

## CAS-Carrera Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program

Felipe Ayala was 11 years old when he met Dr. Michael Carrera. It was 1986 at the East Harlem branch of the Children's Aid Society (CAS), then a 120-year-old New York institution known for helping the city's young people at risk. Felipe had accompanied his father, a handyman from Puerto Rico, and his mother, an immigrant from the Dominican Republic, to learn about the CAS-Carrera Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program, new to East Harlem but in its second year at other locations around the five boroughs.



Felipe with Doc Carrera at the CAS-Carrera offices on the Upper East Side

"All of us in the room were thinking, who's this white guy coming into the neighborhood and telling us all these things he's going to do for us? The only white people who came up here then were the police," recalls Felipe, now 38.

Nevertheless, Dr. Carrera, or *Doc* as he is affectionately called by all, won over the skeptical audience. He offered an afterschool and Saturday program with tutoring and enrichment, and even a \$3.00 per student weekly stipend. "He was talking about us and our families, about bettering ourselves," explains Felipe. "He didn't talk directly about pregnancy."

The CAS-Carrera program, now about to enter its 30th year, has always used a holistic as well as an evidence-based approach to preventing pregnancy in the second decade of life. In addition to educating young people about the consequences of sexual activity, it empowers youth by helping them develop personal goals and the desire for a productive future. Perhaps that's the reason it has grown from serving 200 participants at four New York locations when Felipe was a youngster to 4,000 students in 12 states today.

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“As we went through the program, we saw these people were genuine with us,” says Felipe. “If we didn’t show up for a couple of days, they’d call our homes and even make visits. We would think, really? They actually care that much?”

“I try to *live* the sermon rather than simply *give* the sermon,” Doc says. “We always had to be very mindful that many of these kids came from families who were extraordinarily poor. The schools weren’t giving them what they needed. We had to provide medical and dental care, and if families couldn’t pay their electric bills, we’d generate a fund where we’d loan them the money and they’d pay it back at \$2 a week.”

**In his second year of the Carrera program Felipe went home one evening to find** that his mother, an alcoholic, had deserted the family. He was devastated. “I was already a little rebellious, and when my mother left, I was even more rebellious because I was upset at the world,” Felipe remembers. “My father had to become a mother and I had to become more of an adult because I have a younger brother — he was only seven then.”

Carrera and his program stepped in to help the family in a big way. “The neighborhood pull of drugs and guns and violence was very profound,” Doc explains. Several women became surrogate moms, and the staff at the center, from the licensed social workers to the academic counselors, a surrogate family.

“There were times when I got into fights and stuff,” Felipe says. “They’d pull me aside and ask me what was wrong. They know it’s important to look for the reasons kids may be acting out. The program was instrumental in helping us stay out of trouble by giving us a safe place to be.”

“It’s important for these kids to know who they are,” says Doc. “We try to convey to kids that they’re good, that they’re *at promise*, not *at risk*.”

A major turning point for Felipe came with a self-expression exercise in a makeshift boxing ring. “Someone dressed up like a demon and we went one by one into this ring with him and the instructor asked us to pretend we were facing the one person in the world who we were the most angry at,” Felipe explains. “So I told my mother what I felt about her. Five minutes in that ring, screaming it out. After that, I was able to talk more, come out of my shell. It helped me transition from a very dark place.”

Felipe especially liked the entrepreneurial activities the center offered, such as selling hot dogs at center events. “We didn’t have to be out there selling drugs. We found out we could do other things to make money.”

It’s this safe haven the CAS-Carrera program provided — and still provides — that is perhaps most important to young people. “There was always some type of fighting going on between kids from different schools, between different gangs,” Felipe recalls. “If you were wearing something some kid wanted — a piece of jewelry, a coat — they’d just take it. In high school, I had a part-time job and I was able to buy a nice pair of sneakers. Well, people wanted them and I had to fight back. They never took my sneakers.”

Of course, sex education was a large component of the CAS-Carrera program back then, as it still is today. “Doc sometimes taught the classes,” Felipe explains. “I remember when he took a cup of sand and tipped it over and said, ‘See these grains of sand? That’s how much sperm comes out every time a man ejaculates.’ The shock value of that image, plus information on male and female anatomy as well as emphasis on the message that that early parenthood could jeopardize career goals “made me understand the importance of waiting until I felt comfortable and not rush into having sex.”

**The tie between Felipe and Doc only grew stronger over the years.** Felipe and his younger brother Salvador attended Carrera family Thanksgiving dinners and Christmas open house parties. Doc paid for Felipe’s SAT prep classes, and once Felipe was at SUNY Binghamton, “Doc would send me stuff,” says Felipe. “A card, a treat, some extra cash. I don’t know how many times Doc’s gone into his own pocket for me. He bought me my suit when I graduated college. When I went to work, he bought me work clothes.”

Felipe also credits Doc for teaching him a positive work ethic. “He’s always taught us to be on time. On time for Doc means 15 minutes early.”

The care packages Felipe received from Doc are now sent to all program participants during their college years, in December and then again in May. “When the kids go off to college, we urge them to stay in touch with us,” Doc says. “They have continuing needs like reproductive health services and mental health services and placement in internships, and we provide resources for all of that. We become a big extended family support system.”

Upon graduating from Binghamton, Felipe did what felt very natural — he went to work for CAS-Carrera. After moving through a few entry-level positions, he became a college coordinator for the four Carrera programs in New York City, assisting with SAT prep, college applications, and financial aid applications. “Sometimes these students think they can’t go to college because they don’t have the money, or because they didn’t do well in school,” says Felipe. “I tell the kids, ‘If I can do it, you can do it.’”

**In 2003, a young woman he was dating took Felipe to a service at the Life Changers Church and Ministries** in East Harlem, directly next door to the CAS center where he had grown up. Felipe immediately connected with Bishop Joe Harris and began attending every week. It wasn’t long before he began to take on responsibilities in the ministry, eventually preaching in addition to assuming the role of the bishop’s chief of staff and right-hand man — and met his wife, Natalie Francis, in the congregation. Doc was thrilled to attend their large wedding and paid for the honeymoon. Elisia was born in 2006, and in 2009 the family moved to an apartment in Bronxville in Westchester County.

Felipe takes his family obligations very seriously but it hasn’t stopped his church activities. “I’ve seen him make consecutive hospital visits to members of our congregation,” says his friend Brian Nichols. “He can be at the hospital all night and then have to get back up to Westchester to pick up his daughter and take her to school before he has to go back down to the city to work. Everything he learned through Doc’s program — he’s taken those experiences and given it to others freely.”

“Thank God for Dr. Carrera and his program,” says Felipe Ayala, Sr. “My sons came out as beautiful citizens, which I’m very proud of. A lot of people say that I did a great job raising them. No, the program helped me do a great job.”



*Felipe with his wife Natalie*