

DARIEL'S STORY

By John Valdovinos, Chief Operations Officer



I am honored to share my testimonial about a remarkable 10-year-old boy whose resilience has touched and inspired everyone at The Zones.

When Dariel and his mom Yasmin showed up at our door last August, it became clear that **this was a family in turmoil**. They had left Dariel's father in New York seeking the support of family in Santa Rosa but, when they arrived, they discovered their living arrangement was not going to work. Yasmin explained that all they had was their car and she was desperate to find Dariel a place to go while she figured out their next move.

As we spoke, Dariel's demeanor caught my attention: he stood next to the door, his back against the wall, he would not make eye contact or even look up to say 'Hello'. Life had clearly dealt him a difficult hand. After discussing our after-school program and how subsidy programs in the area work, we found that, unfortunately, finances would simply not allow Dariel to attend. As I watched them turn to leave, my heart sank. I knew we had to do something and rushed to consult with my team. Thankfully, and **with the help of our generous donors, we had the funds to help this family!**

I'll never forget what happened next. I ran out the door and was relieved to find them still in the parking lot. Yasmin was sitting in the driver's seat, gripping the steering wheel, staring straight ahead as if into an abyss. Being a parent myself, I could see that this was a mother holding it together for the sake of her child with no idea what to do. I knocked on the window. She opened it and I said, "Dariel can come to our program for the whole school year, free of charge." She broke down in tears and thanked me over and over again. They came back inside and we got Dariel registered.

The following Monday, Dariel arrived on the bus and I sat down with him to get to know him and talk about school. During our chat, Dariel hunched over and while staring down at his lap said, "I'm dumb. I can't do anything right. I screw up all the time." I knew then that **Dariel needed extra support to gain the confidence he was lacking due to everything that had happened to him**. Right away, we started incorporating him in leadership opportunities like helping the coordinators prepare activities, directing and giving out snacks to the younger kids, and helping out at the front desk. Each task he accomplished, we'd exclaim, "See?! You're not dumb, you can do lots of things really well!" Slowly, Dariel started to believe in himself.

As time went on, we witnessed his confidence bloom. Despite the hardships he faced outside the program, he started arriving every day with a bright smile and a contagious energy that uplifted everyone around him. He also started showing a thirst for learning that impressed us all. Whether it was doing science experiments, engaging in creative arts activities, or participating in sports, Dariel showed a strong desire for knowledge and growth. His academic performance also started to improve with his report cards getting better and better throughout the year. Yasmin was thrilled about the changes she was seeing in her son.

Dariel's story is a powerful reminder of the impact an after-school program can have on a child's life. The Zones became a haven – a place where Dariel could escape the challenges of his daily life. **The supportive environment we fostered allowed him to grow emotionally, socially, and academically, and to believe in his own potential**. His story is testament to the dedication and unwavering support of our staff and our generous community of donors who have provided him with a safe space and a nurturing environment to thrive.

In closing, I am honored to have crossed paths with Dariel. I have no doubt that with continued support, he will conquer any obstacle that comes his way. He has a very bright future ahead!

John