

Cynthia's Story

To change the future, you must confront the past

By Jennifer Torres

EDITOR'S NOTE: *After growing up in the child welfare system and staggering through an adolescence marked by drugs, gangs and pregnancy, Cynthia Rosas, in her early 20s, believed she was at the cusp of a new, more stable life. But within a year, it had seemed to unravel.*

STOCKTON - Cynthia Rosas was sitting in the hallway at San Joaquin County Superior Court, waiting for her social worker and talking to her mother on her cell phone.

"Parenting classes. It's the usual stuff they make you do, except for the drug stuff."

Another summer had arrived and about a year had passed since Cynthia moved into her own apartment with her boyfriend, Chris, and her two young daughters, Harmony and Chiyalia, to begin a new life.

Then, on July 7, the girls were removed from her custody.

For the second time in less than a year, Harmony, by now almost 3, had a suspicious bruise on her face. A social worker ordered that she be examined by a doctor who said the mark resembled a handprint. He also warned that there were signs of possible neglect.

Cynthia was furious and afraid.

She said there had been an accident, that Harmony had been staying with an aunt and that she had fallen.

But that was a lie, and authorities didn't believe it.

Eventually Cynthia would admit that she had caused her daughter's injury, but she maintains that it was unintentional. She lied initially, she said, because she knows the child welfare system and wanted desperately to keep her daughters out of it. She believed she was protecting them.

What really happened, Cynthia later said, is this: She was in her apartment when she found Harmony sitting on Chiyalia's chest, causing the 1-year-old girl to wheeze and cough.

Cynthia yelled, frightening Harmony, who ran and hid. Cynthia then got a belt - not planning to hit Harmony with it, she said, but to scare her.

Then, while looking for her daughter in a dark bedroom, Cynthia whipped around suddenly, and not noticing Harmony standing just behind her, accidentally hit the child in the face with the belt.

Pleading with an investigator who interviewed her after the incident, she explained that she always dresses the girls in good, clean clothes, that they wear labels she hasn't bought for herself in years.

"I believe if a parent looks better than their kids, then the kids are being neglected."

The investigator told her that isn't how a determination of abuse is made.

The allegations listed on Cynthia's child welfare case record begin on Feb. 15, 2008, the day Chiyalia was born. Cynthia was accused of neglecting the infant, but the report was determined to be unfounded.

In total, 18 accusations of abuse toward Harmony and Chiyalia were made against Cynthia and Chris between Chiyalia's birth and the day in July that the girls were taken away. Many of the allegations could not be substantiated. Many others were.

"They've been filing all these reports on me. I don't understand why they didn't take them a long time ago."

She defended her mothering. "They've gotten all their shots on time. I missed one doctor's appointment, but that was because I was in the hospital. It was Harmony's. I've only missed one appointment on each of them."

The social worker who prepared Cynthia's case report described her as "a very young mother who has had a very troubled past. ... It would appear that she has not had sufficient, adequate, appropriate and responsible role models to show her how to be a mother. She herself is still very young in maturity and appears to be looking for something that she was never provided with: loving, caring and stable parents."

The report recommends that Cynthia participate in counseling to address unresolved emotions from her time in foster care. It calls for the sessions to also address anger management and domestic violence. She is to complete more parenting classes.

Harmony and Chiyalia are likely to remain in foster care for at least a year. Cynthia is determined to get them back.

"My biggest test right now is not going back to old ways."

She has enrolled in counseling. She gets to see her daughters twice a week in the visitation center at Mary Graham Children's Shelter - the place where much of her own childhood was spent, the place where her first-born was taken away from her.

It was late summer, and Harmony's birthday was coming up again.

There would be no party this year, but Cynthia planned to visit Harmony. She thought she would ask Mary Graham officials whether she could take a cake along.

"There's no point bringing ice cream. It would just melt on the bus."