



David welcoming guests to Villa's annual Blue & White Gala.

## DAVID FINDS HIS HOME

*Original story written by Camila Castellanos and published by The Outlook. Adapted for The Chirp*

When 13-year-old David Ledden first came to the school at Villa Esperanza Services, he seemed a shell of a boy — withdrawn, guarded, refusing to make eye contact and barely speaking a word. There were reasons, of course. He'd been homeless a good part of his young life, most recently living out of a truck in a Costco parking lot with his stepfather, rarely able to bathe and used to eating only about four different fast-food items. School attendance had been sporadic over the years. He read at a 1st-grade level.

But when a social worker reached out to Derrick Freeman, indicating the boy in need of help might be his biological son, David's life took a rare and momentous upward turn. After a DNA test confirmed his paternity, Freeman fought for custody and immediately sought out help for his newfound son in every corner. He worked with David's school counselor and tirelessly home-schooled him until they could find a stable learning environment that would be the right fit to accommodate his special needs and therapy services.

That right fit turned out to be Villa Esperanza Services. In less than one year at the school, David has grown into a happy, healthy and outgoing boy. Before Villa, he'd never had a friend before, he told his dad.

"The outgoing kid you see today, it's taken a long time for him to get there," Freeman said. "My son told me he'd never had friends, that no one ever noticed him before, not in a good way. This school has just been a godsend to him. They've opened up a whole new world for him. We can't even get out of the car without people calling him by name, saying hi."

David's story might not be the typical one at Villa Esperanza Services, but then again, no story is. Villa's mission since 1961 has been to meet the special needs of each individual and provide love and hope within a



**David (right) with his friend Sakees leading their classmates in a cheer at one of Villa School's pep rallies.**

continuum of care that ranges from infancy to adulthood.

"The kids don't fit into our program, we fit into theirs. Our services are very individually tailored to our clients' abilities, not their disabilities," said Kelly White, Villa's CEO. "We find the best way to tap into and pull out their emotions, abilities and skills, no matter what that might look like later in life, whether it's working out in the community or continuing to learn life skills."

Villa Esperanza Services first began as an independent

day school in Pasadena for children with Down syndrome, back in a day when no public schools offered programs for children with developmental disabilities. Building on the vision of a small group of mothers, who believed their special-needs children deserved quality care and education, Villa has become a place for individuals with developmental disabilities to thrive, no longer secluded but visible members of the community, where they work, attend school and live independently. Responding to the enormous need of an oft-overlooked population, Villa has been at the forefront of creating programs to give individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities the opportunity to learn, work and play with others. Villa now serves 26 school districts and more than 41 cities in Los Angeles and Ventura counties, and provides individual care to clients with any of 30 disabilities, including autism, Down syndrome and cerebral palsy.

The road for David might be long, but Villa is committed to every step of it. His dad, a single parent, knows he can count on Villa, especially when he might be ready to return to public schools.

"I tell him I've loved him since the first day I met him, he's my world," his father said. "Everything with David is touch-and-go right now, but overall he's becoming a very happy kid, he's always thankful for any little thing."

Freeman paused to swallow emotion, recalling when David thanked him for getting him clean clothes. "I teared up so much I had to pull over in the car," he recalled. He knows he can't make up for the lost years, but Freeman takes comfort in knowing Villa is helping David to recover and thrive.

"At this school he's just allowed to be himself without being judged or bullied," Freeman said. "David loves this school. Every day, he is happy to go and he loves the staff." Villa teachers and staff are all looking forward to David's continued growth and developing long lasting friendships.

## **We invite you to join Villa's Annual Giving campaign.**

There are many creative and flexible giving options that can benefit you and Villa.

One easy option is an IRA Charitable Rollover. If you are 70 1/2 or older, you can avoid taxes on transfers of up to \$100,000 from your IRA.

## **We also hope you'll consider joining Villa's Legacy of Hope.**

Legacy gifts help ensure Villa's sustainability for years to come.

**To learn more, visit [VillaEsperanzaServices.PlanMyLegacy.org](http://VillaEsperanzaServices.PlanMyLegacy.org) or contact Gioia Pastre at (626) 449-2919, ext. 118 or [GPastre@VillaES.org](mailto:GPastre@VillaES.org)**



# HIRE UP! Civitan Celebrates Employers

Civitan Club of Pasadena is encouraging businesses to hire individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Business owners want outstanding employees — the kind who are motivated, work hard, and love their jobs. Since 2017, Civitan’s “Hire Up” campaign has helped increase awareness and educate businesses on the benefits of hiring individuals with special needs.

Each year the Club, along with Pasadena City Mayor Terry Tornek, hosts an Employer Awards event during National Disability Employment Awareness Month (October). This year’s honorees included Best Buy, Lauren’s Lunches Catering, and The Flowerman.

Villa nominated Lauren’s Lunches Catering, owned by Lauren Clark, who has hired over six individuals from Villa’s Employment Program since 2016. “When I was initially approached by Villa about hiring Andres (Villa’s client), I was hesitant for several reasons, especially as I had no prior personal experience with anyone with this type of disability,” Clark explains. “When I said yes, I was surprised and relieved Villa provided a daily job coach who guided Andres through every aspect of learning his job. That coach worked with Andres every day until he was able to do the job without help. Now Andres knows his job and daily routine backwards and forwards. He is a great worker, always wanting to be helpful, and always looking for new tasks. Andres is a valued member of our team. On behalf of myself and all my employees, we are very humbled and honored for the recognition by the Civitan Club.”



Honoree Lauren Clark with Andres, a Villa Employment Services client.



Villa Employment Services Director Michael Greene, Lauren, Mayor Tornek, Villa CEO Kelly White, and Villa Employment Case Manager Donna Gonzalez at the Civitan event.

Michael Greene, Villa’s Director of Employment Services shares, “More employers are beginning to realize that the individuals we serve make great employees and provide valuable contributions day in and day out to that business.” Villa’s Employment Services Program provides adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities the opportunity to receive job coaching and support to secure and sustain employment within the community. So the next time you are looking to hire new staff, you may want to “Hire Up”!

For more information about Villa’s Employment Services in San Gabriel Valley, please contact Michael Greene at (626) 449-2919, ext. 161 or [MGreene@VillaEsperanzaServices.org](mailto:MGreene@VillaEsperanzaServices.org). For Employment Services in Conejo Valley, please contact Melissa Garza at (805) 446-1939, ext. 122 or [MGarza@VillaEsperanzaServices.org](mailto:MGarza@VillaEsperanzaServices.org).

**See the Potential;  
Villa Does.**

**Villalmpact.org**

**Villa's Biennial Report Online January 2020**

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# VILLA ESPERANZA SERVICES

*Where Hope is Hard at Work for Individuals with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities*

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[www.VillaEsperanzaServices.org](http://www.VillaEsperanzaServices.org)



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This year's Rose Parade theme "The Power of Hope" very much echoes Villa's mission of providing love, care, and hope for individuals with intellectual/developmental disabilities, and we were honored to have the Tournament of Roses Queen and Court visit the Villa School! Villa students love meeting them each year and enjoy making "cards" for their visit, which this year included a paper flower bouquet and a decorated pumpkin. Thank you to the Queen and Court for being so warm, generous, and kind with our students!



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