



Press Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Whittier High Senior Earns \$10,000 Scholarship for Overcoming Adversity, Achieving Academic Success

WHITTIER – Some of Whittier High School senior Florencia “Flo” Valenzuela’s earliest memories include watching addiction consume her drug-dependent parents and having child protective services place her and her younger brother in foster care at 5 years old.

In and out of foster care for several years, Valenzuela at 13 years old found the courage to testify against her parents and avoided having to return to their custody.

Under the guardianship of her older sister, Marcy, Valenzuela has found empowerment and resiliency, flourishing at home and at school. Holding a 3.8 GPA, Valenzuela is an active member of the Associated Student Body, an Academic Mentor to her peers, athlete and community volunteer.

Despite the overwhelming obstacles, Valenzuela has excelled as an academic scholar and community leader and garnering praise from the Children’s Defense Fund-California (CDF-CA), which has selected her as a 2016 CDF Beat the Odds® Scholarship program honoree. CDF-CA is providing her with a suite of academic and career readiness opportunities – including a \$10,000 scholarship.

“I’m so overwhelmed by the generosity of the Children’s Defense Fund and humbled that they would choose me over so many other deserving students,” Valenzuela, who is one of five California students to be recognized with the scholarship.

The 17-year-old, who dreams of studying social work or communications at USC, won the scholarship as part of the nonprofit organization’s Beat the Odds program, which works to open higher education opportunities for youths who demonstrate academic excellence and give back to their communities while overcoming tremendous adversity.

She will be honored by CDF Founder Marian Wright Edelman at the 26th annual Beat the Odds Awards Gala on Dec. 1 at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel.

“It’s been a very hard journey, and I am so grateful to everyone who has supported and encouraged me through it all,” Valenzuela said. “Thank you to everyone who sees my potential, and it is my goal to continue my education, make a difference in my community and help other foster kids.”

While helping to raise her younger brother in their new home, Valenzuela is also dedicated to her schoolwork, including studying mathematics, playing volleyball and being a student government representative on the District's Board of Trustees.

As an Academic Mentor, Valenzuela also tutors freshmen in her former teacher's English class.

"Flo is an inspiration for us all," said sophomore English teacher Alexa Nisbet. "Every student and teacher she has come into contact with learns it doesn't matter what hurdles life puts in front of us. You just need to keep going and also keep putting out love to other people."

Valenzuela is working with Nisbet to organize a new club, Cardinal Scholars, to help support foster youth attending Whittier High. She also volunteers at the Boys & Girls Club and the California Youth Connection's YOUTH Training Project, which is a collaboration between current and former foster youths, child welfare professionals and youth-serving organizations.

"Despite enduring a difficult childhood, Flo has never let her status as a foster care child define her identity or stop her from achieving her goals," Liggett said. "She epitomizes our District mantra that demographics do not determine destiny. She has become a role model to her peers and truly represents resiliency. I want to thank the Children's Defense Fund for honoring such a deserving Cardinal."

PHOTO CAPTION:

112116_WUHSD_VALENZUELA: Whittier High School senior Florencia Valenzuela is a foster care youth who has overcome great barriers to find stability in her new home and success at her school. She was selected by the Children's Defense Fund-California as a 2016 CDF Beat the Odds® Scholarship program honoree, which comes with a \$10,000 scholarship. She will be honored at an awards gala on Dec. 1.

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Whittier Union High School District works to achieve and maintain excellence in providing a comprehensive education for all students*

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