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After years of struggle, a surprise ride forward for Orange County family



Marie Pineda, from left, front row, Daniel Pineda and Patricio Pineda pose with Miracles for Kids CEO Autumn Strier, along with Erin Earlywine and Barry Vince of Merge Opportunities, next to a 2021 Tesla Model UT that was gifted to the Pineda family and delivered to their new apartment in Orange on Tuesday. (Eric Licas)

By Eric Licas

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When construction slowed down during the pandemic and plumbing jobs became scarce, Patricio Pineda decided to find work as a truck driver to support himself and his four children.

He hated it. The worst part was being away from his family.

“It’s too lonely out there,” Pineda said. “People look at you funny and stuff, like if you go out there way out in the sticks. And if you go out there and you go eat, you can’t enjoy it because you don’t have your family with you there to enjoy the food with you.”

The distance straining his relationships with his loved ones only widened after his daughter, Marie Pineda, was diagnosed with leukemia at the age of 12. Being out on the road so often made it a challenge to share the responsibilities associated with their daughter’s treatment with his ex-wife.

Patricio Pineda returned to plumbing so he could stay closer to home, and scraped together enough money to buy an RV that he and his children could live in. A friend allowed them to park it on their property in Banning, and the single-father would shuttle his daughter to and from appointments about an hour away at Children’s Hospital of Orange County in Orange.

Marie Pineda’s family did their best to allow her to live as close to a normal life as possible. But she did wind up spending most of her birthdays as a teenager in a hospital bed.

“I didn’t really think about none of that stuff,” her father said. “I just thought about her and her well-being and that’s it. It’s like, the cost, I didn’t worry about how tired I was going to be. Everything was just like, her and making sure my kids were at home and safe.”

Marie went into remission, but was re-diagnosed with leukemia about a year later and scheduled for a bone marrow transplant in 2021. By that point, Patricio Pineda and his family were “on the verge of homelessness,” said Autumn Strier, co-founder and chief executive of the nonprofit Miracles for Kids.



Marie Pineda, from left, Patricio Pineda and Daniel Pineda pose for a photo in front of the apartment they recently moved into. They had been on the verge of homelessness for years as Marie Pineda battled leukemia, but found support and eventually gained financial stability with the help of nonprofits Miracles for Kids and Merge Opportunities. (Eric Licas)

That's about when her organization got in touch with the Pineda family. They moved into Miracle Manor in Orange, one of two apartment buildings run by the nonprofit that offers heavily subsidized rent to families of children with chronic or life-threatening illnesses. The complex is less than a mile away from CHOC, making it easier to get to and from treatment.

Patricio Pineda also began attending therapy and classes provided by Miracles for Kids on financial literacy, parenting and more. The organization also connected him with another nonprofit, Merge Opportunities, to gain advanced job training and credentials that allowed him to find a higher-paying position.

"We've really been walking alongside this family for a long time," Strier said. "So this is a really big moment for him and for us."

The Pineda family is one of as many as 450 on the West Coast receiving financial aid, counseling, education and more through Miracles for Kids, Strier said. And there were as many as 22 families living in the nonprofit's two supportive housing complexes located in Orange and Anaheim.

"I didn't really think anybody would ever help like that," Patricio Pineda said. "To me, I thought that was all people like, 'Nah, they just want money for it or something.'"

The support he received helped his family achieve financial stability. They managed to move out of Miracle Manor and into their own apartment in Orange in early January.



Marie Pineda poses for a photo during her quinceañera with her brother, Daniel Pineda. Marie spent most of her birthdays as a teenager in a hospital bed battling leukemia. (Courtesy of Marie Pineda)

Meanwhile, Marie Pineda's treatment proved effective and she is in remission again. She's now studying public health at Santiago College in Santa Ana and, inspired by the doctors, nurses and technicians who cared for her, is considering becoming an oncologist.

“The blessings that happened for the Pineda family don’t happen for everyone,” Strier said. “We have a lot of families who lose their child during this process. And their steps toward stability are very different than a family whose able to move forward with their family intact with a child who is in remission.”

A big surprise: Gifted with a new ride

Strier and Merge’s Executive Director Erin Earlywine applauded Patricio Pineda for finding help and committing to programs that led his personal growth, a level of security for his family and greater opportunities for his children. To acknowledge his hard work, the two non-profits partnered to gift the family with a 2021 Tesla Model UT. They wrapped the black compact SUV in a green bow, brought it to their new apartment and surprised the Pinedas with it on Tuesday.



Patricio Pineda takes his first drive in a Tesla Model UT that was gifted to his family by nonprofits Miracles for Kids and Merge Opportunities on Tuesday. (Eric Licas)

Patricia Pineda's kids grinned as he whipped around the block in the sleek electric vehicle. Marie Pineda said the gift has motivated her to get her driver's license, and she looks forward to being able to drive to school, run errands and go out with friends.

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