

# Surf program educates foster youth

By Allison Sampite-Montecalvo

IMPERIAL BEACH — They came to San Diego with stories of heartbreak — verbal, emotional and physical abuse from parents who didn't want them.

But for five days and four nights, those scars wouldn't matter, because the foster youth from Las Vegas were accepted for who they are.

"When you start working with these kids you see the need," said Wesley Stewart, founder of Urban Surf 4 Kids. "They need love."

An Imperial Beach resident, Stewart founded the organization in 2009 after returning from a trip to Mexico and seeing many fatherless children.

The organization's purpose marries his passion for water-based sports with his faith and compassion for helping others.

This is the second year he held the "So Cali Dreaming" event, which included bonding at camp, movies, surfing, sailing and other activities.

"Surfing is a big part of it," said Stewart, 38. "The ocean provides the opportunity for kids who get into it to heal."

The youth arrived June 25 and the trip culminated with a surf camp for more than 40 foster youth with a free concert, raffle, games and surf movie on June 28 in Imperial Beach.

"We find our purpose and value in life by helping and thinking about others before ourselves," he said. "That's the example we want to set for them."

Alberto Hernandez, program director for Urban Surf 4 Kids, connects with the youth on a personal level.

"My dad abandoned me at birth, my mom was very abusive physically and I was in and out of foster care from the age of 6 until about 13," he said.

Hernandez, 41, was placed in an orphanage in Puerto Rico and after coming to San Diego became homeless.

He ultimately got his degree in human development.

"I actually had a story to tell now," he said. "There was a bad beginning, a really bad middle but there's a great ending to the story, and I think that gives hope to the kids."

Andrew Limas, 20, came to San Diego with an interest in connecting with others.

"I don't want my interactions to be superficial," he said. "I want to go deeper and I want to actually get to know that person's heart and see what I have to offer."

Limas said his mother was raped at 13.

"At that age, my mom pretty much didn't want me and she was going to abort me," he said.



**Andrew Limas, 20, tries out the FlowRider machine at the WaveHouse in Mission Beach. — Misael Virgen**

Limas was in and out of foster homes, but currently lives with his pastor's father in law and is returning to school in the fall.

"I want to be a family courts attorney to be able to work with kids to bring reunification to families," he said.

Today his mother, who he said was addicted to prescription drugs, has been sober for two years.

"She's going to church with me now and I've actually gotten to know my mom for who she is," he

said.

For Anna Renee Anderson, 18, the story of addiction, abuse and neglect is similar.

"I've lived through a lot of pretty gruesome things," she said. "I never thought I'd make it past the age of 12, 14, 16."

Anderson is one of 10 children.

"When I was 14 I escaped and rescued my younger siblings," she said.

She said they were homeless and lived in a van until Child Protective Services got involved.

"I was terrified because I'd heard all these bad things about foster care," she said. "I met my new family and I was reunited with all my little siblings. It was basically like a fairytale dream come true."

Anderson is studying criminal justice to become a special unit victim's detective specializing in sex crimes against women and children.

Anderson said she appreciates the time and effort put into the surf event.

"It really strengthens the community and gives all the foster kids hope that if you work hard you can make your dreams come true," she said.

Hernandez said these youth can do anything they put their minds to.

"Once you get to know the kids and make that connection, the empathy and pain that you feel for them turns into gratitude," he said. "I was supposed to inspire them, but they're inspiring me and it's amazing."