

## Childhaven celebrates new facility in Farmington and upgrades to shelter

By James Fenton *The Daily Times Farmington Daily Times*

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**FARMINGTON** — Nita Manuelito says her passion for children keeps her working long days, smiling through it all.

For the last six months, she has worked as a Court Appointed Special Advocate, or CASA, volunteer for Childhaven, a nonprofit organization that cares for infants to 18-year-olds caught in difficult situations, often cases of abuse or neglect.

Manuelito, 35, also studies business administration at San Juan College, works full-time and takes care of her four kids.

She was among the volunteers, donors, city officials and members of the community who gathered on Wednesday to celebrate the opening of a new Childhaven facility on West Apache Street. The new facility will house administrative offices and the CASA program, which formerly occupied office space at the United Way building down the street.

The public on Wednesday also saw upgrades at the organization's emergency shelter on West Apache Street, just east of the new building.

Childhaven Foundation Development Director Jamie Church thanked businesses, the city of Farmington and private donors for contributing time, materials and money to make the new office building and enhancements at the shelter possible.

"The goal of getting everybody — CASA, our offices, the foundation, the shelter — together has started to come to be," Church said. "Thanks to so many from the community, this is possible. We're excited and very proud."

Encana, ConocoPhillips, Ram Signs, Spotless Solutions and Leadership San Juan, as well as a city of Farmington Community Development Block Grant and the efforts of the General Federated Women's Club of Farmington, helped with the upgrades to the emergency shelter, Church said.

Childhaven CEO Erin Hourihan led a tour of the newly remodeled kitchen at the Childhaven shelter and described her day-to-day duties there, from securing grants to ensuring meals are healthy. That's when Manuelito chimed in.

"It's like being a parent, that's what it's like," Manuelito said, as Hourihan and a dozen others standing in the gleaming new kitchen burst into laughter.

Manuelito should know.

"It's a passion I have for kids," she said. "Yes, there are stressful days, but I just want to make that difference in a child's life. Really, I'm blessed, very blessed."

Since its humble beginnings in 1969 in a single building on Main Street, Childhaven has grown to include seven programs. The organization now provides housing, tutoring, meals, clothes and comfort to as many as 32 children, who stay an average of 90 days.

Elizabeth Castillo toured the facilities on Wednesday. Castillo, who lives in Aztec, decided to ask for a volunteer application to help tutor kids at the shelter.

"It's really cool when you can help someone reach an understanding of something that held them back before," Castillo said. "All those negatives you've been hearing and maybe believing fall away. I was tutored in college and ended up tutoring other students, and it's a great feeling to help others."

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