

# MEET THE DE LA TORRE FAMILY



## Sometimes you need a little help

Penny, a small Chihuahua, barks ferociously as he hobbles toward the front door, not letting the blue bandages wrapping his right leg stop him from protecting his territory. “He broke his leg and will have surgery next week,” explained Blanca, as she gently lays him back down in his cushioned dog bed. “We are giving him a little help.”

At times, a little help is something we all need, as Blanca will attest. She turns toward a wall in the living room, covered with photos. In the middle is Blanca and her husband, Juan, as a young couple, before they moved to the United States from Mexico in 1991. Younger photos of their children, Andrea, now nine years old, and Alan, now six, surround the smiling couple. Blanca points to a picture of Alan. “That was taken just two months before he was diagnosed with leukemia,” said Blanca, the words bringing a tear to her eye. “He was crying a lot and it wasn’t like him to cry. I knew something was wrong.”



Blanca didn’t understand when her 13-month-old son was diagnosed with stage 4 leukemia. “My mind went blank; I couldn’t comprehend what the doctors were saying.” The following seven months were a blur of countless days and nights spent at the hospital, holding her son to stop his crying, watching him strapped down to straighten his arms and legs, and seeing tubes inserted to administer chemo treatments.

Juan spent as much time as he could at the hospital, while also working long hours at an area equestrian center to support the family. With another child at home, Blanca was grateful to a volunteer named Pat, who would stay with Alan, holding him on her lap all night, giving Blanca time to go home to take care of Andrea. “Andrea was at home, and she also needed me to be there,” said Blanca.

### Meeting healthy home requirements

A turning point came when the hospital told Blanca that she needed to take Alan home for a while in order to adhere to insurance requirements regarding extended hospital stays. To prevent infection or other complications, the medical team stipulated that the home environment, where Alan stayed, needed to be comfortable and sterile, with proper humidity levels. The De La Torres knew their substandard rental home, with leaking walls, foundation cracks, and mold, would not meet Alan’s needs.

Arrangements were made for the De La Torre family to move into temporary housing that would meet the health and safety requirements they needed for their son. While the home answered their immediate needs, Juan and Blanca sought a permanent residence that offered a healthy environment.

## Overcoming hurdles to home ownership

Living solely on Juan's salary, the couple didn't have many options available to rent or buy a more suitable home. The De La Torres talked about a Habitat home, but Juan did not think that they had any chance of qualifying and discouraged Blanca from applying. Not one to take no for an answer, Blanca sought additional information about the Habitat home-buying process. She attended the organization's last informational meeting of the year and learned that applications were due the very next day.

Again, Blanca found herself in need of a little help. This time the barrier was the language. Since she couldn't read English, she quickly called a friend who could translate for her. Blanca and her friend completed the forms and submitted them by the deadline. With nothing left to do but wait, Blanca put it out of her mind.

Several weeks later Habitat called, wanting to set up a meeting. "I thought that maybe I had filled out the application wrong," said Blanca, smiling. Juan was surprised that she had applied for the Habitat home but was eager to meet with them. The Habitat representatives told the De La Torres they would be getting a home. "I was so excited," said Blanca. "I had tears in my eyes."



## Making it permanent and perfect

The De La Torre family was housed in a fully furnished rental unit, while their new home was being built. The couple put in 300+ sweat equity hours to help build their home. "I was lucky to have friends, who would watch the kids, while I helped with the building," said Blanca. "And Juan's workplace was so happy for him. They let him take time off to work on the house."



Construction of the house was finished, but Blanca wasn't ready to move in. "I wanted everything to be perfect," said Blanca. "I wanted the walls to be different colors, not just white. That is one of the things I like about owning my own house. I can paint it any color I want. You can't do that with a rental." Habitat helped the family complete their home with a couch, appliances, and other furnishings from the Habitat ReStore.

The De La Torre's new neighborhood was welcoming and friendly. "The girls on the corner were my babysitters," said Blanca. "The woman across the street offered to get Andrea on the school bus in the morning, and a lady a couple doors down said that she would watch the kids anytime."

## Taking it one day at a time

While their new home was taking shape, Alan continued to progress and much to the doctors' surprise was tolerating aggressive chemo treatments, normally reserved for adults. "Alan couldn't eat certain foods and the hospital took care of him," said Blanca. "When he wanted a tortilla, they brought him a tortilla. When he didn't want a flour tortilla, they brought him a corn tortilla."

Sometimes you need a little help and Blanca is grateful to the people who have been there for her family. They are happy living in Missouri, but hope to go back to Mexico one day to visit. "Andrea wants to meet her cousins in person, but Alan's doctors won't let him leave the country right now," said Blanca. "We are taking it one day at a time. We don't know about the future, but one thing I do know is that applying for a Habitat home was one of the best things I have ever done."