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Eastside senior takes Youth of Year honor

Barragan, 17, says she will be first person in family to attend college

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All of the candidates for the Boys & Girls Club of the Peninsula's Youth of the Year award were outstanding, said competition judge BV Jagadish.

However, the judges chose one — Elisabeth Barragan — to walk away with the honor Thursday night in Menlo Park.

The 17-year-old East Palo Alto resident said in a speech for the competition that she wanted to be the first person in her family to attend college. Her parents, who are from Michoacan, Mexico, only had elementary-level schooling. Older siblings were involved in drugs and did poorly in school.

"I did not want to take that road," the East Palo Alto club member said. "I wanted to be different."

The Eastside College Preparatory High School senior will get a \$1,500 scholarship. Elisabeth plans to attend to Mount Saint Mary's University to pursue biology and one day work as a radiologist.

Elisabeth and the two other finalists were not judged only on the talks they delivered Thursday night, but also on school performance, community service, extracurricular activities and ability to overcome challenges, said club spokesperson Chris Canter. The contest has been running for the last 10 years, he said.

The Boys and Girls Club provides youths help with academics and teaches them life skills. About 3,000 kids are helped by the Menlo Park club per year, he said. Canter said that while the young people served by the club range in age from six to 18-years-old, all share tough circumstances.

For finalist and runner-up 17-year-old Cherise Hunter of Oakland overcame her share of tough circumstances to succeed. In one of several essays submitted to judges for the contest, Cherise talked about how her father would steal money from



Joshua Melvin / Daily News

Elisabeth Barragan, 17, of East Palo Alto walked away with the 2009 Boys & Girls Club of the Peninsula's Youth of the Year award Thursday night in Menlo Park. The Eastside College Preparatory High School senior will receive a \$1,500 scholarship.

the family bank account in order to gamble. When her parents divorces, Cherise's mother had to support her and her brother and sister.

Despite these challenges, Cherise dreams of attending Stanford University and majoring in business. She hopes to turn her love of books and reading into a career and own a publishing company.

"Growing up I had to endure many challenges," the 11-year member of the Menlo Park club said. "But they made me stronger."

For Alex Perez, a 17-year-old finalist from Sunnyvale and member of the Redwood City club for 10 years, staying on the right track has been a struggle as well. He told the audience the club helped him improve his behavior, the most important change in his young life, he said.

The young man was expelled from the Redwood City School District for fighting, and also arrested for fighting and stealing — all while a member of the club. His

older brothers, both former Youth of the Year award winners, help made him realize it was time to transform. Club staff guided and supported Alex as he chose his new path.

"I have learned how important it is for people to respect each other at the time they share," he said.

The finalists' parents said they were proud of their children's accomplishments. Cherise's mother Joann said her daughter is very shy by nature but had "come out of her shell" while a member. Alex's mother Rosa and father Jeronimo said the club provided the help their son needed when he decided to change.

But for Elisabeth's mother, Edelmira, the club is part of the reason she came to the United States in 1979.

"I came here to get a better education and life for my kids," she said.

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