



Silvia



and the Professionals

Silvia Gallardo

was drifting along up to the age of 23 with a comfortable life in her parents' home, little in mind for a career, and an unfinished education. There was no pressure to change her easy existence or to improve her résumé. She didn't even have to cook. Something was missing. "I said to my mom, 'Mom, I'm not doing anything with my life, it has no meaning,'" Silvia recalls. "I helped out with the bills, but it wasn't enough."

Then she fell into the hands of two professionals who changed it all. In short order, Silvia finished her high school diploma, got certified as a Medical Assistant, and gave up her fragmented employment history in retail for long-term employment at the Imperial Beach Health Center. She now lives in her own place, teaches herself to cook and decorate, and plans to pursue a nursing degree. "They changed everything, my whole life," she declares. "Now I barely have time for anything, and I make a lot of plans." How to describe the two powerful individuals who transformed Silvia overnight and who continue to exert such an influence over her future? Let's start by saying their combined age is 4.5 years. The younger one is nicknamed "Monster."

"I had to do something with my life when I got pregnant," Silvia says. "I knew I had to get an education." Aidan, now age 3, was the first. Then came Gio, who's now 20 months. Over the course of two pregnancies and one delivery, Silvia got A's and B's in adult school and kept up with her training

despite morning sickness. Her husband, Ozzie, encouraged her, and buckled down to his own education at a police academy.

It was hard work, serious preparation for a life that is typified by one recent morning. "Gio threw all his cereal on the floor, so I got down and was cleaning it up by hand. Then he picked up his brother's bowl with bananas and everything and dumped it on my head." Fortunately, Aidan knows better. "We'll tell Santa Claus," he says whenever "Monster" lives up to his nickname.

Silvia works part-time at the Imperial Beach Health Center as a Medical Assistant. For a job she never dreamed of having before the two professionals appeared, it has turned out to be ideal. "Customer service is my number one thing. My mom always taught me about respect, and treating people the way you want to be treated. It's important to be that way with our patients."

Silvia and Ozzie -- who is now a police officer -- both believe in the nature of their professions. "We're helping people. We've talked about it. It's important, even though there's a lot of tension, especially in his job." They have their hands full with the boys, but two sets of grandparents and a pair of teenaged nieces help out. "The whole family's involved," Silvia says.

Although Silvia has plans and plans mean change, there are some things about her life that are too good to change. "I want to stay a long time at the Health Center. And I love it here in San Diego. We go to the zoo and Sea World a lot. They're educational." Something Silvia is doing differently from her own childhood is spending a lot of time at libraries with her boys, buying them books, and having a little reading area in their home. "They hold their books up-side down and pretend to read," she notes happily.

The two professionals have also helped Silvia with her creative interests. "I'm Martha Stewart!" she laughs; she got interested in decorating once she got busy making her own home. She also enjoys photography, and in her art as in her life, her boys are usually the main subject. Ask for her picture of Monster "getting more cornflakes than he needs." It's the life of challenge and purpose she once cried for -- and there's scarcely a thing Silvia can say about it now without laughing.