

# **Cynthia's Story**

## **Part One: Charting a new course**

**By Jennifer Torres**

STOCKTON - She opens a linen closet in the narrow hallway and pulls out a bottle of laundry detergent.

She unscrews the cap, closes her eyes, brings the bottle to her nose and inhales. Clean, vaguely floral. She opens her eyes again and sighs.

Cynthia Rosas says she has never before had a bottle of laundry detergent that smelled like anything but just soap. She has never had a bottle of laundry detergent that she didn't have to share with other kids at a group home, with other women at a shelter.

Her own laundry detergent in her own closet in her own two-bedroom apartment on the second floor of a north Stockton complex.

She puts the bottle away, takes a short stack of dish towels out of the closet, drops to her knees and unfolds and refolds them on the blue carpet: The giddy, child-on-Christmas-morning appraisal of all the things that are new and hers continues.

"I never pictured myself in a two-bedroom, two-bath," she says.

A self-help book on a coffee table, pans in the kitchen cupboard.

Then she is embarrassed by the plastic grocery bags she's using to collect her garbage. She says she wanted to buy a real trash can but didn't realize how expensive they are. She says she'll probably get one anyway.

It is early July 2008 and stifling.

Trying to trap what little cool the morning left behind, Cynthia turns off all the lights and closes all the blinds. It leaves the apartment gray and still.

She has long, nearly black hair, pulled back in a low ponytail. She is wearing a tank top and a pair of her boyfriend's boxers. His name is Chris Jaramillo, and he is at work. Their 5-month-old daughter, Chiyalia, who had been napping in her crib, begins to whimper. Cynthia gets up to check on her.

Cynthia, 21 at the time, had grown up in foster homes and group homes and the Mary Graham Children's Shelter.

She was 5 when she and her siblings were taken from their mother, who eventually regained custody only to lose the children again months later.

Since turning 18, Cynthia has slept mostly on friends' couches and in shelters, and for a little while, just after Chiyalia was born, with Chris' mother.

"We had to get out of there, didn't we, Mama?" she sing-songs to the baby, lifting her from the crib.

Finally, she convinced social workers that she was clean enough - no more alcohol, no more meth, no more gangs - for a place in a housing program for young adults who have aged out of the foster care system.

Project Hope, run by Lutheran Social Services of Northern California on behalf of San Joaquin County, furnished her apartment and subsidizes her rent. Chris is responsible for paying his share - but mostly, that's been coming out of Cynthia's welfare money. She says she doesn't mind, because he's been buying groceries, paying her cell phone bill, giving her \$10 here and there when she needs it.

She meets weekly with a caseworker from Project Hope, and they have put together an independent-living plan.

It calls for Cynthia to enroll in adult school or to get a job.

It requires that she continue attending weekly anger-management classes, which she hates, and meet all other terms of her probation. In 2005, she and her brother stole a car and wrecked it. She was sentenced to five years of probation and served 13 days in jail.

But what Cynthia is most focused on now is getting her older daughter, Harmony, back. Harmony is 2 and staying in Livingston. She was just about a month old when Cynthia left her with a boyfriend's mother. If she hadn't, she said, social workers would have come for the baby anyway; she was too drug-addicted to take good care of anything.

She had already lost one child, a boy named Malachi, born when she was 16. He was taken away less than a year later - at the time she was living at the children's shelter - and eventually put up for adoption.

But everything seems so different now. She wants Harmony back. She wants to build the kind of life for which she has no clear blueprint and few tools.

But she does have an idea of what it's supposed to look like, and it looks just like this: her own apartment, where she lives with her man and their baby, about as normal a thing as she can imagine. Chris has even been talking about adopting Harmony. And Cynthia has

started thinking that maybe, if they can get a bigger apartment, Chris' other daughters - older girls with other mothers - could come live with them too.

For now, with Chiyalia on her hip, she opens a white dresser drawer and, one at a time, pulls out onesies and sleepers.

One from a friend of Chris' whose daughter outgrew it. Then a whole outfit, brand new and still with tags on, from a former social worker.

She opens another drawer. It's almost empty, waiting for Harmony. She thinks she has enough clothes to last Harmony a week or so. It depends how big she is. She doesn't know.

"Chris' best friend's girlfriend said she would give us some things."

She closes the drawer.

A few days later, Cynthia gets a ride to Livingston. She plans to demand her daughter back. She expects a fight. There isn't one.

She takes Harmony, dressed in a T-shirt and a diaper, and straps her into a car seat. They leave without the rest of her clothes, without any of her toys, without even a pair of shoes, and go to McDonald's.

The child has short, glossy curls and dark, uncertain eyes, almond-shaped like her mother's.

As part of her personal self-improvement plan, Cynthia has resolved not to swear anymore.

In anger, she presses her lips shut and gulps down her words, so that all comes out is a low "mmmmmm."

And now, in awe, looking at Harmony, she whispers, "She's hecka beautiful."

After they finish eating, Harmony is wary. Cynthia coaxes her back into the car with french fries.