

Ten young Latinas in foster homes fulfill the dream of having a Quinceañera



Ten young women from the foster care system had the opportunity to celebrate their 15 years at a very original party.

Sandra Rodriguez recalls that since her childhood, her parents' precarious situation in Mexico forced them to emigrate to the United States when she was just 2-years-old.

Over time, the family of five was evicted from their home and their only option was to live in a shelter in North Hollywood. However, in 2014 they lost everything because of a fire.

When they arrived at another shelter, they were contacted by relatives and offered a place to live. They thought that aid would be helpful, but it was the opposite.

"We lived with [my uncles] for two years but my uncle abused me and my two sisters," said the 16-year-old girl. "We told some friends, [they] called the Department Children and Family Services and got us out of there. And then we were placed in foster homes."

However, between problems and a harsh reality, Sandra liked to think about the idea of having a Quinceañera.

"I had always dreamed of a pink dress," she said eagerly.

Heidy Casillas, age 15, felt the same.

"Since my childhood, I always wanted a Quinceañera. For Latinos, a Quinceañera celebration is very important," said the young woman born in the United States of Mexican parents.

That dream, she said, disappeared because her parents would never be able to afford such an expensive party.

She recalls that at a young age, Heidy had to care for her two younger siblings — now 9 and 7-years-old — by feeding, bathing, taking them to school and attending parent meetings.

She says that her father physically abused them, and her mother could help very little because of her substance addiction. In 2017, her father handed her, along with her two siblings, to the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS).

"For a month my brothers and I lived separately but now we are with the same family," Heidy said.

As time passed in their new foster homes, both young women were unaware that their much wished for Quinceañera was about to become a reality.



Heidy Casillas chose a champagne-colored dress for her long-awaited Quinceañera.

## Unforgettable party

For four consecutive years, DCFS, in collaboration with a group of sponsors — including Quinceanera.com, Luna's dresses, Tacos Mexico and Telemundo — managed to make the long-awaited Quinceañera for 10 young girls, who for various reasons are now in the foster care system.

The girls were chosen through requests sent by their social workers.

The Quinceañera presentation party is an important event in the Latino culture, especially in Mexico, where family and friends gather to share a dinner with music and entertainment to celebrate the transition from childhood to adolescence and formally present the young ladies to society.



The girls performed their surprise dance that included hip hop music and salsa.

"When Sandra and Heidi received the news that they would be part of the celebration, they could not believe it.

"I was super excited because I didn't know I had been nominated," Sandra said.

"I was very nervous and anxious but very happy at the same time for being able to share time with my family," added Heidi.

Each young woman had the opportunity to choose her chambelan and began preparations for about two months.

"It is very nice to see the young women sharing time, looking for their dresses and makeup, and practicing their surprise dance because before the preparations they did not know each other," said Juana Aguilera, spokeswoman with DCFS.

"They had the opportunity to share their stories, they cried, they laughed, and they formed a beautiful friendship."



Family and friends of the chosen girls came as guests to the party.

Although the event is a celebration for the young women it also seeks to raise awareness "about the need for foster families, especially in the Spanish-speaking community, emphasizing that all children deserve a permanent and loving family and a place to call home," explains DCFS.

Each Quinceañera had the opportunity to invite 25 people including family, friends, teachers and social workers. At the end of the party each one of them kept their dresses and accessories as a souvenir.

Both Heidy and Sandra stated that dreams do become reality and now hope to reach many more.

Sandra, who for now, only receives visits from her parents, said that they both came to the party; besides her sisters and her godmother.

For her part, Heidy — who is about to return to live with her mother — said that after having lived such a wonderful experience she hopes to help her 9-year-old sister have her Quinceañera as well.

"My mom and I are going to help to get it done," she said.

Both young women hope to go into medical careers and are achieving academic excellence at school. They added that young women in a similar situation should not let their dreams die.

"Be strong and hold your head up," Heidy said to other young people who are going through the same situation. Meanwhile, Sandra pointed out that "nothing is impossible and if you dream, it can come true."