

# Rappahannock United Way funds health programs: Exercise is a Walk in the Park for Local Mom

By Stacy Rounds

Laura Ruiz is done making excuses.

“My kids always wanted to go to the park and I said no,” stated Ruiz, who lives in Stafford’s Foxwood Village with her husband Olegario and four children. “It’s too far. It’s too hot. Or, it’s too cold. Excuses.”

Ruiz would typically do anything for her children, but getting them to the park is not easy. Her family currently relies on one vehicle for all their family needs.

“We only have one car that’s working,” said Ruiz, who explained the car is usually occupied either by her husband who works full time or her 18-year-old who needs it to attend classes at Northern Virginia Community College and get to her part-time job. If Ruiz was going to take the kids to the park, they’d have to walk.

Five months ago, walking wasn’t part of Ruiz’s routine. She did some exercises at home, but typically stayed inside and often felt isolated and alone. “I don’t have family here – just my kids and my husband,” said Ruiz, who came to the United States from Mexico 21 years ago and still misses having her parents and extended family around.

With no place to go and no one to visit, sitting at home was difficult for Ruiz. That all changed when she was invited to join a health program funded by Rappahannock United Way. Ruiz started participating in the Healthy Living Pays program at Stafford Junction. One of their weekly activities is a Walking Club.



**Laura Ruiz (far left) felt isolated and alone before she joined a local walking program funded by Rappahannock United Way. Today, she walks four to five times a week, is sleeping better, has more energy and has lost weight.**

Olga Escobar, Adult Program Manager at Stafford Junction, began the Walking Club in September 2016 to increase physical activity. “The idea is to encourage the whole family to get out and exercise,” she said. “You don’t need a car for this. People can do this at



**Laura Ruiz (far left) leads the way during a recent walk from Stafford Junction to England Run Library in Stafford.**

home in their neighborhoods.”

This year alone, Rappahannock United Way will help 9,600 people in our community improve their health by investing over \$435,000 in programs like the one Escobar runs.

Escobar leads 20-30 walkers every Wednesday at 10 a.m. After a few stretching and breathing warm-ups, the group walks from Stafford Junction on Truslow Road to England Run Library in South Stafford. The two-mile trip each week was just what Ruiz needed.

“I look forward to coming here,” said Ruiz, who gets a ride from Stafford Junction each week. “At first I didn’t come because of having no car. They said they have a van and they could come get me. That made me feel happy. Sometimes I’m depressed at home. When I walk, I feel happy or at least better. When you have something to do, you get up, take a shower and dress appropriately. The Walking Club gives me a purpose.”

For people like Ruiz, transportation issues and lack of income for gym memberships are often barriers to establishing regular exercise routines. Rappahannock United Way understands how important it is to give people like Ruiz access to resources to overcome these barriers.

Escobar’s goal is to empower all of her walking participants and give them the confidence to start walking in their neighborhoods. “Walking doesn’t cost you a penny,” said Escobar, who encourages her walkers to log miles on their own each week, in addition to what they do in the club. “It’s more about discipline. I want them to reclaim the public space,

get off the couch, get out in the weather and have fun exercising.”

Escobar, who has a nurse track weight and blood pressure for the walkers twice a month, says the efforts are paying off.

“They have been losing inches and levels of energy have increased,” said Escobar. “Walking is simple and easy. You just have to do it. You just have to get started.”

Today, Ruiz walks four or five times a week and often walks to the park with her kids. “They love picnics, so I pack snacks and lots of water and walk to the park,” said Ruiz, who is sleeping better, has more energy and is losing inches since she started walking. “I never wanted to do that before. For my kids, it’s a big adventure.”

Ruiz smiled as she talked about walking with her children to Smith Lake Park and how happy it makes them. “Like every mom, I want them to grow up and be happy,” said Ruiz. “My kids mean everything to me.”

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*Stacy Rounds is a Community Impact Coordinator at Rappahannock United Way. She lives in Stafford.*

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