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## 'Resilient' foster children overcome obstacles to graduate



From left, Tim Byrd, publisher at Palm Beach Live Work Play; Michelle Canaday, circuit director at Guardian ad Litem; Larry Rein, executive director at ChildNet Palm Beach County; David Sarris, Palm Beach State College graduate and FAU student who was in foster care; and John Merlino, regional director at AT&T Florida attend the graduation of 25 foster care students from high school, college or receiving a GED. User Upload Caption: ChildNet celebrates the graduation of 25 foster care students from high school, college or receiving a GED. - Original Credit: ChildNet - Original Source: (ChildNet / Courtesy)

More than 100 people packed into a conference room decorated with balloons and sparklers June 6 at the ChildNet headquarters in West Palm Beach to celebrate the graduation of 25 foster care students from high school, college or receiving a GED.

The students are served by ChildNet, a nonprofit dedicated to protecting abused, neglected and abandoned youth, and the AT&T Pioneers, a network of active and retired AT&T employee volunteers, presented new laptops valued at \$10,000, to the students in celebration of their achievement. In addition, Guardian ad Litem/Speak Up for Kids donated gift cards to each of the graduating students.

"We live and work in the community and we want to give back and support the community in which we live and raise families," said John Merlino, AT&T's regional director.

He told the students, "We value you and hope you go on to give back to the community that supports you."

Merlino notes that the Pioneers have volunteered more than 750,000 hours last year in the state and have raised more than \$300,000 for charitable organizations.

Larry Rein, executive director of ChildNet Palm Beach County, said, "This is a remarkable achievement for any kid to graduate from high school or college, but especially for these kids who have had to overcome many obstacles in their lives."

"They get a lot of support from the community and from the AT&T Pioneers, who are making the next step possible for these students," Rein said. "They are a testament to the community and to the resiliency and strength of these young people."

Rein thanked ChildNet's partner agencies, including HomeSafe and the Place of Hope, but noted that despite the availability of group homes, more foster parents are needed.

David Sarris, 21, is one of these students. He attended the graduation along with his girlfriend, Angela Mommerrate, also 21. Now a social work major at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, Sarris spent ages 14 to 18 in foster care.

"I'm super excited to receive the laptop," said Sarris, who also works in IT support for the Place of Hope. His current laptop overheats all the time so he is excited to have one where he can work from anywhere.

Likewise, Maria Batista, 20, a graduate of Park Vista Community High School west Boynton Beach who is now attending Palm Beach State College to study social work and history, went through the foster care system.

She was fortunate to be adopted at age 16 by her foster mother, Lake Worth resident Lorenza Batista, who grew up in a large family with 11 siblings and has three grown children of her own. In addition to adopting Maria, Batista also adopted two younger children, a girl, 15, and a boy, 11.

"I always wanted to be a foster parent," she said. "I tried to convince my mom to be a foster mom, but she already had 11 children."

Maria Batista said she is grateful to ChildNet and its ongoing support and the AT&T Pioneers for her new laptop.

"Having a brand new laptop will make it much easier for me to do my studies," she said.