

‘He’s an angel to us.’ This young Homestead man is autistic. His family needs help

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Mario Arevalo remembers when his son, Harold, was diagnosed as autistic 23 years ago.

“It wasn’t easy to accept,” he recalls. “We didn’t know about autism, but little by little we started learning more so that we could find help. But we were still happy. He’s an angel to us.”

The Arevalo family has struggled to make it through the pandemic. Mario lost his construction job, his daughter Monica was laid off as a cashier at Bloomingdale’s, and his wife, Olimpia, has had to continue working through the pandemic cleaning homes twice a week. Meanwhile, Harold, 25, has been stuck at home and unable to attend classes or do his beloved design work on his computer.

But a life led in adversity has strengthened their optimism and persistence. “I give thanks to God for having helped us push through this all,” says Olimpia.

Mario came to the United States from Granada, Nicaragua, in 1988. He lived in Palm Springs, California, for five years before moving to Miami in 1992. A couple of years later, he met Olimpia, who had also come to Miami from Nicaragua in 1994.

Looking back to their first few years in the United States, Mario recalls noticing a massive cultural difference from their home country.

“Of course, the customs and traditions are a lot different here from those in Nicaragua,” he says. “It’s definitely difficult when you first start living here, but you eventually have to get used to it.”

After a whirlwind romance, Mario and Olimpia had their first child, Harold, in 1995. They married two years later in 1997, just before Monica was born that summer. Shortly after, they rented an efficiency apartment for the family and lived there for many years before eventually making a down payment on their current house near Homestead.

She recalls another sweet memory: Harold naively would give away his toys, but then Monica rescued him. “Monica would see all these kids just leaving with the toys and would get upset,” Olimpia says. “And she’d say, ‘No!’ and would take them back.”

Harold eventually went to Coral Reef High School and took classes for special needs students, while Monica attended Southridge High School.

Harold has continued his studies at the Association for Development of the Exceptional in West Dade. Though he excels in mathematics, his computer has major issues that have made it difficult to take classes online.

Now age 65, Mario has been unable to find a job. Monica lost her job at Bloomingdale’s because the store was shut down. Since then, she has been able to secure a part-time job working at Whole Foods as a cashier.

And she has resumed studies at Miami Dade College.

“She’s paying for the classes herself,” says Olimpia. “The government scholarship program that was helping her stopped providing money, so now, she’s been taking classes again little by little.”

But there simply isn’t enough to make ends meet. Daisha Zanetti, a counselor and parent educator at the Advocacy Network on Disabilities, was assigned to the Arevalo family toward the end of August. She calls Harold’s situation “very moving.”

“It’s a hard time for all of us to be stuck in the house now,” she says. “But it’s even harder for him when he can’t see the people he’s used to seeing from his program.”

For the holiday season, the Arevalos would appreciate help with food, rent, utilities and clothes. However, their main concern is a new computer for Harold.

“We want mostly to get Harold the help he needs so he learns more and feels fulfilled,” Olimpia says.

Adds Mario: “Harold is an affectionate and kind person. That’s not something a lot of people have, but he does.”

HOW TO HELP

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