

Families Celebrate New Hearth and Home for the Holidays

By **Camila Castellanos**
The Outlook

Just a year ago, Brenda Valentin sat in her car outside an empty lot on Olive Avenue in Altadena, trying to envision the new home she just found out her family would be building there with the San Gabriel Valley Habitat for Humanity.

It would be their first owned home after a lifetime of living with relatives or renting apartments, the most recent of which was a one-bedroom, one-bathroom duplex in Lincoln Heights for her family of five. It would be the first of many firsts.

“This was a blessing, to get a single-family home — it was extremely emotional. I sat there trying to imagine it, this home we would own,” said Valentin, overcome with tears the memory still evoked. “I had prayed and prayed for this for so long. To have stability for my children, to have a place where they can grow up and always come home to ... it was overwhelming. We were overjoyed.”

The Valentin family is now preparing to celebrate their first Christmas in the new house, one of many holidays to come. After moving into the sparkling, three-bedroom, two-bathroom home a few weeks ago, her children have decorated their rooms and Valentin proudly displays a treasured piece she found on Offer Up: A glossy, eight-person dining room table. The table



Photo courtesy SGV Habitat for Humanity
The Cano family, including Nely, Angel, Elijah, Johnny and Giovanni, will celebrate their first Christmas in their new three-bedroom, two-bath home in Pasadena, thanks to SGV Habitat for Humanity.

feels grand, large enough for her whole family, plus guests, following years of eating separately at a fold-out set up in their apartment.

“Now sitting down for dinner, all of us together to eat as a family and talk over our days. I can’t tell you how much that means,” Valentin said.

Helping families like the Valentins achieve homeownership has been the SGV Habitat for Humanity’s goal since its founding in 1990.

Across L.A. County, 78% of extremely low-income households are paying more than half of their income on housing costs. Renters here need to earn 2.5 times minimum wage to afford the average asking rent. With those soaring housing costs, homeownership across the county has decreased 9.3% and is now out of reach for many

families. SGV Habitat, however, is working to create affordable homeownership opportunities to achieve financial solvency, long-term stability and self-reliance through shelter.

Longtime Pasadena resident Johnny Cano remembers the exact moment he got the call that would change his family’s life — SGV Habitat had chosen his application out of hundreds for a duplex on Howard Street and Navarro Avenue.

“It felt like winning the lottery; I couldn’t believe it. I was amazed this program would work for us and that we could be so fortunate,” he said.

Cano and his wife, Nely, had grown up in Pasadena and separately wanted to stay there, near relatives, to raise their three boys. But a two-bedroom apartment at \$2,400 was beyond their reach, and the one-bed-

room, one-bathroom place they’d been living in for seven years was just too cramped for their family of five. The street was a busy thoroughway, too, and Cano worried about his sons being safe if they walked the dog. They considered moving to Lancaster, though it would’ve meant adding a 1.5-hour commute for his wife.

“I wouldn’t say we were deeply religious, but when Habitat chose us, it really was like God saw something and made this happen for us to continue living in Pasadena and build our lives here,” said Cano. He and his wife are the first in their families to own a home. “We broke the generational curse. ... Everyone in our family had always rented and lived in apartments. We are the first to own, we’ll be the first to give our kids some generational wealth.”

One of the ways SGV Habitat makes homeownership possible is through “sweat equity,” where each family puts in about 250 hours in the building of their own home and those of others. With the support of community partners, donors and volunteers, SGV Habitat constructs new homes and renovates existing ones alongside the homebuyers, keeping build costs lower.

For Cano, building his own home turned out to be a joyful experience. He learned how to install drywall, lay trim, laminate flooring and cut tiles. He also learned how to build a fence and irrigation system in the



Photos courtesy Brenda Valentin

The San Gabriel Valley Habitat for Humanity worked with the Lopez family, including son Samuel (from left), Gerardo, Brenda, and daughters Alessandra and Esmeralda (front), to help them purchase their first home, a three-bedroom, two-bath single family home in Altadena.

yard, which has turned him into a full-time, outdoor hobbyist.

“I never knew that I would love my yard so much,” Cano said, laughing. “What might seem like a chore to some, like cutting grass and trimming bushes, to me that is the ultimate homeowners’ experience, and just a joy-filled task. It’s very serene for me; I very much enjoy it.”

He loves that his sons and dog can play outside, and his 4-year-old is quickly learning some soccer skills. But what Cano might love the most is that they can comfortably invite all the family over for the holidays.

“We used to have to eat in shifts, with the kids going first and then the adults, but this Thanksgiving we had everyone sitting down together. It was beautiful,” he said.

In order to help more families in 2024, the SGV Habitat for Humanity has announced a new campaign, Framing the

Future, which will change the lives of 200 families throughout 31 communities over the next three years. The campaign will highlight the need for affordable places to live while celebrating the diverse solutions to the local housing crisis — through increasing housing production,

affordable home preservation and sustainable practices such as operating resale stores to keep materials out of landfills.

“One of the biggest questions we get about our program is, how can I help?” said Bryan Wong, SGV Habitat CEO. “The great thing about Habitat is there are so many answers to that question: Sending in a donation, signing up to volunteer, sharing information with others and shopping in our ReStores are all ways to help more of your neighbors become homeowners. From painting baseboards, or planting flowers to answering phones we have a way for just about everyone, of any age, to help.”

Elsewhere in Pasadena, Door of Hope has been working around the clock to make sure families have a home for the holidays. The nonprofit is celebrating the 26 families it has moved from its shelters into their own permanent homes this year.

Door of Hope CEO Megan Katerjian said her New Year’s wish is that all of the 36 families living in Door of Hope shelters

today will find their own permanent home in 2024.

One client, named Abigail, came to learn about the nonprofit through a domestic abuse shelter. She and her two children now have two bedrooms and their own bathroom, and she is focusing on the steps to becoming financially independent with help from Door of Hope.

“They are putting resources behind me, steering me in the right direction and helping me one step at a time,” she said. “It is a relief that I don’t have to worry about paying for rent while I can work toward bigger goals and get my life together.”

The nonprofit also is hard at work to make the holidays a special time. Children make gift wish lists and parents receive donated presents to wrap. Volunteers decorate each home and host a holiday festival with Santa, presents and a sledding hill.

“It brings holiday joy back for families who have lived through unimaginable hardship,” Katerjian said. “In addition to the usual heartbreak we associate with homelessness — needing a safe place to sleep, a hot meal, and a warm bed — homelessness steals the joy of childhood, especially around the holidays, when Christmas wishes are replaced by desperate needs. ... That’s why celebrating the holidays is so special at Door of Hope. Kids get to be kids.”

To learn more about helping families achieve homeownership through the SGV Habitat for Humanity, visit sgvhabitat.org. For more information about keeping families from homelessness, visit Door of Hope at doorofhope.us.



The Lopez family recently celebrated the first Thanksgiving in their new home with son Samuel, daughters Esmeralda and Alessandra, Brenda, Gerardo and Uncle Allen Alvarado and Grandpa Gilberto Pinedo