



ST. JUDE'S RANCH FOR CHILDREN HOPE HERO ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

May 1, 2021

I'll never forget the jail-like room I was sent to live in when I was 16 years old. I'd become a ward of the court because my Mom had given up any hope of trying to keep me safe any longer. So, while my friends were enjoying their junior year of high school and a fun summer, I was locked in a room where I could touch both walls when I held my arms out; there was a twin-sized cot and a small table and no windows to look outside. If you watch my documentary you'll see the very moment I walk into that room, 50 years later, and immediately dissolve into a pile of tears—the memories of the loneliness and fear I felt flooded over me. That's how I felt there as a grown woman—imagine when I was a child—and imagine the children now, being treated like criminals instead of victims when all they want is a better life; they're just looking for hope.

Those places promise to help our youth (and I'm sure they try), but I left there no more prepared to face the world than when I arrived—yes, they kept me physically safe for 8 months—but it must not have helped because the seven years that followed were the worst years of my life.

When are we going to realize we can't keep doing things the same way we've done them for decades—with little or no positive outcomes—and expect different results? The answer is now, we're realizing it right now, and it starts with the Healing Center at St. Jude's Ranch, with Christina Vela and her team, and with all of us...we're brave enough to be first.

I'm only alive and here today because of the hope I clung to all my life, no matter the circumstances... not necessarily because hope was an innate part of my being, but because others instilled it in me; they were constantly planting seeds that I was capable of so much more than I gave myself credit for, that I deserved more, that I was worth more. And even though I'm sure it didn't always seem like I was listening, I heard every one of those angels along the way...and I held onto their words with hope until I had my own. If you ever wonder what you can do to help (over and above your generosity tonight), that's the answer: plant hope with kind, encouraging words...it is so simple. And that's what the Healing Center (I added a mention of the CEO, Christina Vela, here since I edited out where she was mentioned earlier) will do for the kids. It won't just provide a home for them until they're 18, it will provide hope that will last a lifetime.

I'm beyond grateful to be recognized by this special organization that means so much to me, especially at a time in my life when I can accept it, breathe it in and enjoy it...not like years ago when I would be honored and feel like an imposter and think, "If they only knew me..." Well, St. Jude's does know me and they know I'm aligned with their mission. Although I appreciate being the one on this stage being honored in this moment, I'm fully and completely aware that I'm simply a representative for all those who have come before me, those who walk with me now and those who will follow. Some of the brightest, bravest, boldest human beings I know are survivors and a few are in this room: Chelsea, Kimberly, and my heart, Jessica, who you'll hear from later. I hope you can see them up here with me because I feel them. I proudly represent all those who, like me, survived for a purpose...and I humbly represent those who didn't survive, like my best friend Marilyn Marie Hayden and the young girl whose murder by her trafficker forced me to conquer my shame and break my silence, Nichole Elizabeth Yegge. They had a purpose, too. Every time I'm recognized, every time I speak...I do it in their honor.