After abusive early childhood and rebellious teenage years, former foster child flourishes

By Joe Rodriguez
jrodriguez@mercurynews.com

Amanda Madrid may be only 22, but she’s waited a lifetime for a view of the world few young women like her ever got. “It’s peaceful, even on a cloudy day like this,” she said from a vista point at Cal State East Bay, a campus built in the Hayward hills. “When I came here, I felt for the first time in my life that I was exactly where I should be.”

Before college, she struggled in foster care and was determined to get away from her abusive family. She was sent to a juvenile rehabilitation facility, but still found ways to escape. She was in foster care for 15 years, after which she worked as a care worker, photographer and musician. She now lives in a large room in a low-income housing complex.

FOSTERING HOPE

Wish Book proves valley’s spirit of giving

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome to the 28th edition of the Mercury News Wish Book. During the next few weeks, our reporters and photographers will introduce you to individuals and families who face significant challenges. Each has a wish you can help come true.

Since 1983, readers have donated more than $6.5 million to provide everything dollar you give helps people right here at home. For the first time in many years, these stories will be published without the guidance of Holly Hayes, who led the Wish Book for more than a decade and who passed away in April. The Mercury News is committed to maintaining the Wish Book legacy, and so this summer, the Wish Book coordinator.

Thank you, and happy holidays.
Trying to Put All the Pieces Back Together

Valerie and Steve Whitehill, of Cupertino, both survived their cancers but lost their landscaping business.

Battles against brain tumor, breast cancer destroy family business

By Sean Webby
webby@mercurynews.com

The gold-framed picture of how things used to be shows the Whitehills, Steve and Valerie and their three kids, standing side by side on a beach, bathed in sunshine and success.

Seven years later, it hangs near a walker, a constant reminder of a man in a wheelchair, a wife in a hospital gown in a professionally shot photograph, was soon to suffer her own blow.

In the wake of what has happened, Steve and Valerie's successful business, Whitehill Landscaping, has withered away. Their savings are barren, depleted by medical costs. They are unable to pay for the services that can retrain Steve to brush his teeth, comb his hair or tie his shoes.

The Wish book is an annual project of the Mercury News that invites readers to help their neighbors.

how to give
A chance to be a kid

Christian Van Nuland, 2, gets help Tuesday from his older brother Chris, while using steppingstones at Happy Hollow Park & Zoo in San Jose. The younger Van Nuland suffers from heart problems.

Program gives Happy Hollow passes to children with developmental issues

By Charlie McColum
mcocollum@mercurynews.com

Christian Van Nuland seems like a normal 2-year-old kid.

The Wish Book is an annual project of the Mercury News...
Framing Your Story

- Decide on the message.
- Find the people.
- Check on the person or persons you think will tell the story.
- You are a reporter.
- Think photos.
Writing Your Story

• Get to the point; keep it short.
• Find a balance of emotion and facts.
• Be a storyteller.
• Keep the tone conversational. Avoid jargon.
• Write it once, then write it again.
• Proofread it, then have someone else proofread it.