

SUCCESS STORY

A Return to Hope: Angelica's Story

Santa Cruz Community Counseling Center | California

When Angelica arrived as a 10-year-old in the United States, she was filled with hope. In Mexico, it seemed her family would never escape poverty. As farm laborers, Angelica's parents had little opportunity to improve their situation and they wanted more than anything to give their children a good education. No matter how hard they worked, their future seemed bleak.

But when Angelica's family settled in Watsonville, not far from Santa Cruz, Calif., the chance for something better was finally within reach. The children would be assured an education—one that might even lead to a college degree. The parents' hard work as laborers would earn them a steady income and one day, perhaps, they might even buy their own home.

Angelica loved school. In spite of the fact that she spoke no English upon her arrival to Watsonville, she excelled academically and made friends easily. By the time she began 9th grade at Watsonville High School, she felt confident in herself and her ability to succeed. But that's when tragedy struck her family. Coming home from school one day, she learned her father had been killed in a car accident.

Angelica was inconsolable. She loved her father deeply and could not process her loss. Her mother was equally grief-stricken, as she not only lost her husband but was suddenly thrown into the role of sole supporter of her two children and another child on the way. Now everything was uncertain.

Angelica's mother knew she needed to increase the number of hours she worked after she had the baby, and she turned to Angelica for help. As her mother worked long hours in the fields, Angelica became a full-time caretaker to her two younger siblings, a brother who was three years younger than she and an infant sister. Now, in addition to managing her schoolwork and trying to cope with the loss of her father, she was also responsible for cooking for the family, doing laundry, cleaning, caring for her siblings and running errands.

Day after day, Angelica tried to focus on the work before her, but her misery grew and she could not stop thinking of her father. Without meaning to, she picked fights with her mother who was also stressed and sad. Her schoolwork suffered and she began to withdraw into herself. Angelica felt that, when her father died, her family's dream of a brighter future died with him. Once again, her family was on the edge of poverty. Once again, it seemed, no matter how hard they worked, they would never get ahead.

Weeks of grief turned in to months and after more than a year, Angelica felt lost. She turned to her school counselor for help.

Angelica was referred through the school to Nuestro Futuro's individual counseling services. Nuestro Futuro (NF) is a Santa Cruz Community Counseling Center program, which has



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partnered with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's *Caring Across Communities* initiative. When Angelica first began meeting with her counselor, she was soft-spoken and reluctant to share. The grief still welled up easily and she became overwhelmed by her sadness. Over time, however, she began to trust the NF counselor and began to move through her grief.

As the months passed, Angelica blossomed. Meeting regularly with her counselor, Angelica began to talk again about the hopes she had when she was younger. She was able to talk about how much she loved her mother and wanted to help her. She found she no longer wanted to fight with her and the things that made her angry seemed to fade away. She cried less and less and it was easier for her to focus on her schoolwork as well as her chores.

Six months into her counseling, Angelica has changed. "I feel counseling has helped me a lot," says Angelica. "Everything I have in my mind or my feelings I can share it with my counselor." And she has begun to look forward again. She believes that one day her family will achieve its dream of owning a home. She has also found her own dream: to become a doctor. Excelling academically, Angelica not only plans to graduate from Watsonville High School, she has her eye on a college degree and a career in medicine.

Nuestro Futuro was able to provide Angelica with the type of support she needed when she needed it. "Counseling has been very helpful for me," Angelica said, "and I appreciate the attention my counselor has given me."

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is supporting *Caring Across Communities* and its partners, such as the Santa Cruz Community Counseling Center, to address such needs by increasing and improving mental health services for all America's children. Learn more about how programs like *Caring Across Communities* create innovative solutions for children like Angelica at www.healthinschools.org.

To learn how *Caring Across Communities* is helping immigrant and refugee students succeed, please visit www.rwjf.org/newsroom/product.jsp?id=60828.

For more information about the Santa Cruz Community Counseling Center, contact Tonia Heath at tonia.heath@sccc.org.

About the Center for Health and Health Care in Schools

The Center for Health and Health Care in Schools (CHHCS) is a nonpartisan resource center at The George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services. CHHCS links educators and health professionals to the information essential to building effective school health programs; testing new school-connected strategies to achieve better health outcomes for children; and promoting awareness of successful new directions in school health programming.

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