATIONAL MENTORING MONTH

Since 2002, community-based nonprofits such as Garden Pathways and other organizations that emphasize the value of mentoring have been observing January as National Mentoring Month.

Vivian Arreola, a family resource specialist with H.E.A.R.T.S. Connection of Kern County, which is staffed by parents and family members of local children with disabilities or special health-care needs, said mentoring helps mentees "look for the leader that they have inside themselves but that they don't think they have because of all the obstacles they're up against."

Arreola leads two Spanish-language parent-to-parent support groups, where attendees learn to express their feelings, look for resources for their kids, start putting their fear of learning English behind them, and even take a stab at leading support groups themselves.

Judi McCarthy values mentoring so much that she organized two "mentoring roundtables," in August 2006 and February 2007. The events were attended by representatives from scores of local community service agencies.

McCarthy is the volunteer chairwoman of the Women's and Girls' Fund of Kern County, a growing special-interest endowment that was established in 2005 as part of the Kern Community Foundation. She said she appreciates mentoring because, if done right, it teaches mentees many needed academic and life skills, while also showing them that they have potential and are "well worth the mentor's time."

"Most people in a mentoring situation need to learn the latter as much as the subject taught," she wrote in a recent e-mail.

This spring, the Women's and Girls' Fund plans to award its first set of grants totalling \$18,000 to organizations that emphasize education, training and mentoring.