



Overcoming the Odds

When life hit hard, Michelle Reyes of CPS Parking Operations refused to become a statistic

by B. Lou Guckian, senior writer, photos by Vincent McDonald, corporate photographer



Michelle Reyes (left) credits the United Way and her pastor, Ron Arbaugh of Calvary Chapel (in back), for helping her build a better life for herself and her sons (pictured left to right) Jonathan, Michael, Estevan and Richard.

When her 3-year-old son, Estevan, was diagnosed with leukemia in 1994, Michelle Reyes was understandably afraid. Tragedy struck at a time when Reyes was a young mother of three, suffering through an unhealthy marriage. She had not yet graduated high school and lived at the Alazan Housing Project near downtown.

Today, Estevan is 12 and in remission. Reyes has completed an associate's degree and has worked for CPS for nearly six years. And she and her children live in a new neighborhood near their church, Calvary Chapel, in northeast San Antonio.

In between was United Way.

Looking back, Reyes can hardly believe the misfortunes she and her sons overcame or the turn their lives took, and she says it couldn't have happened without United Way. "If I didn't have their help, I don't know what I would have done," she said.

Reyes' call for help was answered the same day she asked. "I called one morning, and they sent Rachel, a caseworker, to my home that afternoon," Reyes recalled.

Over the next three years, while Estevan underwent extensive chemotherapy, United Way agencies provided transportation to medical appointments. United Way provided much-needed items such as strollers and diapers. And United Way provided parenting, homemaking and literacy classes for Reyes.

One night, shortly after Estevan had begun treatment, Reyes tuned in to a TV program that set her spirit afire. "Twin brothers were being interviewed," she recalled. "One was serving a life sentence in prison; the other was a high-ranking manager at a major corporation. When asked, 'How did you get here?' they each replied: 'If you grew up in my situation, you'd be here, too.' I decided right then to break the cycle and change my life."

As Reyes' determination grew stronger, and Estevan got better, she enrolled at St. Philip's College. "If I could make it through the first semester, I thought, I knew I could take it all the way," she said. Again, United Way was there, providing child care while she attended classes.

In 1998, Reyes graduated from St. Philip's with an associate's degree in accounting information and was hired by CPS. Today, she is parking coordinator for Facilities, Security and Fleet Operations.

Reyes credits United Way, all the way. "People don't ask to be down on their luck, but it happens to nearly everyone sometime. And when we are down, it's important to know help is there," she said.

Today, Reyes has four healthy sons: Jonathan, 14; Estevan, 12; Richard, 10; and Michael, 4. She's raising them solo, meeting her obligations on a single-parent income. And she gives to United Way.

Reyes wouldn't think of not giving something back to the organization that helped rebuild her life. "I encourage everyone to give, even if it's just one dollar a paycheck," she said. "Dollars add up! Some people think a dollar is nothing. But it could mean everything to someone else."

This is Reyes' story. She is one among at least 250 CPS employees who find help each year with United Way-funded agencies.

To make a pledge or learn more about United Way agencies or CPS' annual United Way campaign, call **Karen Pyka Sanders**, United Way coordinator, at ext. 2701.

Getting Help Is Confidential, Easy and Free

Finding help is free and as easy as placing a phone call to the United Way Help Line at (210) 227-4357 (also called "211 Texas"); visiting the Web at www.unitedwaysatx.org; or by calling a fellow worker who has volunteered as a referral agent.

Referral agents do not replace Human Resources staff and are not counselors. They are volunteers who have completed a training course that enables them to provide co-workers with reference information and to keep referrals private.



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