



CRYSTAL AND PENELOPE

Crystal and Penelope's lives are full of excitement, including schoolwork for them and their children. At 42 years old, Crystal, is finally pursuing her bachelor's degree after putting her academic journey on pause when she became a mother decades ago. Penelope, 21 years old and Crystal's oldest daughter, witnessed her mother's sacrifice first-hand when she was younger.

With the help of United Way's Dual Generation Initiative, Penelope does not have to make the same sacrifice her mother did when she was younger as both of them are working toward their college degrees. Both have young children of their own, Penelope with a 1-year-old child and Crystal with a 3-year old child, who are receiving high-quality early learning in child care that comes at no cost to them due to the Dual Generation Initiative.

Together they are healing generational wounds by achieving their dreams and by giving their young children a stronger foundation for their future.

"Nobody in my family had really gone further," Crystal said. "I realized later that education was important so that I could get somewhere in life, but I didn't know how." As a young, single mother Crystal's

postsecondary education had many starts and stops when Penelope was young. Crystal grew up with a mother who worked constantly and was raised by her grandmother most of her childhood, who had only a fifth-grade education.

Crystal persisted and earned an associate's degree but ultimately had to put her education on the back-burner once again when Penelope was little, having to focus on working full time so they could survive. Crystal struggled to find child care for Penelope and couldn't always afford child care.

"It was like fighting tooth and nail," Crystal says. "Who can watch her? Who can I trust? I couldn't afford daycare because I was paying for rent and basic necessities."

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For years, Crystal focused on survival. She worked in finance, which provided some economic stability but created some painful sacrifices. She found herself trapped in the same cycle that she experience with her always working mother, except this time she was the parent who never had the spare time to spend with their child. “I was never home, I missed out on so much with my kids,” she said.

As a young girl, Penelope didn’t understand the challenges her mother was experiencing. Looking back today as a mother, she recognizes the sacrifice her mother made every day. She recalls her mother balancing work, school and parenting without any support. “I remember nights of it just being us two,” Penelope says. “There was no help. It was just her trying to survive on her own with me.”

Penelope is now married and has a child of her own. Becoming a parent gave her a different perspective on what her mother went through all those years ago. “It hurts my heart that she was so young trying to figure everything out by herself, our circumstance just wasn’t fair to her,” Penelope said.

Seven years ago when her new husband finished his education, Crystal was finally given the greenlight to go for her dreams. Crystal, now a

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mother to Penelope’s youngest siblings, enrolled at the University of Texas at San Antonio. The same obstacle stood in her way as when Penelope was young: the high cost of child care for her 8-month-old daughter.

“With five children at home, I didn’t know what we were going to do,” Crystal said. “Without child care, I think I would have had to stop school again or go part-time.”

That is when she came across an email from her university mentioning United Way’s Dual Generation Initiative.



The Dual Generation Initiative disrupts the cycle of poverty by creating solutions to challenges like housing, education, child care and employment for parents pursuing their education. By removing these barriers, families achieve greater stability and success with a positive future ahead of them.

“At first I thought, ‘I never qualify for anything,’ but something told me to try,” Crystal admitted. Her decision changed her and Penelope’s lives. Once she got into Dual Gen, her greatest barrier to earning her degree was gone as both her and Penelope’s young children were placed into quality child care settings at no cost to them. Now, they could focus on school while knowing her children are thriving in their early learning.

“To know my children are safe and learning while I’m at school means everything,” Crystal said. When Crystal became a grandmother as Penelope had her first child, she encouraged Penelope to go back to school with the assistance of Dual Gen.

“I was scared,” Penelope admits. “I had a baby. I didn’t think my circumstances looked like they were setting me up to succeed.”

With the support of United Way’s Dual Generation Initiative, both Crystal and her daughter Penelope are succeeding in their education and on track to earn their degrees.

“Without child care, I don’t think I would have gone back to school. I probably would have just worked,” Penelope says.



The ability to work less and focus on school has additional benefits for their family: more time to be present for their children. Without having to juggle a full-time job and school, they can attend their children’s field trips, school events and experience those everyday moments that Crystal once missed because surviving demanded working constantly.

“When I was younger my mom wasn’t always able to be there because she had to provide,” Penelope says. “Now, we get to experience that life now that we lost when we were younger, that’s healing,” she added.

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“I used to say ‘that would never happen to me’ but you never know what situations can happen in life.”

“All of the things I used to miss out on most, I don’t have to miss anymore,” Crystal said.

Neither of them could have imagined earning their college degrees just a few years ago, much less at the same time together. They are proof that it is never too late on your journey to achieve your goal.

“For the first time in my life, I’m proud of myself,” Crystal says. “I want my kids to see that if Mom can do this, they can too.”

With the support of United Way, Crystal, her daughter Penelope and her grandchild are excelling in their education today with a brighter future ahead.

To learn more about United Way of San Antonio and Bexar County’s work and to hear more stories, visit uwsatx.org.