

From **THE DAILY NEWS**
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News, announcements and
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Clarisa Ontiveros named 2010 Youth of the Year

Clarisa Ontiveros said she once thought “the American dream” was indeed a dream, unreachable to many kids in the Peninsula’s low-income neighborhoods. High school dropout rates of 70 percent in those areas testify to the opportunity gap that often discouraged Clarisa’s peers.

Today, this 18-year-old Redwood City resident is beating the odds. She has been recognized by the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Peninsula as its 2010 Youth of the Year. The award, given at the local, state, regional and national level, acknowledges efforts to overcome personal challenges and contribute to other club members and to school and community.

After Clarisa graduated on the honor roll from Hoover Elementary School in Redwood City, she found herself one of the few

Latinas in her Sequoia High classroom. Later, in the advanced levels, as many of them dropped out, Clarisa struggled to maintain good grades and soon was interacting with top students.

When she was a high school freshman, she began volunteering at the Boys & Girls Clubs at its Redwood City clubhouse. Tutoring fourth-graders there, facilitating the club’s teen programs, and organizing special events, she did 200 hours of volunteer work and eventually earned a spot on the club’s teen staff.

Clarisa is now managing the club’s Success Maker department, responsible for helping young members improve their math and reading skills and developing study plans with parents — all while persevering in her own high school effort and planning to enter college.

She wants to major in communication studies so she can return to the Peninsula as an advocate for those seeking to overcome the opportunity gap and succeed as productive citizens.

“I want to be an example and break the cycle of my community’s stereotype,” she said in her speech as a Youth of the Year finalist. “Poverty, violence and drug abuse are all consequences of living in the shadows.”

Drawing on author Sandra Cisneros’s “The House on Mango Street,” Clarisa concluded, “One day I will pack up my bags, and people will say, ‘What happened to Clarisa? Where did she go with all those books and papers? Why did she march so far away?’ “They will not know that I have left to come back, for those who cannot get out.”

Another Redwood City club member was one of the four finalists. Alex Perez has been a club member since he was 6. After being expelled from school, turned himself around and volunteered with youths at the club, became a producer of short films and computer graphics, and is planning a college major in mechanical engineering (if showbiz doesn’t win him over).