Mariana Colorado, Matthews House

Mariana Colorado is a vibrant, cheerful 20-year-old college student attending Front Range Community College. She holds a 3.7 GPA and plans to transfer to CSU and eventually work as a behavioral scientist.

For Mariana, however, educational and long-range career goals weren't always something to which she aspired. Originally from a small town in southern Mexico, Mariana's family moved to Fort Collins when she was too young to remember. Her family struggled to find work. Moves were frequent, and often involved starting over. With change came uncertainty. Her interest in academics waned.

Meanwhile, her relationship with her parents deteriorated. Mariana attributes their harsh disciplinarian tactics to cultural differences, and the fact neither of her parents were educated.

"They don't know how to discipline," she explains. "And so they beat you. With a stick, a belt. Whatever was around. Because of that, I never felt loved."

Mariana began to drink heavily, use drugs, and, though she still attended school, she gave up on academics. She ran away from home several times, and at 13, joined a gang. A few years later, she went to live with a family friend who happily took her in.

But for Mariana, leaving her family's turbulent and volatile home didn't necessarily translate into an easier—or more settled—life. Over the next three years, she would live with four foster families.

It wasn't until she went to live with Daniel Olivarez that things began to change—namely, that she was expected to complete her homework. She complied, and soon, her work was garnering A's.

"It was at that point I realized I had potential," says Mariana.

Emboldened, she continued working hard and was shocked when a teacher recommended she enter the High School Select Program. Once enrolled, she would complete both high school and college-level courses at Fort Collins High School, earning college credit as she finished her senior year.

She says she began to realize that success is not an accident. And that the people you choose to surround yourself with matter greatly. So when, at 18, she was emancipated from the foster care system and her caseworker suggested she reach out to the Matthews House, Mariana eagerly obliged.

"I had never experienced an organization like them," she says, eyes shining. "They're so passionate about helping you. The Matthews House is my family."

The Matthews House has helped Mariana transition into adulthood. Brianna Barbera, her Transition Facilitator, is there to help her client master life skills such as navigating college and the job market, filing taxes and even helping proofread her school papers.

“I have the privilege to walk alongside young people to help them gain independent living skills and become self-sufficient,” says Brianna. “It brings [me] such joy to watch them succeed."

In addition to working with a Transition Facilitator, Matthews House clients can take advantage of the organization’s many workshops and programs, such as College Connect, which introduces participants to various collegiate opportunities and career paths.

Mariana, who attended a session of College Connect, says the workshop was incredibly helpful. Now a sophomore at Front Range, she hopes to transfer to CSU and earn a degree in Criminal Justice.

She’s also working toward obtaining her U.S. citizenship, and hopes to one day work for the FBI studying the habits of serial killers.

“There aren’t many people who could do that job,” she says, “but I don’t walk with fear on my back.”