



Dear YOTO Family,

For students experiencing homelessness, the path to graduation can be filled with seemingly insurmountable obstacles. After four decades of supporting youth in Pima County, however, the members of our YOTO Family know that success is possible! **A few months ago, Youth On Their Own (YOTO) celebrated 40 Years of YOTO at our annual Spring Lunch.** We couldn't be more proud of the thousands of youth who, through hard work and dedication, have overcome the odds. At the event, one of those young people stood before a room of more than 850 supporters and students to share his journey. **Today as we launch our annual Back to School Challenge, I'd like to introduce you to that person: Carlos Jacquez.**



Carlos, Pueblo High School, 2018

Carlos was born in Arizona and spent his early years in Mexico with his mother and grandmother. His childhood was a happy one until – at just 10 years old – a tragic car accident took his grandmother's life and left his mother with severe, life-altering injuries. Suddenly, Carlos found himself moving between relatives and navigating a new and uncertain reality. **By the age of 15, he was expected to take on adult responsibilities, caring for both himself and his mother.** Recognizing that he would not be able to meet those responsibilities in Mexico, he made the difficult decision to return to the United States alone to pursue his education.

Starting over in Tucson was anything but easy. Carlos was able to stay with a cousin, but between work and school, he hardly had a moment to rest. During the day, he attended class, and in the evenings, he worked until closing at a local retail store. Work was followed by a long walk back to his cousin's house, homework, and sometimes late nights baking brownies to sell at school the next day. Most nights, he slept only a few hours before starting all over again.

Despite the exhaustion and pressure, Carlos remained determined to stay in school. Thankfully, a staff member at Pueblo High School discovered Carlos' situation and introduced him to YOTO. Finally, things began to change. **At YOTO's Mini Mall, Carlos was able to access free basic needs items like food, hygiene products, and school supplies – the very items we are collecting this summer for our Back to School Challenge.** As Carlos remembers:

“Because I was so busy and money was so tight, YOTO's Mini Mall was crucial. I truly relied on the groceries, toiletries, and supplies that I got there to make ends meet!”

Moreover, because he regularly attended school, Carlos was able to earn YOTO's Academic Stipend. **Most YOTO youth report that the Academic Stipend is the single most helpful support that YOTO offers.** Carlos, for instance, used his stipend to cover essential expenses like his phone bill, allowing him to stay connected to his job and pick up additional hours whenever possible. Just as important, however, the stipend represented something deeper: consistency, encouragement, and the knowledge that someone cared about his success. As Carlos recalled:

“The stipend meant happiness, security, and joy for me. It was more than money. I knew that someone from YOTO was coming to our school to see me and ask how I was doing. It meant that I was important to someone, that I wasn't alone in this world, because that's how I often felt during this time.”



Carlos in front of his new home

With the caring support of so many YOTO Family members, Carlos found a community that inspired him to persevere. **In fact, not only did Carlos graduate from high school, but he went on to attend the University of Arizona, earning a bachelor's degree in business!** He now works as an account manager at a local insurance company. YOTO is even one of his clients! What's more, after years of moving from place to place, he reached a major milestone: **Carlos purchased his first home!** When reflecting on his journey from a youth experiencing homelessness to a homeowner, Carlos noted the importance of the sense of family and belonging YOTO gave him:

“Not having a home taught me the value of community. For me, the YOTO Family has been that community. It has been my home. Now, after being homeless several times in my life, sleeping on my cousin's couch, and moving from apartment to apartment, I was finally able to buy my first house!”

As someone who has experienced firsthand the difficulties of being a teen on his own, Carlos strongly believes in sharing his story with other youth and the community members who have the power to support them. At this year's Spring Lunch, he stood alongside three other YOTO graduates – one from each decade of YOTO's history – and spoke about the impact the YOTO Family has played in his life. He closed with a message that stayed with everyone in the room:

"I believe that every single one of us was at some point a piece of carbon. But, with the right amount of pressure, carbon becomes a diamond. I consider myself a diamond that shines bright every day."



YOTO Board President Katie Maxwell and Carlos accompanied by fellow alumni speakers Leila, Sam, and Rain at YOTO's 40th anniversary Spring Lunch

Carlos' story is one of thousands made possible by a community willing to show up for young people when they most need our support. **As much as we are inspired by his success, however, there are still thousands of youth like Carlos under that same pressure today, carrying responsibilities far beyond their years.** Right now, they are waiting for the kind of support that can make the difference between carbon and diamonds.

That is why today, I am asking you to continue to show YOTO youth that despite the obstacles they face, they also have the potential to both dream big and realize their dreams. **We can show youth that we also believe that, as Carlos says, they are diamonds.**

Thank you for taking the time to learn a little more about Carlos' story and the important role our YOTO Family plays in this community. I hope you'll consider being part of our **Back to School Challenge** this year!

With gratitude,

Elizabeth Slater
CEO, Youth On Their Own

PS: You can double your impact! All gifts made to YOTO's 2026 Back to School Challenge will be matched dollar-for-dollar up to \$20,000!

PPS: Gifts of up to \$506 (single filers) and \$1,009 (joint filers) qualify for the Arizona Charitable Tax Credit. That means that if you pay state taxes in Arizona, you can support youth like Carlos at no cost to you!