

'I owe him my life'

In 1985, she was an abused teen. Michael Meeks rescued her.

RUBÉN ROSARIO

The last time Dakota County child protection worker Michael Meeks saw Rolanda DelaMartinez, he was putting the 14-year-old victim of kidnapping and child abuse on a plane home for Florida. That was 21 years ago. When Meeks saw her again Wednesday, DelaMartinez, now a marketing executive and mother of four, wrapped her arms around his neck and tearfully embraced him. The reunion took place as Meeks and 11 other unsung public servants received a "Champion for Children" award from CornerHouse, a Minneapolis agency that law enforcement agencies rely on to examine victims and assess child abuse claims.

DelaMartinez uses the word "lifesaver" to describe Meeks, who removed her and two cousins from an abusive home in 1985.

"If Michael had not been there at the right time and taken the initiative to really investigate what was going on in that house, right now I would be in child prostitution or some criminal activity because of the situations that I was put in," DelaMartinez told me before the awards ceremony at the Hennepin County Government Center in Minneapolis. "I owe him my life."

Such praise for social workers is rare. They get little of the credit when things go right and much of the blame when things go wrong. Their failures often make news. Their successes go largely unnoticed.

Wednesday was different. Meeks earned praise for efforts dating back two decades. In 1983, when DelaMartinez was 12, she was living in Florida with her father, who had legal custody of her. Her parents had divorced when she was 9 months old. Her mother showed up and lured her from her father's front yard.

The mother took the teen to Burnsville, where she lived with three half brothers. There also was a stepfather, who DelaMartinez claims sexually abused her.

DelaMartinez was enrolled in nearby Nicollet Junior High School under a different name. She was told her father didn't want her and gave her up willingly.

"I felt completely out of place," DelaMartinez recalled. "I had never been to Minnesota and I believe I was about one of only five black students in the school at the time."

The now-35-year-old divorced mother said she was threatened with death if she contacted her father. She described a stressful home life that included frequent beatings with extension cords.

The family, she said, picked up and moved within 24 hours to a house complex in Inver Grove Heights after her mother learned DelaMartinez had confided her situation to a group of Jehovah's Witness members who came to the door one day.

DelaMartinez attended Simley Junior High School under another alias and briefly played for the girls basketball team. A yearbook picture shows a curly-haired girl wearing a headband and mascara to cover stitches she received from a chessboard thrown at her.

Meeks first went to the home to investigate allegations that two cousins of DelaMartinez, both visiting from Florida, had been sexually abused before their trip here. The allegations proved to be false. But one of the cousins, a 10-year-old girl, called Meeks days later and told him she saw DelaMartinez's mother point a .357 Magnum handgun at the head of her 5-year-old brother because the boy urinated on his bed.

Meeks went to the home to investigate the gun-threat allegation. He left with three kids that night.

"My mother had instructed me and my brothers to lie," DelaMartinez said. "I did initially. But he took me aside and I just spilled my guts about a lot of things that were going on inside that home. I remember him telling me, 'You're leaving this home tonight.' "

The cousins and DelaMartinez were placed in temporary foster care. DelaMartinez was reunited with her father two months later. She remembers Meeks driving her to the airport.

The cousins, who were returned to Florida to be raised by relatives, did not fare as well. The girl died seven years ago from AIDS after acquiring the virus from an intimate partner. The boy in the gun incident has been in and out of prison.

"I blame it on what happened to them inside that home," DelaMartinez said.

In 1993, DelaMartinez came back to Minnesota on her own accord and set up a successful tax accounting firm. Then, last year she saw a billboard for Prevent Child Abuse Minnesota. She called to volunteer. She is now the nonprofit's director of development and marketing.

"There are kids out there that are extremely abused and they suffer in silence and sometimes there's nobody there to help them," said DelaMartinez, who is writing a book about her victimization. "The work I do now is God's work that hopefully will make a difference."

Meeks, who confirmed DelaMartinez's account, said no one inside the home was ever criminally prosecuted.

The mild-mannered social worker, who now investigates abuse of disabled adults and the elderly, seemed to cherish the embrace as much as the award and the congratulatory handshakes from Gov.

Tim Pawlenty and other dignitaries who spoke at the event. Predictably, he deflected the praise.

"Rolanda was direct and honest," he said. "She was 14. She knew what was right and what was wrong. But she took the initiative, the courage, to tell me."

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FYI

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www.preventchildabusemn.org. To learn more about CornerHouse, visit www.cornerhousemn.org.