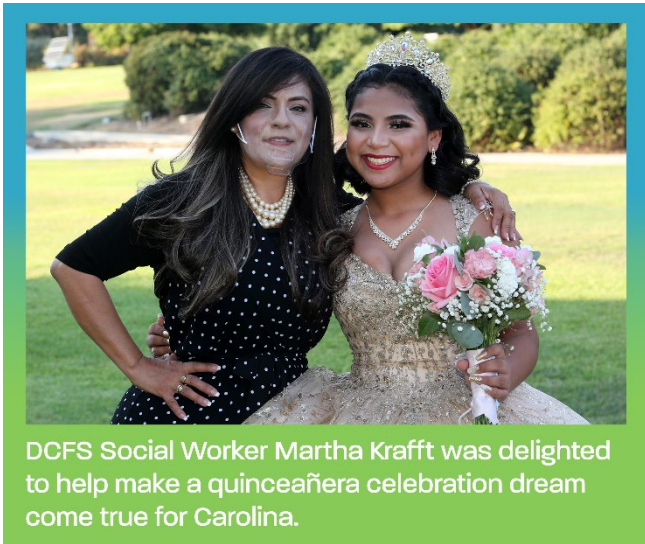




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DCFS Social Worker Martha Krafft was delighted to help make a quinceañera celebration dream come true for Carolina.

Latino families who celebrate the coming-of-age of their daughters with a quinceañera celebration often spend many months, and sometimes years, saving and planning for the special occasion — elegant ball gowns, up-dos and choreographed dances are often just the beginning.

For Latina youth living in foster care, the prospect of such an elaborate and expensive celebration may seem unattainable. Recognizing the cultural and sentimental value of this tradition, the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) hosted its Seventh Annual Quinceañera event on Oct. 3, where five Latina youth were honored.

Family, friends, community members and DCFS staff gathered at the Los Angeles County Arboretum in Arcadia to help bring the fairy tale to life. Among them was Social

Worker Martha Krafft, who nominated one of the young honorees.

“Seeing their desire to have this celebration and knowing that without the Department’s assistance, they wouldn’t have this experience is what motivates me to ensure that I take the time to nominate them,” said Martha, who makes a point each year to nominate youth on her caseload.

Coinciding with Hispanic Heritage Month, the quinceañera event offered DCFS an opportunity to celebrate the culture and resilience of the young honorees. In Latino culture, when a young person turns 15, the occasion represents a transition from childhood to young adulthood. A quinceañera is akin to a debutante ball in North American culture, where the young women are formally introduced to the community.

“They dream of this special quinceañera celebration where they have the chance to put on a beautiful dress, have their makeup done, look glamorous and be the center of attention for that one day,” Martha said. “The chance to have other people around celebrating them is so important because they often don’t have the family support that other youth do. There are simply no words to describe how happy and delighted they are when they learn their dream is actually coming true.”

Elizabeth Orozco, the DCFS Public Affairs senior secretary who works for months behind the scenes coordinating the event each year, said the celebration incorporates a number of traditional elements like the donning of elegant ball gowns, the dancing of the Quinceañera Waltz and the “Presentation of the Dolls,” which symbolizes the transition from childhood to young adulthood. She said these traditions play an important role in preserving the girls’ heritage, which is too often lost once a child enters foster care.



Lucy Luna, the owner of Luna's Dresses, works with the girls to select the perfect gown for their fairy-tale day.

“This event is important because it goes beyond just a celebration,” Liz said. “The girls get to spend a lot of time together and this allows them to bond, share feelings, interests and life experiences, and realize that they are not alone in what they are going through.”

Community partner Lucy Luna, owner of Luna’s Dresses in Huntington Park, has collaborated with DCFS since the beginning to make this dream come true for young Latinas in foster care. Each year, she works closely with the selected youth to help each of them find that one perfect dress to make them feel glamorous.



Family and friends joined to show their support for the five young Latinas honored during DCFS’ Seventh Annual Quinceañera celebration.

“My goal is to make them feel special,” said Lucy. “I tell them, ‘I am your godmother. I am someone who is here to make your dream day come true.’ It is beautiful and satisfying to make them feel like queens after everything they have been through.”

Even when faced with public health challenges and logistical hurdles, DCFS and its community partners have ensured that the tradition continues. On the day of the event, guests in face masks lined up in dozens of cars adorned with streamers, homemade signs and balloons, honking their support and cheering from a safe distance for the duration of the party.

For Martha, who has had the pleasure of watching two youth on her caseload enjoy this unforgettable experience during back-to-back years, knowing that she

can help bring this joy to life is the ultimate incentive.

“I take the time and make the effort to nominate my girls for this experience because I see this as one small way for me to demonstrate that I’m hearing them and sensitive to their needs, and to help validate their worth as young Latina women,” she said.



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