

Mi casa, su casa

Northport philanthropist opens doors again, this time as host for 'Summer Miracles' program

By Tom Allegra

Her humanitarian efforts have spanned generations.

It began with her participation in Big Brothers Big Sisters while she attended college in the late 1980's, when she mentored a child in need of guidance and support.

It continued with her five-year stint as director of the Gift of Life program, during which the number of children brought to Suffolk County from outside the U.S. to receive life-saving corrective heart surgery every year increased from 20 to 60—not to mention hosting their families from Honduras, Mexico, El Salvador and even Africa.

It culminated with her adoption of a six-week-old child from Guatemala, who is now a recent college graduate (see related story, below).

And this month, Northport attorney and psychic medium Winter Brook Ryan continues her altruistic efforts as the host of a 13-year-old child from Columbia as part of the non-profit KidSave's "Summer Miracles" program.

The goal of the non-profit's five-week summer program is to find adoptive families for Columbian orphans and foster children ages 12 to 15 who will soon be ineligible for social and family assistance programs in the impoverished South American country. According to Ms. Ryan, only 24 percent of Columbian children in this age bracket not sponsored by a program like KidSave will ever be adopted.

"Being the mother of two girls, that pulled on my heartstrings," the 1985 Northport High School graduate said during an interview with **The Observer** at her Northport Village office on Monday, July 8. "But once the children participate in this program, their chances of being matched to finding a forever family increases to close to 80 percent."

The exact figure is 76 percent, according to KidSave In-Country Director Carolina Moreno, who joined the interview by phone as an advocate and interpreter for the softspoken and somewhat shy Nicolle (an assumed name used to protect her identity as required by KidSave and the Columbian government).

"The most important thing is finding the right family

and the right match for the child," said Ms. Moreno, noting there currently are 9,000 Columbian children waiting to be selected for the Summer Miracles program. "Sometimes we bring kids who have been waiting for this opportunity for a very long time."

So far, Ms. Ryan's family appears to be the right match for Nicolle... and Nicolle the right match for the Ryans. They've enjoyed visiting the Northport Library together to take out the romance novels Nicolle enjoys as well as easy reading material to help her learn English. They've spent time on the couch watching the teen-centered Disney show "Soy Luna," which features English subtitles so that Ms. Ryan and her 22-year-old daughter, Dakota, can improve their Spanish. They've learned the difference between American and Columbian cuisine—and how it's still the traditional Latin American cooking style Nicolle prefers. They've attended a Long Island Ducks game, where Nicolle witnessed fireworks for the first time in her life. They've acclimated Nicolle to having pets inside the home (a dog and seven cats), because animals typically are kept outdoors in Central and South American countries. And this week they visited Mystic, Connecticut via the Orient Point ferry.

"We're making a difference for all the children who are able to participate and hopefully find a forever family," Ms. Ryan said of the Summer Miracles program, which brought a total of 29 Columbian children to the U.S. this July. "And the goodwill is going to spread so that when they return home, they can say they were treated kindly by individuals in our country."

The ultimate goal, though, is to keep these visiting children inside the U.S., because once the program ends on August 1 and the children return home, contact between the children and their host families is forbidden.

"But in my case," Ms. Ryan said, "I am open to converting my hosting to a formal arrangement."

Whereas Ms. Ryan first would need to be approved by KidSave, social workers and an adoption agency, amongst other requirements, Nicolle already is hoping she can stay here.



BETTER TOGETHER: Jude Minguez, 10, of Northport, has quickly befriended Summer Miracles program participant Nicolle, whether it was practicing walking on stilts in Mystic, Connecticut (right) or putting together a puzzle (above) at the Northport home of Nicolle's host, Winter Brook Ryan

When asked about her dreams and aspirations, she said "to find a family in the U.S."

Perhaps she already has found the one.

"I'm having a wonderful experience," Ms. Ryan

Feels like home

By Tom Allegra

For adopted children growing up, it usually doesn't take too long to recognize the difference in physical attributes between themselves and their adoptive parents and/or non-biological siblings.

Just ask Dakota Ryan, 22, of Northport, who was six weeks old when she was adopted from Guatemala by Northport attorney and psychic medium Winter Brook Ryan.

When a young Dakota voiced concerns about why she looked so much different than her mom and sister, Winter Brook did her best to put Dakota at ease.

"There was a period of time when I was like, 'You look so much like my sister and you look nothing like me!,' Dakota recalled telling Winter Brook during an interview with **The Observer** at their Northport Village office on Monday, July 8. "So one time, when she went down to visit Mexico, she came back and she had dyed her hair black to look like me, and that appeased me. I was totally fine then."

"My mom always did her best to make me feel comfortable."

Dakota and Winter Brook are trying to do the same this month for "Nicolle," a 13-year-old Columbian foster child they're hosting as part of the non-profit KidSave organization's five-week Summer Miracles program (see related story, above). Whether it's taking her to get tamales or trying to fry

fish and cook rice in the traditional Columbian style, Dakota has shown Nicolle that assimilation can work both ways.

"When we make things [food] that are from [Nicolle's] country, she lights up and is very excited that we're doing our best," Dakota said. "Even if the food doesn't taste the same because it's from America, at least we can do our best to try and make her comfortable and feel like she is safe and able to talk to us, because that was what worked with me and made me feel comfortable—doing what you can to immerse as much of the culture as you can into it."

"I'm excited to have this beautiful young lady participating in our home, being part of our family," Winter Brook said of Nicolle. "I'm excited to experience fireworks with her, because it was the first time—it's her first time trying things, and she smiles."

"I have been enjoying everything," Nicolle said through her KidSave interpreter and advocate Carolina Moreno, "because everything is a new thing for me."

Nicolle's emotions, although contained and understated, were evident as she sat to Dakota's left during the interview. She giggled when asked what she missed about Columbia (the food); she spoke more loudly when asked about her dream job (a physical education teacher); she teared up and welcomed a hug from

Winter Brook when asked how it felt—"butterflies," she said—to arrive in the U.S.

"Where I live, most of the people wish to have the opportunity to come to the U.S.," Nicolle said, "so I feel very happy to be chosen and selected because I'm the only child from my region to travel."

It's an amazing opportunity for Nicolle, but not one free of heightened emotions and sapped energy levels. Upon coming off the airplane, Nicolle immediately jumped into Winter Brook's arms. But then, when she reached their Northport home, Nicolle was exhausted and crashed to sleep. And then, when she woke, she sat with Ms. Ryan and sobbed tears of mixed emotions—the joy and thankfulness for being in the U.S., the fear of the unknown, and perhaps a little bit of homesickness.

"I was nervous about the language and also traveling because I didn't know where I was going and I didn't know the people who would be waiting for me, either," said Nicole, one of seven Columbian children being hosted in the tri-state area this summer.

"I was excited to meet the family who was waiting for me," she said. "It was strange when I first arrived because I didn't have the language, but once I arrived home I felt very comfortable."

Comfortable at home. Exactly how Winter Brook and Dakota want her to feel, and where they want her to be.



life and enable KidSave to continue their program and even grow it."

For more information about KidSave and/or hosting a child as part of the Summer Miracles program, visit www.kidsave.org.

Mother-daughter tandem creating comfortable environment for teen from Columbia seeking adoption