

HOLIDAY WishBook

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Hearts full of hope★

LEARNING TO COPE WITH THE CHALLENGE OF RAISING A SPECIAL-NEEDS CHILD

Nora Gonzalez, a counselor from Alum Rock Counseling Center's Children Services Program, talks to Adrian Hurtado, 6, while the boy's mother, Ana Vasquez, left, talks to one of his twin sisters, Beetzie in front of their East San Jose home.

Adrian's household is filled with a large extended family and can be chaotic at times. The boy has been diagnosed with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), so that makes it even harder for him to concentrate.

His one-on-one relationship with Gonzalez has made a big difference.

The Alum Rock Counseling Center's Children Services Program helps families struggling to deal with behavioral issues or physical disabilities.



(Pauline Lubens / Mercury News)

By PATRICK MAY / Mercury News

adrian flies his paper butterfly around the living room. A purple blur, it flits above the sofa past the old bullet hole in the front window. He swoops it over the heads of his younger sisters, the 3-year-old twins Adrian can't resist hitting and pushing when his anxiety kicks in. Like it's doing now, as he suddenly lets the butterfly crash to Earth, then stomps on his siblings' board game that teaches them circles, triangles and squares.

The world has always been right up in his face. When he was a toddler, Adrian Hurtado's mother, Ana, noticed something wrong.

"He couldn't eat and hold a spoon. The food fell off of it because his hand would shake, and he'd get frustrated and refuse to eat. Then he'd start to cry."

Now nearly 7 years old, Adrian has been diagnosed with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, anxiety and depression. He still suffers intermittently from trembling in his right hand. Then there's the daily regimen of medications to tame whatever it is that makes him strike out at the people who love him the most.

Nora Gonzalez is one of them. As an emissary from the Home Visitation program at Alum Rock Counseling Center, she has worked weekly with Adrian the past eight months in his

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Staff credits

East San Jose home, helping his mother to get him to follow rules and respect boundaries, even though boundaries are often just blurred lines inside his head.

Counselors like Gonzalez strive to establish relationships. "Caring professional intervention makes a profound difference in helping a family cope with the unique challenges of raising a special-needs child," says Patricia Chiapellone, executive director of the counseling center.

For the child, she says these home visits can mean the difference "between compounding failure and a whole new success-oriented outlook."

But real life, of course, isn't nearly as simple.

Lately, despite some early progress, Adrian is backsliding. One recent morning, his mother had to take him out of his first-grade special-education class after Adrian kept ignoring the teacher and throwing himself on the floor.

"He's been kicking and biting other kids again," Gonzalez says during a recent home visit, while Adrian and his siblings and cousins scurry about the four-bedroom house shared by Ana, her mother, her two sisters and their eight children. "It'll be a long process. He's progressing, but it doesn't happen overnight. Adrian used to have severe tantrums and throw chairs. At first he wouldn't even talk to me, but he's slowly coming out of his shell."

This afternoon, he's on the sofa drawing — stick figures on white paper from Gonzalez's box of supplies. With his short black hair and an Oliver Twist grin, Adrian munches on a grape, his single dimple squeezing in and out. He focuses on the drawing — first up, a small figure with a big X drawn over it, as in "prohibited."

Who's that?

"That's me," he replies.

Why an X?

"Because I'm screaming."

Why did you act up in school today?

"My friend hit me," he says with a nervous smile. "So I jumped him...to eat his blood!"

His mother and Gonzalez talk about his problems at school, about his father, who lives elsewhere in San Jose but sees his son most weekends, about the neurologist who says the CT scan looks normal, about getting mental-health help now that he's almost 7 and no longer eligible for the home-visitation program, about how his younger cousin has started imitating Adrian's inappropriate antics.

While they chat, the little storyteller in the "all-stars" T-shirt and pajama bottoms starts another sketch.

This time he draws a bright sun. Then a tree. Then a stick-figure watering the tree. Then a watering can shaped like a heart. Adrian is told that there's a newspaper story being written about him. Looking up from his drawing, he quietly suggests an opening:

"Once upon a time, Adrian..."

Wish Book readers can help write a positive chapter to Adrian's story — and the stories of other families with special-needs kids. Donations will purchase [vouchers for groceries \(\\$50](#)

each) and [gift cards for clothing, school supplies and educational toys \(\\$25 each\)](#). And Adrian's confidence would get a boost from having some [chunky pencils and eating utensils designed to assist kids who are strengthening their motor skills \(\\$50\)](#).

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