

## “CONNECTIONS”

### *Yolanda's Story*

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One child cries incessantly as her harried mother rushes to find a bottle of milk, lost somewhere deep in the depths of the diaper bag. Another child, with big brown eyes and a mischievous smile, dances around joyfully between his mother making treats in the kitchen and a small circle of children intently listening to stories in the front room. It is a typical Friday for a children's playgroup located in one of Sacramento's forgotten neighborhoods. Run down, hectic and full of life, it is salvation for Yolanda and her young child, Sarah. Here is where Yolanda comes to mingle with others from her apartment complex, an otherwise estranged collections of societal rejects – drug-addicts, prostitutes and struggling young families trying to get by one day at a time. Here is where Yolanda comes to meet single mothers, some, like Yolanda, who are not close to their family; some fighting a drug habit; and many without any kind of support at all. Here, in this tiny apartment with its worn tile floors and peeling paint, is where single parents and their children find respite once a week to play, make crafts, listen to stories and learn from each other about what it means to make connections – and to find hope – while making a better life for their children and themselves.



A young, quiet woman with long, dark hair and gentle manner, Yolanda first came in contact with the Alliance when she decided to participate in a children's playgroup advertised on a flyer in her apartment complex. Although initially only five or six kids came to the group, Yolanda felt it was important that Sarah meet children she could play with. *“At each meeting the parents went around and introduced ourselves. Then there were some structured activities for parents and children – story time, making bubbles, yogurt parfait cups, and hand print pictures. I enjoyed the activities with the kids and it was a good way to make friends. The community worker with Early Connections, asked if there were any other resources I needed in my life. At that time I wanted to register at American River College and she helped me with that. It was good for me to have the group because I was by myself with my daughter while my boyfriend lived in another residence in Sacramento.”*

The support and guidance Yolanda received from Early Connections proved to be a turning point for this single mother from Southern California. Yolanda, her boyfriend and daughter moved up to Sacramento a few years ago when Yolanda's boyfriend found his birthmother. *“The timing was right to fly up here and meet his family. We weren't stuck down in Long Beach career-wise or anything and his Mom really wanted us up here. My mom is in the area, too, but I'm not very close to her.”*

*“I have a lot of goals and dreams,”* Yolanda stated. *“But I don't always have the motivation. The support that Early Connections gave me helped me get through those times.”* It was when the Alliance staff helped Yolanda register at American River College that she saw a flyer for AmeriCorps and started working as a tutor and mentor at Thomas Edison Elementary in the San Juan Unified School District. *“The AmeriCorps office, in turn, was at Encina High School where the*

*Alliance has an office. Indirectly I was connected to the Alliance once more! I came and saw the Early Connections worker when I had my second baby. I feel so lucky to have met her first! She is one of the greatest people I have met!” “My Alliance worker is grounded,” Yolanda continued, “she knows what she is talking about and has been there for me – an ear to listen since my mother is not very supportive.”*

*“I was lucky to live in an area where the Alliance does outreach – a safety net in my ‘bad’ living situation. People need to know that the Alliance is different – it is big on resources. A worker might not have the answer, but they may have a phone number to find out. People from the Alliance are on a different level from other mandated reporters, too. People need to realize the Alliance is just trying to hook people up with resources to help them out and this is hard to get across to other people.”*

*“What do you think the Alliance could do to improve the program,” I asked in earnest. Yolanda seemed so pleased with her services, and yet spoke with some hesitancy when asked about the program in general. “People today are defensive and protective. It’s hard to get people to be willing to come to a strange place for assistance. In turn, the more elderly residents in our community are afraid to even come to the door to answer needs assessment questionnaire. Crime has risen since the apartment complexes went up, they claim, and they are now afraid to leave the house! Maybe going door to door to invite people to use services would be a good way to do outreach. This area especially has lots of bad things going on – CPS visits, warrants for arrest, mandated reporters getting into other people’s business. Door to door outreach is more personal than a flyer and would help introduce the programs in a more personal and inviting way.”*

***“I believe in getting help when you need it – this (the Alliance) is a perfect program for me. I could have felt stuck and not pursued my goals and dreams. But after meeting the Alliance community worker with Early Connections I found the ‘connections’ I needed to move beyond my circumstances and a friend to support me along the way.”***

Yolanda



As we chatted about Yolanda’s present job – a waitress at a local restaurant – and the training she is receiving to become a travel agent, her face lit up. It was evident that traveling to different countries and serving people who wish to do the same was something that excited Yolanda. And yet, in her short 26 years, this woman has already traveled on an adventure of survival not many of us will ever encounter. From her first day at the children’s playgroup, to seeing the flyer about AmeriCorps at American River College, to her program at the travel agency, Yolanda has been an active participant in her and her daughter’s rise out of desperation.