Mothers Build Community of Friendship through Parent Groups

Mothers Giselle Avalos and Lorena Nuñez met in the parent group six years ago when their sons Nathan and Oliver enrolled at the Blind Children’s Center. Through the open discussions and support from family workers, they soon found that their sons had similar medical diagnoses—cerebral palsy, epilepsy and intellectual disabilities, in addition to their visual impairment.

“I was very quiet when Nathan first arrived,” Gisselle remembered. “As the groups continued, I began talking about my son’s diagnosis and along with Carlos’ help, I became more open.” Lorena’s experience was similar. “By meeting other families and hearing their stories and their children’s diagnoses, I found more than friends; I gained another family,” she said.

Because Nathan and Oliver both have complicated diagnoses, having their mothers nearby has been beneficial. Lorena noted, “I think this made their transition to school easier, and the staff also felt at ease knowing that if they need support from us, they

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can find us upstairs.” As time went on, Lorena and Giselle formed a deep bond. “It’s been a wonderful experience and we’ve often helped one another check on each other’s kids,” explained Giselle.

Elvira Flores, whose daughter Naomi enrolled in the Center as a two-year-old and is now a kindergartener, had similar experiences. “I was in various groups at the hospital, but I didn’t really relate to the mothers because I was a mom to a child with a disability,” she remembered. “But when I found the group at the Center, everyone was so open, and the other mothers offered me the genuine friendship I needed.”

Yolanda points out that the confidence caregivers gain from the parent group is invaluable. “I have learned to advocate for my son. I know now what he has a right to, what he needs and deserves,” Giselle remarked. “And the daily encouragement they provide reassures moms like me and enables future independence when my son graduates from the Center.”

Mother Adriana Flores knows this feeling well. Her oldest daughter Litzy, whose diagnoses include astigmatism, photophobia and nystagmus, graduated from the Center three years ago. Adriana explained, “The parent group helped my family understand the depth of my child’s diagnosis. It was also comforting to know that other parents understood my situation.”

Throughout the course of a family’s journey, both Carlos and Yolanda provide patient navigation and emotional support to the parents. Both of our Family Workers are fluent in English and Spanish, which brings an added layer of comfort and familiarity to the process. “Carlos and Yoli have even modeled calls to service providers, mentoring me so that now I can do it on my own. It’s made me so much stronger and more independent,” Giselle said proudly.

Some days, the parent group is focused on fun and taking a moment to breathe. Giselle recalled one particularly memorable session where the parents made arts and crafts. “The class allowed me to be distracted from my child’s diagnosis and the pressures of life for a while.” Lorona agreed. “The open forums forced me to open up, communicate and connect. I was able to build a deeper connection not only with Carlos and Yolanda, but with the other parents, too.”

Jennifer Rios, mother of five-year-old student Henry, has found similar support. “You become part of a community of parents facing similar challenges, which helps to normalize the special education experience,” she said before adding, “I honestly don’t know where my family would be without the Blind Children’s Center. Our son has grown so much in two short years and we are so grateful.”

Meet our Family Workers
Carlos Martinez, Sr. & Yolanda Blancarte-Chatman

Knowing that a child’s diagnosis of blindness or severe visual impairments affect the whole family, the Blind Children’s Center has offered on-site Parent Groups for decades. These weekly sessions, offered in English and Spanish, are more popular than ever, spearheaded today by Carlos Martinez, Sr. and Yolanda Blancarte-Chatman, who bring nearly forty years of total experience to their roles. Carlos and Yolanda help bridge the gap between families, the Center, and external entities including healthcare providers, public school districts, and others.

Yolanda supports families of younger students (infants to preschoolers) while Carlos supports the families of the older students (pre-k to 2nd graders). Yoli and Carlos both bring empathy and insight to their work, and a unique understanding of the needs of children who are disabled.

As a child in Mexico, Yolanda overcame polio before immigrating to the United States twenty-eight years ago. She still remembers the strain it put on her family when she summoned the strength to start a new life in a new country as an adult.

“My father didn’t want me to go,” she remembered. “He told me I’d always have a place at home. Meanwhile, my mom was
Yolanda concurred, “It’s imperative for parents to understand that they will find joy again. I remember distinctly leading a singing group for the parents, and one mom had the most beautiful voice. She explained that she used to sing but had stopped after her child was born, and she wasn’t sure if she ever would again. We let her know it was okay to share her gift and okay to laugh. A week later, she rejoined her church choir.”

When students graduate and parents leave the group, it’s a bittersweet feeling. Carlos and Yolanda find reassurance that parents rarely return for guidance, but rather to update them with their successes and progress. “One mom often calls me to let me know how well her daughter is doing,” said Yolanda. “She was very quiet when she joined the group, but since leaving, she’s led fundraisers and really shown incredible growth. It makes it all worthwhile,” she said with a smile.

Carlos’ story is Yolanda’s in reverse. His son, Carlos Martinez Jr., lost both eyes as an infant to Retinoblastoma. After an admitted period of self-pity and paralysis, Carlos, Sr. joined the Parent Group and Parent Mentor Pilot Program. Within two years, Carlos, Sr. had made incredible strides in his own life and joined our staff as a Parent Mentor, bringing his own unique experiences as the father of a child with a visual impairment.

“My mission after Carlos Jr.’s diagnosis was to help other parents in my situation,” he explained. “I wanted them to understand that this is judgment-free zone. They can let go of their burdens here and speak openly.” Today, Carlos, Sr. is an invaluable member of our staff and Carlos Jr. is a newly minted graduate of the University of California, Irvine.

“Parents of children who are visually impaired often have their own vision blocked because all they see is the diagnosis,” Carlos continued. “But we need to break that barrier down and allow them to see the possibilities that exist all around—for them and for their children. I want parents to know that they will smile and dream again.”
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