

A roof over their heads

Family of three women finds a safe haven at Salvation Army Hope Center

As a child, a curious Janet Rodriguez liked to tear apart her toys and other small gadgets and then put them back together. Later, she would fix broken things around the house.

"I would fix the TV or broken zippers on clothes," she said. "I've always liked working with my hands."

The Norfolk, Va. native got the chance of her lifetime to build and repair bigger things, when in 1979, at 23, she quit college and joined the U.S. Marine Corps and became a CH-46 helicopter jet engine mechanic.

For eight years, she serviced the engines' parts, using a variety of hand tools, power tools, machines and specialized equipment. Among other duties, she inspected turbine blades to detect cracks or breaks and examined engines for defects. The sergeant left the marines in 1986 when her daughter was born.

In 1987, she moved to San Antonio with her husband and daughter, and a year later landed a job, with VIA Metropolitan Transit, cleaning buses. Her hard work and reliability caught the attention of her boss, who promoted her to shop attendant. Before long, Rodriguez received another promotion and became VIA's first black, female diesel bus mechanic.

Then one day in 1999, Rodriguez slipped and fell into the pit, breaking her right kneecap. "I knew that day I wouldn't be coming back because the damage to my knee was so extensive," she recalled.

Rodriguez collected workman's compensation, but after 246 days on the disabled list and unable to return to work, VIA let her go. To make matters worse, the mortgage company that was financing the home she was having built foreclosed on the deal, fearing an unemployed Rodriguez would have trouble making payments.

At the same time, the lease on her apartment expired in June 2000, leaving her and her daughter out on the street. (In 1989, Rodriguez' husband left home one day and never returned, only to surface in 1994, pack some belongings and leave again.)

Meanwhile, Rodriguez, 46, and her 16-year-old daughter moved into a motel, where she paid \$177 a week at one, and then \$280 a week at another. Upon learning of her daughter's situation, her mother, Frances, left Virginia to join her here.

"It was so stressful," a tearful Rodriguez said. "I felt hopeless, but the whole time I prayed and asked God to guide me. The hardest part was making sure my daughter wasn't suffering. Somehow, I kept her in school because she is on the A and B Honor Roll."

Finally, the money from her disability checks ran out and with no place to go, Rodriguez sought help from the GI Forum. A worker called the Salvation Army Hope Center and told the staff of Rodriguez' plight. Not long after, Rodriguez, her mother and daughter found a safe refuge there.

Funded by United Way, the Salvation Army Hope Center's transitional living program is designed to help single parents



Comforting thoughts: Janet Rodriguez finds comfort in the chapel at the Salvation Army Hope Center.

and families break the homeless cycle and transition into independent living.

"I have a roof over my head and there are three meals a day," Rodriguez said. "I know my mother and daughter are safe. The staff here is fantastic. They've never made me feel small. They have church services and Bible studies, and I like that. My mother raised us up in the church."

Today, Rodriguez works for Yanaguana Cruises as a dispatcher and recently moved into an apartment with her daughter and mother — an accomplishment made difficult because her credit was ruined while unemployed. She eventually would like to work for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

"I would like to help others when they are in trouble," she said. "I know what it's like. I believe God does answer prayers."



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