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12 DAYS

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the classroom. The items she buys for Evelyn are almost always pink.

"She's our princess," Metzger explained. "She's our only girl in class."

HARDSHIP TO OVERCOME

Evelyn was born with abnormally small eyes, a condition known as microphthalmia. She spends much of her time in a wheelchair that is now too small and falling apart. She can't use it in her home because there is no ramp, but her home is much too small to maneuver in anyway.

The wheelchair sits on the patio when she's at home, so she must be helped whenever she wants to move.

Ramona Oviedo and her husband, Isais, are raising their youngest daughter, Estephanie, 14, and their three grandchildren, Evelyn, Brandon, 10, and Homer, 11, while the children's mother, Idolina, travels to Blanco, Minn., to work at a packing plant from July through December.

The children must rely on their grandparents to care for them; their father died when they were very young.

Homer, Brandon and Evelyn are eager to have their mother home for the holidays, though they're not sure when she will be home this month. She calls every day and sends money when she can. But her meager pay isn't enough for all of the family's needs.

The family gets government help, which keeps everyone fed, but there are many things they must live without.

They are one of a dozen families featured this holiday season in the 11th annual *12 Days of Christmas* series, sponsored by the United Way and *The*

Monitor. The series focuses on families in need and asks residents of the Rio Grande Valley to help bring a bit of cheer to them this Christmas.

STRONG FAMILY, BROKEN HOME

The Sanchez and Oviedo family lives in a small home that has seen better days. The linoleum on the wooden floor is wearing through and the smooth boards below are warped, leaving gaps.

Wind blows through the holes in the walls. Some rooms in the three-bedroom house have no doors and only plywood where windows would be.

The home has no air conditioning and the one space heater isn't enough to keep everyone warm.

A hot shower would be an indulgence — the water heater is broken. When they need hot water, Ramona boils water on the stove.

Evelyn shares a bed with her grandmother and her 14-year-old aunt, while Evelyn's two brothers share a bed. When their mother is home, she takes the grandfather's bed and he makes do on the couch.

Only one bathroom is available for seven people to share.

Electricity works in half of the house, with extension cords running along walls to power lights in the rooms. Another cord runs from the kitchen, across the dining room to the back porch, giving power to a washing machine with a broken spin cycle that drains onto the wooden porch floor.

But the grandmother carries on with little complaint.

"My biggest stress is when the cars aren't working, when the kids need to be picked up or taken somewhere," Ramona said in Spanish.

Only one of the three vehicles the family has can be

relied on. A truck in the uneven, dirt driveway remains motionless, a tire missing. A car without a bumper cannot be driven because it needs to be inspected and registered.

MOVING FORWARD, LOOKING AHEAD

On Christmas Eve, the Sanchezes and Ovidos will huddle in their small family room, surrounding the brightly decorated Christmas tree and, if they're lucky this year, like last, there will be gifts. Or Homer's favorite holiday tradition — fireworks.

Likely, Ramona will make tamales, something she tries to do each year.

The children have Christmas wishes for items that seem far out of reach. Estephanie wants a PlayStation Portable, Brandon dreams of a Nintendo Wii, Homer wants a cell phone, and Evelyn can always use more educational toys.

They would love to see their grandmother get a new winter coat, or maybe some earrings, and tools for their grandfather.

For Evelyn, her brothers want to see more improvement. She has been attending Salinas Elementary for a year now and has already made great strides — walking and talking more than her family has ever seen.

"I want to see her walking and talking more," Homer wishes for his sister.

But when Ramona considers what she wants for Christmas, she takes only a moment before she answers.

"I don't know," she says, her daughter Estephanie translating. Ramona shakes her head and smiles. "All I want is for everyone to be healthy."

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12 DAYS OF CHRISTMAS SANCHEZ FAMILY



HOW TO HELP

The United Way is accepting donations — including, but not limited to, clothing, food, furniture, toys and money — for the families of this series. To donate, call (956) 279-9047, (956) 279-9048 or (956) 279-9049 or mail donations to P.O. Box 187, McAllen, TX, 78505. The United Way of South Texas is located at 1200 E. Hackberry, Suite F in McAllen. You can also make an online donation on the United Way of South Texas website at www.unitedwayofsothx.org. *The Monitor* is not accepting donations.

Evelyn Sanchez

7 years old; female; Shoe size: 7; Shirt size: Small; Pant size: Medium

Homero Sanchez Jr.

11 years old; male; Shoe size: 3.5; Shirt size: 12-14; Pant size: 12-14

Brandon Sanchez

10 years old; male; Shoe size: 3; Shirt size: 10; Pant size: 10

Estephanie Oviedo

14 years old; female; Shoe size: 5; Shirt size: 16; Pant size: 14

Ramona Oviedo

54 years old; female; Shoe size: 6; Shirt size: Medium; Pant size: 12

Isais Oviedo

66 years old; male; Shoe size: 7.5; Shirt size: 14.5; Pant size: 28

Idolina Oviedo

31 years old; female; Shoe size: 7; Shirt size: 18; Pant size: 14

Household Needs: Hot water heater, rewiring throughout the house, space heaters, blankets, closets or wardrobes (armoires), windows need to be repaired, washer needs to be repaired, interior doors, new flooring, truck tire, car needs to be registered

Evelyn Needs: New wheelchair, wheelchair access in the home, yoga ball, "cause and effect" toys — anything musical or noisy, with push buttons, etc., mini trampoline, walker

Wants: Estephanie wants a PSP, Brandon wants a Wii, Homer wants a cell phone and Evelyn wants toys. The kids want Grandma to have a winter coat and gold earrings, and they want Grandpa to get tools for Christmas. Clothes and coats are always needed.