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# Children's Defense Fund-NY fetes once-homeless Brooklyn teen

BY BEN CHAPMAN

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Rosemary Rodriguez, 17, spent most of her high school years in a homeless shelter in Brooklyn, and although she foundered at times, she refused to give up. The Children's Defense Fund-NY honored the Rachel Carson High School for Coastal Studies senior Tuesday with a 'Beat the Odds' scholarship. (TODD MAISEL/NEW YORK DAILY NEWS)

Many city high school seniors are winning college scholarships this time of year, as graduation season looms just a few months away.

But few of them have overcome as many hardships as Rosemary Rodriguez, a formerly homeless Brooklyn teen.

Rosemary, 17, has tackled life in the shelter system and abuse within her family to be able to graduate this June from Coney Island's Rachel Carson High School for Coastal Studies.

On Tuesday, she received a \$10,000 "Beat the Odds" college scholarship from the Children's Defense Fund-New York.

Rosemary is one of five city students who won the scholarship that recognizes kids who have overcome tremendous adversity to give back to their communities.

And for Rosemary, who hopes one day to become an investigator who profiles criminals for the FBI, the support and recognition makes all the difference.

“It’s unbelievable,” she said of the award. “It makes going to college that much more of a reality. I never thought I’d get here after everything I’ve been through. But I am so thankful.”

Rosemary spent most of her high school years living in a homeless shelter in Brownsville. She now shares a cramped two-bedroom apartment in Bensonhurst with her mother and three younger siblings.

Rosemary’s family plunged into financial trouble when she was 7 and fled her abusive father with her mother and siblings. She said her father was an abusive alcoholic who beat her mother when he drank, leaving physical and emotional scars. She hasn’t spoken to him in nine years.

The family was evicted from their apartment when she was 13, joining the ranks of thousands of families living in city shelters. As of Monday, 23,000 children were being housed in such shelters.

Rosemary said the psychological impact of shelter life, with its chaos and close quarters, dealt a blow to her self-confidence early on — nearly derailing her studies.

But she recovered and — after her painful and bewildering years in the shelter system — she’s re-taken the courses she failed as a freshman and managed a hard-fought 70 average.

“I thought that living in a shelter made me less of a person,” said Rosemary. “Getting back on track after that was the hardest thing I’ve ever done.”

After school, Rosemary works as a peer counselor in a youth justice program at the Center for Court Innovation, dispensing advice to homeless kids who are in danger of ending up in the criminal justice system.

Children’s Defense Fund-New York executive director Naomi Post said Rosemary’s inspiring life story exemplifies the type of student her group seeks to empower through scholarships.

“She hasn’t allowed the circumstances of her life to define who she is,” Post said. “She has an indomitable spirit and she is committed to being a role model.”