

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2013 | The Monitor, www.themonitor.com

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SPIRIT

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A lack of oxygen to the brain can cause permanent brain damage, and after speaking with nurses and doctors about what to expect with Danny, his parents feared he may never walk or talk again — especially without proper treatment and therapy, something they couldn't afford.

The Ojeda family was featured in *The Monitor* and United Way's "12 Days of Christmas" series and program last year, which alerted the Rio Grande Valley to their needs.

"We're very thankful to the people that helped us through donations, being there, always praying," David Sr. said.

For the past 12 years, the newspaper has shared the stories of 12 families in the Valley in need. Each family's story is highlighted for a day, and readers are asked to donate money, clothes, blankets, appliances or whatever else the family may need.

This year, *The Monitor* is renaming the campaign "The Spirit of Christmas," in recognition that the generosity of local residents can and should extend beyond 12 days each December, said Carlos Sanchez, editor of *The Monitor*.

"Our hope is to get people to realize that the spirit of Christmas can always be present and the generosity that we tend to show around the holidays can become part of our community's fabric," Sanchez said.

In 2011, *Monitor* readers donated more than \$35,000 to the program. Last year, more than \$45,000 was raised.

Clothes, blankets, appliances, gift cards and checks were presented to the families, like the Ojedas.



Hernandez family, then and now

At left, Selena, 2, rests her head on her mother, Claudia Hernandez, inside their new home Nov. 19 in Las Milpas. Below left, Claudia Hernandez carries Selena while standing in a room of their new rental home in Las Milpas. The Hernandez family received aid last year as a part of a giving campaign.

Photos by Deicia Lopez | dlopez@themonitor.com



"It's always something we look forward to because the families do benefit from the project," said Amelia Rojas, an outreach specialist for the United Way. "There's so much giving and so much caring for other people."

David and Claudia Hernandez were very concerned for their youngest child, Selena, who had heart, lung and kidney problems.

Their living conditions were far from ideal

for the 1-year-old, who was plagued with asthma and a weak constitution. The house they rented in Pharr was too small — the family of five slept in one room — and the landlord wouldn't fix the plumbing issues, so the sewage smell was overwhelming, and Claudia worried about her family's health.

Winters were harsh for the Hernandezes with no heater and Selena would often fall ill and end up,

once again, in the emergency room.

After receiving help from the "12 Days" program, though, the Hernandez family has moved into a bigger house with proper plumbing.

"Whenever we need something, or something has gone wrong, we call the landlord," Claudia said in Spanish.

Although they are paying more for rent (\$600 instead of \$400), David is able to work at a local church to make some extra money, after he finishes at the auto shop for the day. The church, Claudia said, also helps them with food whenever they need a little more.

They were able to get help with Selena's medications, and, Claudia said, Selena's doctor was able to secure the young girl's insurance for the rest of her life.

The children also had a

very happy holiday. They received gifts of sweaters, pants and toys, too. Selena got a lot of dolls, her mom said.

"I was very grateful," Claudia said. "Without them knowing us, they helped us. Thank you very much."

Those who work at the United Way who are involved with the "12 Days" program, like Rojas, see how the donations affect each family.

"(Claudia) was one of the participants that was so grateful for the assistance from the community," she said. "And you see the difference. You really are happy to see that they did take advantage of that opportunity that was given to them and they do make a better life for themselves."

The money the Ojeda family received from

the United Way, donated by *Monitor* readers helped significantly in getting Danny the medications and therapy he needed. Hard work and determination helped Danny's progress, too, and after four months in a wheelchair — which was donated through the "12 Days" program — he can walk again.

Danny has returned to school, and he recently gave his wheelchair to someone else in need.

"He has recovered so fast," his father said. "We did not expect (it)."

Danny's older brother, David Ojeda Jr., 20, remembers the joy he felt when he saw Danny returning to his former self.

"I was very happy because after seeing him dead ...," David Jr. trailed off.

"I wasn't dead," Danny said in Spanish. "I was waiting in heaven."

David Jr. laughed and said Danny has high hopes for his career.

"He wants to play again," David Jr. said. "He wants to be famous."

Danny looked over at the soccer poster again and smiled.

"Thank you," Danny said.

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