Local details houseless experience

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BRANDON NICOLAS | SPARTAN DAILY

Jaime Navarro reflects on his experience being houseless in San Jose on Friday outside a family residence.

Jaime Navarro, a 42-year-old San Jose resident, sits on his uncle's front porch with a flannel-clad shirt and some jeans, across from the Chevron gas station where he works.

He was houseless in the same area for nine years.

"In '95, my brother, he passed away from AIDS . . . my brother George Navarro, he was 25 years old," Navarro said. "My father, he passed away at 52 from cancer, two tumors in his head."

He said his sister died three years after his father.

"Carolina Navarro . . . there were five of us, she was like the backbone of our family," he said.

"My mother, she was young too, she passed away in 2008. She lasted the longest out of all of us, out of all my family."

Within the span of 13 years, Navarro lost all of his immediate family.

In 2001, Navarro and his then partner had a son, James Navarro. After his birth they separated and he was left alone to take care of his baby.

"It got kind of hard after a while," he said. "I had the house under my name and I ended up selling the house."

He said after selling his parents house, he started renting rooms in the area while trying to find a steady job.

Navarro and his son faced housing insecurity for the first time.

He said his son missed his mother and once they started facing housing insecurity, Navarro tried to reunite the two.

"I couldn't give the love that my son . . . wanted from his mother, I couldn't do that part," Navarro said.

He said his former partner lived in Gilroy at the time and she started a separate family. He got in contact with her by reaching out to James' aunt.

Navarro said the mom didn't want to have official custody of the child.

While trying to get his former partner to keep custody of his son, he was receiving money through the California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs).

CalWORKs is a public assistance program by the California Department of Social Services that provides cash aid and other services to eligible families, according to its website.

Navarro said he worked alongside a CalWORKs caseworker to try and get his former partner to receive permanent custody of his son.

He said with the help of the caseworker, he realized the mom would want to keep custody if she was the one to receive the CalWORKs money.

Navarro gave up his custody for the benefit of his son. He said during this time, his son saw his mom as the "cool parent," which worsened their relationship.

"I mean, I lost my brother, my dad, my sister, my mom and then my son was against me," he said. "I just, I was hurt, man. I was really hurt."

Losing the money from CalWORKs was how Navarro ended up houseless.

When he was houseless, he stayed in the neighborhood he grew up in, along trails and occasionally staying at his friend's place.

Navarro said he started using drugs after he ended up houseless.

"I could never go forward because I couldn't hold down a job because I couldn't wake up the next day in the sense of – to take a shower, be clean, keep a commitment – the way it should be," he said.

Navarro said there was help available to him when he was houseless, but he was on drugs and never got the help he needed.

"I'm just so tired of ripping and running around," he said. "All I needed was a little bit of help, but I didn't want to be a burden to my family."

Navarro now lives in an emergency interim housing facility, or tiny home, in Rue Ferrari, San Jose. He works with a case manager to help him find more stable housing and a full-time job.

He works with Griselda Suarez, a HomeFirst Services case manager.

"I was introduced to [HomeFirst Services] and I love it now," Navarro said. "I mean, I love it now because it took me to another height of where I really want to be and they're helping me."

HomeFirst Services is a nonprofit organization that provides shelter and housing opportunities to the houseless and those at risk of becoming houseless in Santa Clara County, according to its website.

"[The tiny home gives you] a sense of belonging, you get your own key, your own shower, your own bathroom, your own heater, they feed you three times a day," Navarro said. "I feel like I want to do something with myself, I've been feeling that way. That's all I needed, was just that little push right there."

Suarez said she works with 40 participants and she has been assisting Navarro since January.

"Every case is different depending on the needs of everyone, therefore assessing their situation and being client centered has been a helpful method of supporting them through the process of getting back on their feet," she wrote in an email.

Navarro currently has a job at a Chevron gas station in San Jose. He said he used to work at the same Chevron in 2018, but he couldn't keep the job because he was on drugs.

"But now I got my things in order now and they see that," he said. "And they gave me my job back because they see me trying."

Oscar Villalobos, assistant manager of the Chevron gas station Navarro works for, said he's proud of the progress Navarro has made and was happy to get him his job back.

"Seeing how it used to be before and now seeing how everything's going," Villalobos said. "It's like bubbles, like in the bubble bath, everything rising up. Now I see him rising up and it makes me really proud to see him, looking up to him."

Suarez said the temporary shelter where Navarro currently lives allows one individual to stay for 60 days with two extensions of two months. She said additional days past the two extensions could be provided depending on the case.

Navarro said his ultimate goal is to reunite and be happy with his son.

"This is part of my little destiny right now, everything coming together," Navarro said. "Everything from the tiny homes from me getting my stuff together is my goal – to have a spot where my son, he can come over and know that it's home for him too."

John Miranda, Navarro's uncle, described him as a positive person working towards his goals.

"[Jaime is] trying to show [unhoused] people out here where he was homeless, that if he can do it, they can do it," Miranda said.

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