

## Stamford Shelter Helps Clients Shed Homeless Stigma

By Nora Naughton

STAMFORD — After a year of drifting between shelters, Mercedes and her daughter will have a roof over their heads this Christmas.

The 41-year-old single mother, whose last name was withheld for privacy, recently arrived at Inspirica, one of Stamford's two homeless shelters. She will spend the holiday in the organization's Family Housing Program emergency shelter.

"It's starting to feel like a family here," Mercedes said of the Inspirica staff's commitment to providing a memorable Christmas for she and her daughter. "The people here have taken care of me, and I feel better ... I used to have bad panic attacks and things like that. Now, it's like I can breathe."

In addition to her security this Christmas, Mercedes will also get to play Santa for her 3-year-old daughter who will benefit from Inspirica's annual holiday gift collection.

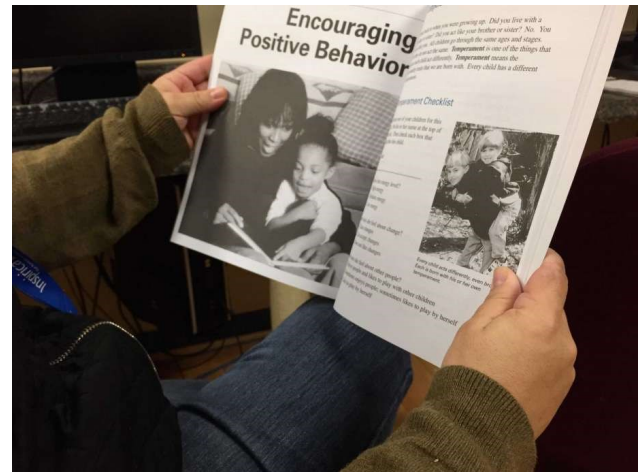
"It will be nice to give her a real Christmas, because it has been a while since I could do that for her," Mercedes said. "She watches the toys go out for other kids and she gets so excited ... I can't wait for her to see her own presents."

This Christmas is a lot different from last year, when Mercedes used every penny she had to travel to Connecticut from the Dominican Republic.

She came to Fairfield County hoping to collect child support from the estate of her daughter's father who recently died.

"I used my last \$400 to get here thinking there would be money waiting. He owed a lot of child support before he died. It was our last chance," she said. "But there was nothing, and we were stuck."

With no money, no relatives nearby and no place to live, Mercedes and her daughter bounced between shelters for months.



Continued on next page ...

## A new future

But their fortunes changed in May when they arrived at Inspirica.

"We would stay in a place as long as they would let us — usually a month — and then we'd be on our own again," Mercedes said. "I'm glad we found this place. My daughter is happier here ... the other places were very strict about children."

Mercedes is now more relaxed, knowing they have a long-term place to stay. She has also connected with a case manager who steered her into career counseling and placed her and her daughter in transitional housing.

This support system has allowed Mercedes, who used to work as a certified dental assistant, to start thinking about her future for the first time in years, she said.

"It's hard to get back out there," Mercedes said of finding a job. "I only worked on the base when I was married to a Naval officer. When we got divorced, I was kicked off the base ... I lost everything at once — my job, my home, my husband."

Mercedes is enrolled in the JumpStart Career Program, which helps clients overcome obstacles that keep them out of work and homeless.

"The work that we do is so important for so many of our clients to get out of homelessness. A job is that first step," said Rian Drenzek, director of the JumpStart Career Program. "Many have a stigma to overcome, and we need to help them with that."

The JumpStart program is open to all Inspirica clients. The classes are comprised of all walks of life — some have master's degrees, while others never even made it to high school. But they all face the same barrier: unemployment.

"No matter what they are facing, we all work together to find them the best path to employment," Drenzek said. "At some point, you see this transformation — just seeing the difference in somebody who gets the call for the interview or when we do the resume and they see themselves on paper is really cool."

Mercedes said JumpStart has given her a goal to reach, proudly stating she sent out a batch of resumes last week.

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The single mother has also spent a lot of time working on her relationship with her young daughter. Three nights a week, she attends a parenting class at the shelter, where she works on everything from communication to anger management.

"I feel like my daughter and I have become more united," she said. "I can understand how she's feeling more."

While she strengthens the bond with her daughter, Mercedes said she still has a lot of work to do to mend her relationships with her older children, who were scattered after her divorce. Her 15-year-old son lives with relatives in North Carolina and her 20-year-old daughter is in the Dominican Republic. "My one Christmas wish would be to go see my son in North Carolina," she said. "I hope by next year we can all celebrate together in a home."

To read the article online, please visit: <http://www.stamfordadvocate.com/local/article/Stamford-shelter-helps-clients-shed-homeless-10813467.php#photo-12084723>

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