

Former gang member plans bright future

Recent Casa Grande grad Brayan Araiza will attend SRJC, seeks to become lawyer

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ARGUS-COURIER INTERN

Brayan Araiza knew how to fit in with his gang, showing friends his willingness to threaten and attack people who got in his way.

Now, as a 2010 graduate from Casa Grande High School, the 18-year-old Araiza looks toward a future as a lawyer, and provides a living example of exactly how to turn a life completely around.

"The people around me are the reason I managed to change," said Araiza. "So many people, including teachers, (Boys & Girls) club staff and family, have helped me be-

come who I am."

Reflecting on his experience with the gang, Araiza recalls causing trouble when he was only in seventh grade.

"In junior high, I'd hang out with a lot of gang members, and I decided to join," said Araiza. "We'd intimidate people, beat them up and fight a lot."

For Araiza, however, early involvement with gangs did not translate to a future of crime. Recognizing that his actions caused unnecessary pain to the people he cared about, he decided to turn his life around.

"I left the gang at the beginning of high school," said Araiza. "My family was the main reason for this decision. My mom

suffered the most. She would cry. I realized that this was not right."

Determined to stop hurting his parents, Araiza overcame the pressures from friends who wanted him to remain in the gang.

"I had a hard time leaving the gang because my friends would intimidate me," he said.

Luckily, outside the gang, Araiza received strong support from many people who wanted him to have a future away from gangs.

The Boys & Girls Clubs of Marin and Southern Sonoma Counties became both

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an escape and a source of encouragement for Araiza as he dealt with the difficulties of overcoming his history with gangs. A member of the Corona Ranch Clubhouse from an early age, he did not always see the community as a valuable source of help.

"My mom signed me up for the Boys & Girls Clubs a long time ago," said Araiza. "When I started getting into trouble, I didn't want to go as much."

Despite this early resistance, Araiza learned to appreciate the acceptance and assistance the club lent him.

"The people at the club helped me even though I was a troublemaker," said Araiza. "They encouraged me to get good grades and have been great role models."

The Boys & Girls clubhouse even helped simply by offering another activity to distract him from the difficulties of leaving a gang.

"The club helped me stay out

of trouble. It gave me a reason to stay away from the gang," Araiza said.

Now an exceedingly different person from the seventh-grader who would constantly beat up others while getting involved in fights, this year Araiza was awarded the title of Youth of the Year by the Boys & Girls Club of Southern Sonoma Counties.

"At first, I didn't want to apply for the award," said Araiza. "You have to give a speech and write essays, so I didn't want to do it."

Nevertheless, he applied for this title, which evaluates the achievements of high school students.

"The award looks at factors like leadership, community service and grades," said Araiza.

The judges selected him as Youth of the Year, and, with this honor, Araiza received a \$2,500 scholarship.

Araiza has uses for this

money, as he will attend Santa Rosa Junior College and plans to transfer in a couple of years to continue his education. Meanwhile, he hopes to play football for SRJC, since he discovered his talent and enthusiasm for the sport while a member of the Casa Grande team.

After experiencing life as a member of a gang, Araiza foresees a future working in law.

"I want to be a public-defense lawyer," said Araiza. "Many people are charged with crimes they didn't commit, but they don't have a good defense lawyer. They waste their time in jail before they are found to be innocent."

Araiza feels that he should do his part to change these situations.

"I want to help people in the same way I have been helped," he said.

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