

# LOCAL

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## Sticking by her side, when it mattered most

San Clemente couple gave Roxanna Jimenez  
a loving home and set her on a path to success.



**YVETTE  
CABRERA**  
REGISTER  
COLUMNIST

It's a question that's always bothered me:

Why do some kids cross that all-important finish line of graduating from high school, while others struggle to even make it out of the gate?

Especially in Orange County's toughest, low-income neighborhoods, we're up against odds that land many in jail, on drugs or in gangs, not on the right track to an education.

It's a question that took me re-

cently to a Mexican grocery in San Clemente, El Toro Rojo.

Here, I follow Roxanna Jimenez as she paces the floor, her high heels clicking. She confers with the butcher, trying to estimate how many pounds of marinated *carne asada* she'll need to feed 100 people at an event she's planning.

As a teenager, Roxanna worked in this very market, and the employees here still greet her by first

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Huntington Beach High School bilingual community liaison Roxanna Jimenez, seated second from right, with the family she embraces as her own. From left are David Weiss, 10-year-old Jessica, 13-year-old Alex, standing, and Sonja Weiss in the back yard of the family's San Clemente home.

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# CABRERA: Stability through love

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name and with hugs. But today, at age 30, she's no longer the girl who almost didn't make it out of the rough Oak View neighborhood in Huntington Beach.

She's the bilingual community liaison at Huntington Beach High School, and the co-adviser of an innovative program that encourages immigrant parents to take an active role in their child's education.

Next week, at an Orange County Human Relations ceremony, Roxanna and co-adviser Kimberly McGlaughlin will be honored with community leader awards.

In February, I wrote a column about Roxanna's trajectory – how she was kicked out of Ocean View High in Huntington Beach for acting out and missing school (not to mention a report card full of Fs), how she flirted with gang life, and how her mother intervened by sending her to Mexico at age 14 to straighten up.

But that wasn't the whole story.

And, after we stop at El Toro Rojo, Roxanna and I head to the hills of San Clemente, to meet with David and Sonja Weiss, a couple Roxanna likes to call her "other parents."

We all know the difference it makes when someone – a teacher, a principal, a counselor – steps in to help a troubled kid. Well, for Roxanna, David and Sonja were those people.

The couple met Roxanna in Santa Ana, where they co-owned a wholesale produce business, and where 15-year-old Roxanna was working part time. At home, Roxanna, the eldest of five, didn't get much support for her dream of an education. Instead, she was pressured to work, and to keep watch over her younger siblings.

David and Sonja weren't parents at the time.

But they instinctively wanted to wrap their arms around Roxanna and help her cross that finish line.

So they told her they'd get her into a school, San Clemente High



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**Roxanna Jimenez, now one of Huntington Beach High School's bilingual community liaisons, was taken in by San Clemente couple Sonja and David Weiss when she was a teen.**

School, and help her graduate.

David explains how that started: "I came home and asked Sonja ... 'There's this little girl, and said she could really use some help. Would it be OK if we brought her to our house and take care of her?' Sonja didn't wait 30 seconds. She just listened, asked a couple questions, and said 'Sure. When?'"

The couple had never done such a thing, but they sensed Roxanna needed stability. Indeed, the first night Roxanna spent in her new bedroom at the Weiss' home, she crawled into bed, pulled the sheets over herself and curled in to a fetal position.

It was a tough road. David initially could catch glimpses of sadness in Roxanna's eyes. She was torn about many things, including having to leave her siblings in Oak View. So David sat her down and told her: You can choose to be a victim, or you can find the positive.

With her background, he suggested, she could one day help others.

It was a turning point, he says, and from then on Roxanna walked

with confidence.

Sometimes the answers we're searching for are simple. As Sonja has concluded, what children need most is love and attention.

And that's what they gave Roxanna – helping with her homework, attending her choir performances with their own parents (she was the first "grandchild"), introducing her to her first pie (strawberry), taking her for her first shopping trip for school clothes (she cried).

For Roxanna, part of her drive came from not wanting to disappoint the Weiss family. Do the absolute best you can, they told her. And she did, graduating from San Clemente High School and, later, earning a bachelor's degree from Long Beach State.

David had just one request. When you're able, he told her, reach out and help somebody else.

So paying it forward is what Roxanna has done since.

She's done it on a personal level (she and fiancé Brian Jones recently took in Roxanna's youngest sister and helped her land at Orange Coast College), and she's done it professionally, constantly reminding immigrant students that college is for them.

Even today, the Weisses pitch in when they can. They helped pay for Roxanna's students to attend grad night last year. They also donated the *carne asada* from the El Toro Rojo market, which they own, for the Campus Pride barbecue she helped organize last month.

Sonja calls Roxanna's determination "stick-to-it-ness."

It's a good word for us to remember.

It takes just one person to say, "I'll help you cross that finish line" – people like David and Sonja who didn't give up on the little girl who told herself, "I'm not going to give up on school."

**CONTACT THE WRITER:**

714-796-3649 or

[ycabrera@ocregister.com](mailto:ycabrera@ocregister.com) or

[twitter.com/Ycabreraocr](https://twitter.com/Ycabreraocr)