

Blindness no obstacle for Hialeah woman's college dreams

Being blind isn't keeping Hialeah resident Paola Espinosa from trying to achieve her dreams of higher education.



Buy Photo

Paola Espinosa, 21, volunteers four days a week at the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired. Here, she is helping Thomas Quintana on the computer.

PETER ANDREW BOSCH/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

BY LAURA FIGUEROA

LFIGUEROA@MIAMIHERALD.COM

There she was, sitting in the audience of Univisión's Saturday night Spanish variety show *Sábado Gigante* -- mesmerized.

Sure, Paola Espinosa had shaken hands with one of the show's co-hosts, but that's not what had her amped. It wasn't the flashy stage backdrops, the celebrity performances or the jewel-studded dresses sculpted on the show's models. These were things she couldn't see, except for blurred shapes and spots of color.

It was the behind-the-scenes energy that captivated Espinosa, 21. She could sense the buzz of stagehands working the crowd, of camera crews positioning their equipment. She could hear the applause and jittery chatter of audience members.

Being there reminded Espinosa of her dream -- to attend college and study communications and media.

Espinosa's wish for higher education is not so much limited by her ability to see, but by paying for the courses and buying special computer equipment.

"I don't mind working hard," Espinosa said softly as she sat inside a computer lab at the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired. "My whole life, I've had to work three times as hard as someone with vision, but I'm thankful because it has made me a stronger person."

There was a time when Espinosa was able to see the world more clearly. It was when she was 14, after a series of operations to fix the glaucoma she was diagnosed with as an infant in Lima.

Her vision would last only four months after a follow-up surgery tore her worn-out retina. It was one of 17 eye surgeries Espinosa has endured. Today, she is blind out in her right eye but sees splotches of color in her left.

"Now I'm back in my world, and this is me," Espinosa said, smiling. 'Sometimes people tell me, `You should pray, pray, pray so that one day you regain your sight back,' and I tell them, `Why? I'm happy as I am.'

``I may not be able to see the world how they see it, but I sense it in ways that they probably cannot."

Espinosa recalls how she felt at home when she first entered the Miami Lighthouse, 601 SW Eighth Ave.

She started taking computer courses in April, and in three months mastered all the programs. Now she volunteers there three times a week, helping others to maneuver a keyboard or to read Braille. As she makes her way around the two-story building, people shoot a smile when they hear "Paolita" -- as many affectionately call her -- is nearby.

"In terms of competency, talent and desire, Paola has all those things," said Richard Nieves, a caseworker at the Miami Lighthouse who nominated Paola for The Miami Herald Wish Book program. ``She's just missing some key ingredients to help take her over the top."

Among the missing ingredients: a laptop computer (she has memorized each key's position on the key board); a digital recorder for note keeping; a scanner and special software called Kurzweil 1000 that will allow her to scan textbooks and have the pages read back to her. The reading software can cost up to \$1,000.

That's too costly for Espinosa's mother, Paula, a widow who cleans houses to support Paola, and her two brothers and 10-year-old sister. Her siblings live in Peru, while the Espinosas live in a modest apartment in Hialeah.

Espinosa realizes some may question her desire to study media -- a profession where reporters write what they see and where videographers capture images. She's determined to prove them wrong.

"Some might say my dream is impossible," Espinosa said.

``But there comes a point in your life when you stop listening to people telling you what you can't do. I want my brothers and sisters to see an example in me of what you can do."