

EMPOWERING JOY: Maria Hernandez; Centro Rendu

1 Can you tell us about your current role and what led you to it?



I am the Youth Navigator and Case Manager at Central Ending for the youth program. My journey started when I participated in a youth program at Parrish, which inspired me to work with young people. Having struggled with navigating systems during my own youth, I wanted to provide the support I didn't have.

2



What academic background do you have, & what accomplishments are you proud of?

I moved to the U.S. at 11 and faced the challenge of learning English. Graduating high school was a significant achievement for me. After working two jobs to save for college, I eventually pursued higher education, despite the hurdles I faced as an immigrant student.

3

What might surprise others about your job?

One surprising aspect is the level of resilience students show despite their struggles. When you view their situations through a lens of hope, it can be uplifting—not just for them, but for us as well.



4



Where are the students you work with in their academic journeys?

Students I work with range from those still in high school to others who have dropped out and wish to return. Many struggle with graduation due to systemic barriers.

5

What excites and motivates students when you talk to them?



Students often get excited about finding their passions. For instance, one student became enthusiastic about pursuing mechanics after realizing it aligns with his hands-on learning style.

How do your own experiences with joy influence your work with students?

My personal experiences shape my understanding and empathy toward students. I share my journey to encourage them to believe in themselves and pursue their dreams, even if they seem distant.



8

Can you share an instance where you changed a student's outlook?

I often encourage students who feel discouraged by discussing their interests and potential career paths. This approach helps them see that there are viable options, reigniting their motivation.



6

Where do you see students experiencing joy in their academic lives?



Joy often comes from feeling part of a community. When students feel seen and heard, they find joy, even if school itself is challenging.

7

What is your role in helping students attain joy or excitement?

My role involves walking alongside students, providing emotional support, and helping them explore their aspirations without the fear of failure.

10

What barriers do students face in attaining joy in their education?

Many students face challenges at home, financial constraints, or systemic issues that discourage them from pursuing their goals, often leading to feelings of disillusionment.



Is there anything else you'd like to add?

I believe my mission is to help students recognize their potential and make informed choices for their futures. I want them to leave with a sense of hope and the belief that they can make an impact in the world.

