

'Angels' helped mom rebuild her life

Gabriel Project support was crucial for expectant mother facing uncertainty

BELLEVUE
BY JEAN PARIETTI

Veronica Cruz was pregnant and raising three children on her own, already facing financial and personal problems. Then she got a devastating call from her doctor's office: A blood test showed there was a chance her baby could have Down syndrome. Ending the pregnancy was an option, the nurse told her.

That call came on Jan. 6, 2011 — Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord or Three Kings Day — a day of family celebrations and gift-giving in Cruz's Mexican culture.

"I felt like my world was crashing down around me," the Spanish-speaking Cruz said recently through an interpreter. "All I could do was sit and cry. I said, 'Dear God, how can I take care of my three children, work, and take care of a baby with high needs?'"

Still, she pulled herself together for her children's sake and took them to the celebration at her cousin's house.

"We all gathered and prayed a novena to Our Lady of Guadalupe asking her to help," said Cruz, a member of St. Louise de Marillac Parish. "I had faith, but after that call my faith got stronger."

Not wanting to put her baby at risk, Cruz decided against the ultrasound and amniocentesis the doctor's office had scheduled.

"By the second visit, I decided to keep the baby regardless. God was giving me this baby for a good reason," Cruz said.

On June 21, 2011, she gave birth to a healthy boy, Nathan.

'Back on my feet'

Even with the help of family living in the area, Cruz would have had a difficult time getting through her pregnancy and the complications and loneliness in her life without the aid of "angel" mentors from Gabriel Project.

The parish-based ministry offers love, care and support — spiritual, material and emotional — for women in crisis pregnancies. The program, originating in Houston in 1973, began in the Seattle archdiocese in February 2011 at St. Stephen the Martyr Parish in Renton.

Cruz, who came to the U.S. at age 17, was a victim of domestic violence while married to the father of her sons Daniel, now 10, and Jesse, now 8. She later had a daughter, Ashley now 5, with her boyfriend. When Cruz learned she was pregnant again, her boyfriend was leaving her for another woman; he suggested Cruz get an abortion.

After learning her baby may have medical problems, Cruz reached out for help. She was referred to Gabriel Project by Gina Brennan, an educator with Catholic Community Services' Pregnancy and Parenting Support



Veronica Cruz enjoys a moment in front of the Christmas tree with her children: Daniel, 10; Nathan, 18 months; Ashley, 5; and Jesse, 8.

Program, who also is a member of St. Stephen Parish.

Gabriel Project connected Cruz with Sandra Tomich, a Spanish-speaking parishioner at St. Anthony Parish in Renton.

"She was in a very stressful situation, emotionally, financially and (she was) lonely," Tomich said. "I identified with her a lot because I'm Hispanic, too ... and I'm a single mom," she said.

"Sandra had helped me in many ways," Cruz said.

Tomich brought groceries and baby supplies, helped Cruz get her driver's license reinstated and worked with her to get late bills and rent paid.

Gabriel Project also linked Cruz with other assistance programs, such as the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

"Sandra helped me to get back on my feet," Cruz said.

'God does it all'

Besides helping pregnant women find and connect with the resources they need, and perhaps paying for some small expenses, Gabriel angels "work with the moms to help them make good decisions and become more independent," said Paul Robertson, the archdiocese's Gabriel Project coordinator.

"It's God who does it all," said Silvia Adams, a St. Anthony parishioner who first proposed bringing Gabriel Project to the area. "We're just intercessors to connect her to all those things. But the

true person who's there for her is God."

In addition to working on the practical matters in Cruz's life, Tomich often prayed with the young mother. "I encouraged her not to lose her faith," Tomich said.

Brennan, who later became one of Cruz's angels, said one of the privileges of working with Gabriel Project is encouraging a mother like Cruz in her spiritual life, making sure she is prayed for and with, and "that we are spiritually enriching (her) enough so that she would walk with God and be living her life with Jesus."

Today, Cruz's life is much brighter. She is a substitute chef at a Seattle nursing home and, with the help of her Gabriel angels, is working to become a U.S. citizen like her children. On a recent Saturday afternoon, the constant activity of four young children in the house didn't seem to ruffle her.

Cruz's transformation from hopelessness to peacefulness and joy "has been amazing," Brennan said. "All this confidence in the Lord helps her be a better mom. This is the best miracle that I can see in her," she added.

"When I first found out I was pregnant I was both happy and concerned, wondering how am I going to raise four children?" Cruz said. "But in faith, I kept in mind that God put things in our path for a reason, and I now have this beautiful child."

HOW DOES GABRIEL PROJECT WORK?

Trained mentors provide love, care and support for women in crisis pregnancies, and connect them with the resources they need.

Volunteers are active in 19 parishes around the archdiocese; seven other parishes are in various stages of implementing the program.

Participating parishes post a "sign of life" with the program's toll-free number, 888-9 AN ANGEL (888-926-2643).

Each caller is matched with a "Gabriel Angel" who helps during her pregnancy and beyond. Other volunteers aid a parish's "Gabriel Team" in a variety of ways.

