



**Creating Happy Memories
for Families in Need**

HERO AWARD WINNER

The Aguilar Family

GENEROSITY

IBOs Martha and Margarito Aguilar remember the Sunday four years ago when a group of women walked into their Florida church during a Bible class. No one knew the women, but they were warmly welcomed.

The group had walked a few blocks to the church from the Auburndale Bridge Residential Substance Abuse Treatment Program. Part of Bridges International[®], the program is an alternative to incarceration that helps women recover from addiction and re-enter communities.

Martha and Margarito talked with the group and asked for their prayer requests. The Bridge program works with individuals, so many of the women shared their pain of being separated from their children as they worked toward rehabilitation and getting their lives back on track.

“Even to this day, their prayer requests are heart-

wrenching to me,” Martha said. “They could be praying for their child who was growing up without them and living with somebody else, or praying for their child who is struggling. It makes me cry just thinking about it.” Margarito also was moved. “There was a lot of pain, a lot of hurt, a lot of recognizing the mistakes they made,” he said.

Martha and Margarito wanted to do something to support the group. After talking with the staff at the Bridge program, the Aguilars learned that families visit the residents during holidays, and that there was a need to increase the positive activities available. “That’s why we decided to help – to make it more fun for the families but especially for the kids,” Martha said.

The Aguilars and their 12-year-old son, Sebastian, did just that by creating mini carnivals four times a year during holidays. Spending their own money, the Aguilars put together games, crafts, face painting, toys, prizes, candy and other activities for the families to enjoy.

In recognition of their volunteer work supporting these women in need, the Aguilars are being honored with the Amway Family Hero Award for Generosity. >

“They are genuine and compassionate, and they are advocating for these women.”

**VERONICA OGBEIFUN
ON WORKING WITH THE AGUILARS**

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Tosha Esham (center) appreciates the support she received from the Aguilar family.

A FAMILY'S STRUGGLE

Martha grew up in Florida. Some of her family members struggled with addiction, she said, and successfully went through rehabilitation. This has given Martha an understanding for what women at the Bridge program, and their kids, are experiencing. "Probably because of what I've been through, I just feel a heartache when I see someone in that situation, so I want to give as much love as I can," she said. "I feel for them, I really do."

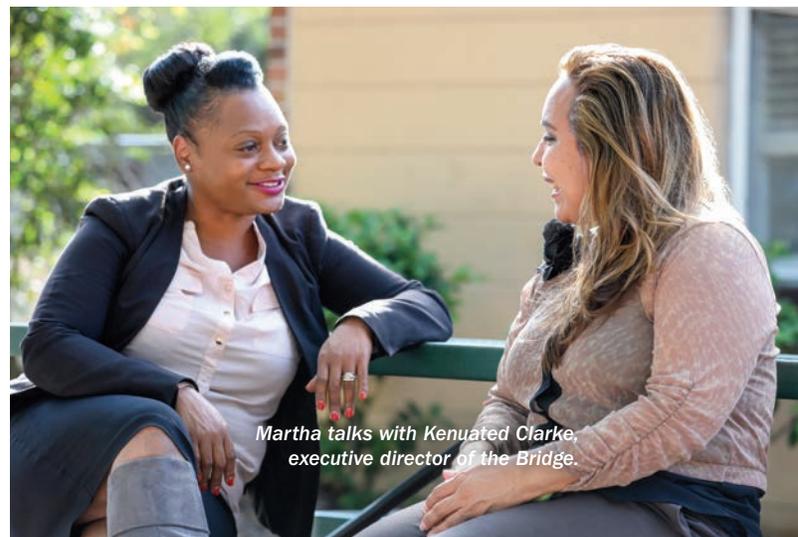
Margarito feels the same way. "I don't like to see the kids being sad," he said. "It doesn't matter what the reason is – it's not their fault. To see the kids smiling, having fun and playing games is great. If I can get a smile out of a child, I'll do it."

Sebastian goes with his parents to the Bridge for the family days. He sets up his own table with checkers and tic-tac-toe and plays with anyone, child or adult, who will take him on. "I think it's really fun," he said. "The kids get to be with their moms and they really enjoy it. I like hanging out with the other kids, getting to talk with them and getting to know them."

He remembers one child in particular who needed some extra attention during a Christmas family day. The event had ended and everything was put away, but there was a little girl who wanted her face painted. "So we got about half the stuff out again and we painted her face," Sebastian said. "She was overjoyed! It made me feel good."

Veronica Ogbeifun worked as a chaplain at the Bridge for two years. She said many of the women come from difficult circumstances and need encouragement. The Aguilar family has shown a genuine compassion for the women at the Bridge, Veronica said. "They talk to them, minister to them, show them love. They're patient and kind with them. They make them feel welcome without having a judgmental spirit or looking down on them."

Veronica added that the Aguilars' generosity has helped the residents both emotionally and spiritually. "They've made a tremendous impact by giving their time, their services and their money and expecting nothing in return," Veronica said. "They don't do it for status, power, recognition, none of that. They're so faithful and committed."



Martha talks with Kenuated Clarke, executive director of the Bridge.

Volunteers play an important role at the Bridge, said Kenuated Clarke, executive director of the program. “The mission of the Bridge could not be accomplished without the generosity of individuals like the Aguilars,” she said. “They donate their time to the ladies here, which is pivotal for their success as they transition from the treatment program.”

A HELPING HAND

Support has grown for the Aguilars’ efforts. Other members of Martha’s family help at family days, and Bible study classmates pitch in financially. In addition to family days, the Aguilars attend graduation when residents complete the program and give every woman a Bible as a graduation gift. “A lot of times when they graduate, they may not have a family member there, so we’re there to clap for them,” Martha said.

The Aguilars have helped several Bridge participants make smooth transitions when they leave the program. As the women re-enter communities, some have no money or transportation while they try to find work and a place to live. For several of the graduates, the Aguilars have collected furniture and other household items, transporting and delivering items to help them get established.

“We want to let them know we care – and not just on the family days,” Martha said. “They need love and support so they know they’re not alone.”

Tosha Esham is a graduate of the Bridge program. Her 7-year-old son, Caleb, visited her on one of the family days. She said he loved the games, getting his face painted and playing in a bounce house. “They were amazing for the family days and amazing with the children, with the candy and toys and all the things they did,” Tosha said of the Aguilars. “It was really memorable for Caleb and really, that’s all that matters.”

Knowing that they’re helping both the Bridge residents and their children is what motivates the Aguilars to continue volunteering. “What we enjoy the most is the families playing together,” Martha said. “The children are the ones who touch my heart the most. Talking with the children, loving them, making them feel special, seeing them smile – I love that.” ■



Martha (center) prays with Caroline Unciano Gross (left) and Cynthia Clouse (right) from her Bible study class.



(left to right) Tosha Esham and her son Caleb with Sebastian, Margarito and Martha Aguilar