

# Cynthia's Story

## Old demons, new challenges

**By Jennifer Torres**

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** *Cynthia Rosas believes she has started a new life, reuniting with her older daughter, Harmony, and moving into an apartment of her own with her boyfriend, Chris Jaramillo, and their baby, Chiyalia. But having Harmony back is proving to be a difficult adjustment for both mother and daughter, and despite the intervention of a host of social services, Cynthia's home life remains precarious.*

STOCKTON - It is only a few weeks after her daughter Harmony's second birthday party - when Cynthia Rosas had felt like she was part of a normal couple, hosting a potluck barbecue on the lawn outside her apartment - and Chris Jaramillo, her boyfriend, is gone.

On a Wednesday night in September 2008, during an argument in which she said she was "egging him on," Chris, 29, grabbed and choked her.

The next morning, she told caseworkers from the program that provides her housing about what happened. They advised her to call the police.

Chris was arrested, spent a few days in jail, pleaded no contest and was ordered to attend a domestic violence program.

Court records show that, within days of the incident, Cynthia requested that the stay-away orders placed against him be lifted.

A month later, she says they're not together. His name is off her lease. But he comes around often, and he keeps a key - to visit the girls, she says.

"He comes and goes when he wants. It scares the hell out of me." (She has started to curse again when she's frustrated. She had been trying not to.) "All of a sudden, I look, and here the hell he is. You can't tell a person, 'Cynthia, I'm here'? "

But in the end, she says, she'll take him back.

She is trying to put together a dinner with what is left in her refrigerator at the end of the month.

"I think dinnertime and morning time and putting them to bed are the hardest parts of being a mom."

She turns to Harmony, who is watching her from the kitchen table.

"Girl, we don't have much food left over. I don't get my food stamps 'til the ninth."

She sighs. "Chris is really good about getting stuff to last."

For now, there are tortillas and eggs and potatoes.

"What do you want?" she asks Harmony. "Eggs burrito?"

"Yeah."

"No papas? Just eggs?"

Harmony nods.

For most of her first two years, Harmony had been living with the mother of one of Cynthia's ex-boyfriends. Cynthia had taken her there as an infant, unable to care for her herself.

She reclaimed the child, eager to create a new family, but it has been more difficult than she expected.

Getting along with Chiyalia, now about 8 months old, whom Cynthia has had near her since birth, seems so much easier.

With Harmony, it is often strained. Cynthia is alternately frustrated and concerned by her toddler behavior.

"Harmony, dude. She repeats the same things over and over again. And I told her about repeating herself, 'We hear you the first time.' "

Cynthia has been assigned to parenting classes and has received counseling. Like the hundreds of teens who are prepared each year to exit foster care in San Joaquin County, she was offered training on how to balance a checkbook, how to cook, how to keep a house, how to apply for a job, how to care for a baby. Many of the lessons stick with her, but they do not erase what she absorbed about families and survival when she was a child herself.

In December, a social worker visits the apartment after someone reports suspicious bruising on Harmony's face. Chris has been accused of hitting her, something both he and Cynthia deny.

What happened, Cynthia says, is that Harmony was sitting in a booster seat at the kitchen table when she kicked the edge of the table to scoot herself back. She kicked too hard, though, and ended up tipping the chair and falling to the floor.

"Chris doesn't hit my daughter," she says. She says she would fly at him if he ever did. An investigation of the abuse allegations is inconclusive.

Still, Cynthia is angry. She believes she is being unfairly targeted because of her own history in the child welfare system.

"C.P.S. don't believe in second chances, huh? I just get mad, because I'm really trying. I've changed my whole life."

Meanwhile, her caseworker at Project Hope, the program that provides housing to former foster youths, wants her to change even more - to earn her high school diploma, to find a job. Sooner than later.

"She gave me a lecture about self-sufficiency that just, basically, I don't remember, because I got so mad. ... They gave me 50 million things to do. I have to turn in two job logs a week. On top of the 50 other things I have to do."

She goes twice a week to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings; she must bring her daughters to appointments at the Women Infants and Children food program office. She must check in at the welfare office. She must be at home for visits from a social worker. There are training and counseling sessions she is regularly told to attend.

And now, Project Hope has told her she must also start going to meetings of the Mothers of Preschoolers support group.

She is annoyed and resistant - one more thing she has to do.

But then, she finds, she is embraced by the group of smiling, young women who are shocked at the story of her life, who sympathize with her parenting struggles.

And she loves MOPs.

"Everybody knows everybody. Everybody's nice to everybody. ... The books they give us are hecka tight."

She arrives early to a MOPs meeting at St. Andrew's Lutheran Church, feeds Chiyalia and Harmony from the breakfast buffet provided for the mothers, then walks the girls to their day care rooms.

Back at the meeting, she sits next to Miriam Deuel, the pastor's wife. The women at her table have started an ice-breaking discussion about what traditions from their childhoods they hope to pass on to their children.

It is Cynthia's turn to answer, and she is stumped. But they are patient. Finally, she says she was always very close to her brother, Junior, and she hopes her daughters will have a bond like that.

At the end of the meeting, leaders announce upcoming events. One of them is a couples dinner - single moms are welcome too, they say.

Miriam nudges Cynthia, but Cynthia doesn't get it. She imagines being at the dinner party with Chris.

"That husband-wife dinner," she says on the way back to her apartment. "I hecka want to go. It'll be at one of the other girls' places. I think it sounds fun."

The party is for adults only. Cynthia talks about finding child care for the night, but it doesn't work out.