Public Allies is nominating Anna Castañeda, an AmeriCorps member at Public Allies San Antonio, for the deep transformation she is experiencing as an Ally.

When in her early 20s, Anna sold drugs on San Antonio’s Westside. The problem was that, by 26, Castañeda had four kids and a felony conviction, possession with intent to distribute cocaine. Over the next year she would find herself on a perilous journey in and out of homelessness, in which her remarkable grit and determination would be matched only by the generosity she encountered along the way, finally bringing her to a place of hope.

That place is the [Alamo Colleges Westside Training and Education Center](http://www.alamo.edu/ewd/wetc/) (WETC) where Castañeda works as an AmeriCorps [Public Ally](http://www.publicallies.org/site/c.liKUL3PNLvF/b.5106423/k.BD7E/Home.htm). To talk to her now at 28, bright, hopeful, and stunningly articulate, you would never guess how close she had come to becoming a statistic of poverty.

The daughter of a single mother who worked farms in Texas and Michigan, Castañeda knew what it felt like to be alone. From the age of 10 she assumed responsibility for her younger siblings. Her mom would leave basic ingredients in the house, so Castañeda learned how to cook. She asked her mother for the money she needed to enroll herself and her siblings in Boys and Girls Clubs to that they wouldn’t be sitting around getting into trouble on evenings and weekends.

Eventually, however, trouble would find her, and Castañeda carried her childhood loneliness with her into adulthood surrounded by drugs.

“Selling drugs gave me the flexibility to be a stay at home mom,” Castañeda said.

When she was finally caught in violation of her probation in 2014, it was only a fifth pregnancy that prevented her from being sent to the [Bexar County Substance Abuse Treatment Facility or Intermediate Sanctions Facility](https://www.bexar.org/506/Programs-Services-Specialty-Courts) for six to nine months. She realized then how close she was to losing her children permanently.

“That’s when I was done,” she said.

Castañeda, like many Americans living in poverty, was caught in between two worlds. To qualify for help from nonprofit resources and social services she needed to better herself, she had to be unemployed or homeless. However, she knew that simply getting a minimum wage job with no education and soon-to-be-five children was not going to get her out of poverty without a long-term plan.

In the midst of this daunting mid-pregnancy routine, Castañeda said, she found an unlikely answer to her loneliness. She learned to ask for help, starting with God.

From there, she says, things began to fall into place. She soon found and applied to Public Allies, and is now serving at WETC. Thus far, she’s applied her formidable determination to going above and beyond for the benefit of the people they serve.

“It’s not so much that we need people to be empathetic or to put themselves in our shoes,” said Castañeda, “We need people who are in those shoes.”

Castañeda wants to go to school, and continue giving back to her community and providing for her kids.

“I want to offer my kids something,” said Castañeda, “I had my love, but it goes beyond that.”