

SAN ANTONIO STORIES

Helping animals is teen's road to independence

By Vincent T. Davis STAFF WRITER



Bob Owen / Staff photographer

Monique Villarreal, left, delivers pet food to Lucy Perez. Villarreal is enrolled at Northside Independent School District's Reddix Center, where students with special needs transition to adulthood by working at local businesses.

About the author



Davis

A 22-year veteran of the Air Force, Vincent T. Davis embarked on a second career as a journalist and found his calling. Observing and listening across San Antonio, he finds intriguing tales to tell about everyday people. He shares his stories with Express-News subscribers every Monday morning.

Each stop was one more step toward personal independence.

Guided by the digital voice of his GPS, Marcus Villarreal drove his daughter, Monique, to a West Side neighborhood to deliver food for pets of Meals on Wheels clients who are homebound.

Monique's teacher, Andrew Francis, followed her into the drizzling rain to unload several plastic bags from the car. The nonprofit's AniMeals program began providing nutritious pet food to clients after volunteers noticed many recipients shared meals with their animals.

Dangling do-dads, knickknacks and trinkets strung across the front yard greeted the duo at Lucy Perez's home. Perez dipped her head beneath porcelain bells, rusted lanterns and stuffed bears on her porch to receive food for her dogs, Monster, Blackie and Princess.

"Thank you, mija," Perez said to Monique, as the young woman carried the meals to Perez's front door. "I really appreciate that."

Monique is one of the young adults, ages 18 to 22, enrolled at the Northside Independent School District's Nellie M. Reddix Center, where students with special needs learn to transition to adulthood by working at local businesses, using public transportation and taking life skill classes.

Francis said Monique, 19, has made great strides with support from her parents and staff.

"Her family is willing to venture into new territory," Francis said. "They want her to have as much independence as possible. It's important that they (students) feel as much a part of the community as anyone else."

In addition to Meals on Wheels, Monique also volunteers with Wildlife Rescue & Rehabilitation in Kendalia and the Animal Defense League of Texas. She started volunteering at the Humane Society of San Antonio and Pets Alive! to raise her understanding of caring for animals.

One gift she'd like would be a pair of night-vision goggles so she can see the animals when it's dark.

She treasures her Littlest Pet Shop toy collection, which reminds her of childhood. That's when her fascination with creatures large and small began, watching documentaries, movies and television shows that revealed the majesty and grace of the animal kingdom. Over the years, she has studied amphibians, birds, fish, mammals and reptiles, committing every fact to memory.

"I want to help these amazing animals," Monique said. "I want to make sure they have a healthy, happy life."

Reddix Center staff members have asked her to share her passion during open house events. Recently, one of Monique's dreams was realized when she was accepted into the docent program at the San Antonio Zoo.

Francis said an important aspect of the program is carving out opportunities for the students. He designed an individualized curriculum built around Monique's love of animals, joining classmates who are getting real-world experience based on their passions.

He said Monique's network helps her keep on track toward her goal. Her support system includes her mother, Melaine, as well as her father. They take turns driving her to rescue shelters and to the homes of seniors to deliver pet food.

Her father's goal is for people to judge his daughter on what she can do, not what she can't do. He said it takes a special person to see her potential.

"We're not going to be around forever," Marcus Villarreal said. "She needs to have a support structure in place that can help her navigate through daily routines in life."

After two weeks on the school bus, she began riding the VIA Trans shuttle to school and around the community, texting her parents when she arrives home to Kiki, her rescue dog.

"That level of independence and help align with the passion in any community," he said. "Monique is a testament to that."

On this particular day, after delivering pet food to Perez, Monique's next stop was Wildlife Rescue's Roger & Phyllis Sherman Animal Care Complex where the goal is to get displaced animals healthy and back into the wild.

She prepared crunchy vegetables and fruit for animals taken in by the shelter on Basse Road. She chopped carrots and a squash into small chunks and sealed the pieces in plastic bags. Based on nutritional charts, the task sometimes includes weighing and calculations.

Monique finished the morning at the Animal Defense League on the Northeast Side. She often rides VIA Trans to the nonprofit dedicated to helping animals find a permanent home. She has staff members' phone numbers on speed dial, in case she has questions about any tasks.

As she approached the dog kennels, barking echoed through the bays.

"Hey, guys, how are you?" she said as she pushed a thumb-size clicker when the dog exhibited good behavior.

Monique said she loves all creatures but if she had a favorite it would be the Arctic wolf. She's intrigued by how they care for each other, work together and survive as a pack — just like her family and staff at the Reddix Center. vtDavis@express-news.net