

# Why a Citrus Valley High senior wants to teach Redlands-area youth to be confident



The Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Redlands-Riverside named Isabel Cruz of Highland its Youth of the Year. Isabel is a 17-year-old Citrus Valley High School junior who wants to teach girls the importance of self-confidence and pursue journalism or writing after graduating from college. Courtesy photo

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The Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Redlands-Riverside named its Youth of the Year and Youth of the Year Ambassadors earlier this week. Picture clockwise from bottom left is BGC's Youth of the Year Isabel Cruz, 17, and ambassadors Christopher Monterroza, 19, Tyryn Cleveland, 16, and Adrian Chavez, 17. Courtesy photo

**REDLANDS --** Isabel Cruz says she wants to be the poster child for self-confidence.

Teased as a child for the way she looked, the newly named Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Redlands-Riverside Youth of the Year hopes to inspire local children to feel comfortable in their own skin.

“Being able to talk to fellow teens and staff has inspired me to do better in school and life,” said Isabel, a Citrus Valley High School junior.

Each year, local Boys & Girls Clubs select a Youth of the Year who embodies the nonprofit's mission to mold productive, caring, responsible citizens of the future. This year, the Youth of the Year Ambassador honor goes to Adrian Chavez, a 17-year-old Redlands East Valley senior of Yucaipa; Tyryn Cleveland, a 16-year-old CVHS junior of Redlands; Christopher Monterroza, a 19-year-old REV senior of Redlands; and the top winner, Isabel, 17, of Highland.

The final four “will serve as spokespeople for the clubs” and will be honored by the organization in the spring, according to a Boys & Girls Clubs news release.

To be considered for the Youth of the Year honor, all four had to write essays on three topics — club experience, their personal brand and their vision for America's youth —

and give a short speech on how the club has impacted their lives. A panel of judges determined the winners, the release said.

Isabel said she learned of the club's benefits from a cousin. She scoffed at the idea at first, but after a visit with her parents to the Hansberger Clubhouse on Clay Street, things began to change for the better, she said.

"What drew me to the club was having that first-day experience where I felt welcomed and treated like a family member," she added. "The staff were really cool and I found that it was incredible fun."

Isabel credits her peers for putting her on the right path because "they would constantly tell me I have to work towards this to get into college" and "what types of classes I needed to take," she said. Soon, her grades and attitude improved, and she became more confident in herself.

"Looking back I knew that I really had to get my life together to have a good future," she said.

Today, Isabel is a Boys & Girls Club volunteer for the Keystone Club, a community service program, as well as the SMART Girls program, a self-esteem enhancement program for girls ages 8 to 17, and other programs. She also volunteers at her church and plans to attend a junior college after graduation before transferring to USC or UC Berkeley in hopes of becoming a journalist or an author.

"Or, if I'm lucky," she said, "be in the fashion industry."

But most importantly, she says, she wants to be a role model for those who struggle with self-acceptance.

"This kind of drive and passion, if you will, (to build her) self-esteem may come from her own personal experience as a kid," said Eddie Hernandez, the club's development director, "but she is now kind of paying it forward by helping others find that same courage from within."

"I want to show younger girls that you don't have to be ashamed of who you are," Isabel said, "and not to let people bring you down but be you."