

The New York Times

THE NEEDIEST CASES

December 20, 2011

Helping a Son Cope With Diabetes, While Juggling Her Own Challenges

By Mathew R. Warren



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

Virna Cancino and her son Joshua, 9. She could not keep a previous job because of vascular disease, but is trying for another.

Playtime and parties can be dangerous pastimes for Joshua Cancino-Betanzos.

Joshua, 9, has an insulin pump in his abdomen, and he has to be extra careful because any jostling in the schoolyard could easily stop it from working properly.

He is also not free to enjoy sweets as other children can. Recently, he dreaded a school party where treats were to be served; his mother offered to make him his own cake so he would not feel left out.

Joshua is still learning to cope with his illness, Type 1 diabetes, but he is an expert on recognizing the symptoms of a diabetic episode.

"I can tell that something is wrong when I get really, really thirsty and have blurry vision," he said.

When Joshua was 6, no one knew the true nature of his illness, not even doctors in Mexico, where he lived with his family. They misdiagnosed his condition for months, his mother, Virna Cancino, said. It was only after he fell into a coma and needed emergency treatment that the physicians got the diagnosis right, she said.

In 2008, Ms. Cancino left Mexico and headed to New York with her two youngest sons, Joshua and Sebastian Cancino-Betanzos, who was 8 at the time. The plan was to reunite with the boys' father, who was already in the city.

Ms. Cancino, who had worked as a hotel receptionist, hoped to find a decent job to help support her family. She also oversees Joshua's medical needs: he has to have regular insulin injections, a carefully regulated diet and a check of his glucose levels three times a day.

"I didn't realize it was going to be so hard having a child with this kind of problem," Ms. Cancino, 42, said. "It requires a lot of attention."

Once in New York, Joshua began seeing a pediatrician regularly and was fitted with the insulin pump. His treatment is paid for through Child Health Plus, a state insurance plan for low-income families.

Ms. Cancino found work as a housekeeper, and the boys began attending school in Queens. But throughout the year, the school nurse, who checked Joshua's glucose after lunch, would frequently summon Ms. Cancino because of his condition. To keep the school from sending him to the emergency room, Ms. Cancino would leave work to pick him up and attend to the problem; it usually involved adjusting his insulin dosage.

Because of Joshua's need for constant care and a worsening circulation condition of her own, Ms. Cancino was unable to keep her job, she said. She has chronic venous insufficiency, in which the leg veins struggle to return blood to the heart, causing terrible pain.

At the same time, life with her children's father, a restaurant cook, was becoming increasingly volatile. He physically abused her, she said, and was eventually arrested. He is now in proceedings to be deported to Mexico, she said.

But Ms. Cancino says she has forgiven him. She fears that his deportation may mean losing the \$1,400 a month he pays in child support. It is her only source of income, covering all the family's expenses, including \$600 a month in rent for her and her children to share a two-bedroom apartment with a roommate in Richmond Hill, Queens.

"To me he wasn't good at all, but he is a good father," she said. "We still depend on him a lot."

With the help of [Sanctuary for Families](#), an organization that works with victims of domestic violence, Ms. Cancino was granted a U visa, given to immigrants who are victims of certain crimes.

Ms. Cancino was emboldened to try to re-enter the work force, but felt unprepared. She decided to attend career-readiness workshops in Lower Manhattan at Sanctuary for Families, an affiliate of [the Community Service Society of New York](#), one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund. But the trip from her home was more than she could afford. The agency drew \$416 from the fund to cover the cost of four monthly MetroCards so that she could travel to the workshops.

Ms. Cancino has improved her typing skills, taken a class on data entry and brushed up on résumé-writing and preparing for job interviews. She hopes that despite a tough economy, her new skills will help her find an office job.

Joshua says he feels lucky for all the sacrifices his mother has made. He hopes to become a veterinarian.

His mother, though, believes she would make a good nurse, a job for which she says she has been well trained.

"I learned from Joshua," she said. "I've been practically his personal nurse."