



A red Nissan SUV is parked in an asphalt lot. On the roof rack, there are two yellow surfboards with black fins. The car is positioned at an angle, showing its rear and side. In the background, there are green trees, a white fence, and a building. The lighting suggests it's daytime.

PHOTO BY LILIANA ANGUIANO / STAFF

Homelessness can take many forms, including ambitious students

A pair of Southwestern College scholars share their experiences as unsheltered people



PHOTOS BY LILIANA ANGUIANO / STAFF

Ian Ramirez



Julisa Chavez



Homeless

— BUT CLINGING TO A STUBBORN —

hopefulness

By LILIANA ANGUIANO

Happy students often say they found a home at Southwestern College.

Ian Ramirez literally calls Southwestern College his home.



MOTOR HOME

Ian Ramirez prepares for another day of classes and studying from his car parked on campus.

Ramirez, 19, lives in his car that he sometimes parks in the darkened SC parking lots. It is temporary, he said, but for now it is his address.

His life has had a temporary feeling since he suffered his first bout of homelessness at age 13. A dysfunctional and sometimes violent family has caused him to flee for his own safety. He enjoys surfing, but often found himself couch surfing the homes of friends and acquaintances.

"I've been homeless for probably 12 different stretches," he said. "A lot of the time I just viewed it as 'I'm just going to (a friend's place) for a few days.'"

Hunger was a constant companion in his household. When his family did feed him, the quality of the food was often lacking.

"Excessive famine," he said. "It was really difficult as someone who cares about my health to have to eat instant ramen. So that was really hard, having to choose between nothing and one of the unhealthiest foods I can ever think of eating." ►

HOPEFULNESS CONT ON PAGE 56

SWC CARES HELPS WITH TECHNOLOGY, CHILD CARE, NUTRITION

It has never been a secret that a majority of Southwestern College students come from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, but recent data borders on bleak. More than 8 out of 10 SC students are from families that qualify for free or reduced lunch programs in the K-12 system. Almost 40 percent self-reported food insecurity and a third reported housing insecurity.

Other rampant student stressors are inability to purchase technology such as laptops, inconsistent access to internet and Wi-Fi connectivity, expensive transportation and lack of childcare.

Since 2020 SC has made an intentional pivot toward providing additional help to students under stress in an effort to keep them in college.

One arm of that multi-pronged effort is SWC CARES, a state-funded program that emerged from the pandemic that creates a miniature social services agency on the Chula Vista campus. Trina Eros, who comes from a social services background, was brought onboard to lead the \$490,000 program.

Homelessness and housing insecurity among students has been her top priority, she said, but relieving these problems will require more resources than the college has.

“We don’t have the capacity to resolve someone’s homelessness,” she said.

That does not mean the college is incapable of helping homeless students, she said. Eros coordinates care for those facing homelessness or eviction, and works to connect students with social service agencies with the means to find solutions. Her efforts have helped to place scores of students into safe, affordable housing, at least temporarily.

“I definitely consider SWC CARES, like our community partners, an extension of (the federal) CARES because we have to rely on them so much,” she said. “It takes a village.”

Eros and her team have been overwhelmed by thousands of requests for assistance. There is more she would like to do, she said, particularly in terms of outreach to people in the community who may need help, but that may have to wait.

Students who have received support expressed appreciation, even if their problems were not completely solved. Homeless student Ian Ramirez said he was not expecting magic right away.

“I am not used to any help at all, so I feel it would be unappreciative of me to say that there could be anything better,” he said. “I never thought I would get a gas card, money for food, have my programs for school paid for and a calculator paid for.”

— *Liliana Anguiano*



HELP FOR STRUGGLING STUDENTS

The SWC CARES/Basic Needs office is located in Bldg. 16-105E on the Chula Vista campus. Virtual and in-person office hours are Monday, Wednesday and Thursday from 8 a.m. – 5p.m. Tuesday hours are 8 a.m. – 6:30 p.m. Friday hours are 8 a.m. – 3 p.m. Needs Coordinator Trina Eros may be reached at (619) 216-6687 or teros@swccd.edu.



PHOTOS BY LILIANA ANGUIANO / STAFF

Student depends on college as a source of hope and connection

By LILIANA ANGUIANO

Julisa Chaves had decided it was time to end her troubled life.

She planned to commit suicide in Denver, but fate intervened.

She'd gotten on the wrong bus and was headed for San Diego.

A longer trip gave her the time she needed to reconsider and take another stab at life. ►

CONNECTION CONT ON PAGE 57



ANOTHER CHANCE AT LIFE

Julisa Chaves was planning to commit suicide but instead boarded a bus from Denver to San Diego. She said she found hope and a path forward at Southwestern College.

“Homeless is not hopeless.” IAN RAMIREZ, *SC student*

HOPEFULNESS FROM PG 53

Hunger is the biggest challenge of living in his car, Ramirez said. He would like to follow a healthy vegan lifestyle, but sometimes it comes down to survival.

A football player at Hilltop High School and Olympian H.S., Ramirez managed to be a student-athlete who graduated with decent grades despite long periods of homelessness that started in middle school. He enjoyed football, he said, but also acknowledged that it was also possible that he needed the distraction.

“I realized that I had something that channeled me toward football,” he said. “I needed to redirect (my) energy. I guess football helped me to do that.”

He was not a typical football player, he said, in terms of his values. Ramirez describes himself as very liberal, an environmentalist and an LGBTQ ally. He enjoyed the game, but not the toxic atmosphere created in the locker room by some of the other players. It caused him to think about where he channeled his efforts and why.

Today he is putting his mental and physical energy into transferring to UCSD to study computer science, he said.

Sometimes the road is smooth, other times it just seems to end without warning. Often a cliff awaits. Last semester Ramirez was registered as a full-time student until he lost his place to stay. He was homeless again and dropped all his classes.

“(Maintaining) the discipline to go to classes and do the work when you are in a dark place is really hard,” he said.

Withdrawing from the classes caused other kinds of downstream suffering, Ramirez said. He is now battling academic probation, which feels like being punished twice.

“(Withdrawing) is still affecting me,” he said.

Most community college students who resolve to focus more on school do not actually move to the school and live in its parking lot, he acknowledged.

“I am ambitious about the things I care about and that will allow me to persevere through the circumstances I’m in,” he said. “Homeless is not hopeless.” ■

CONNECTION FROM PG 55

Her new chapter started very badly. She arrived in San Diego broke and homeless, then was sexually assaulted her first night in her new city.

“I didn’t know what to do in the moment,” she said. “I was very scared, but I had to kind of toughen up and not be scared. If you are scared and you show fear you are in trouble. Life is like a dog. If you show fear, it will attack.”

Chaves was homeless for eight months, she said. During that time, most people she encountered were unkind. People she met in shelters confused her because some were trying to dig out of their situation while others were not. Authorities were not always helpful.

“Unfortunately, they mix shelters with people who want help and people who don’t want help,” she said. “In one of the shelters I was touched inappropriately by a 70-year-old man. Security told me I had to stop being so loose.”

Chaves became one of the people trying to dig out of homelessness and poverty, so she applied for assistance from social service programs. Waitlists were the killer of hope. Most were many months — even years — long. She said she bounced from shelter to shelter.

Some nights there was no room at any shelters. That’s when the predators crawled out of the darkness.

A man 18 years her senior groomed her with promises of help and support. When she went to his apartment, he sexually abused her.

“It was the hardest thing to have to deal with the abuse in exchange for a place to stay,” she said. “I would go to my ex and take it because I was in survival mode.”

She survived the abuse, barely.

Today Chaves has housing through South Bay Community Services. She lives in Chula Vista with a roommate who is also part of the program. She said she is very grateful for the housing, but is not sure how long she will be able to stay there.

“I really, really love it,” she said. “I get sad



PHOTO BY LILIANA ANGUIANO / STAFF

because when my time is up here, I don't want to leave this area because it's so safe. Usually people stay here for a year, but they can extend the time frame. Unfortunately, they are not able to let us know how long we can stay here because they don't want people to get too comfortable."

Chaves said she suffers from Neuromyelitis Optica or NMO, which prevents her from standing for long durations. She is currently looking for work, she said, but has not been able to land a job because of her disability.

"(NMO) affects my nerves, my eyes and my spinal cord," she said. "Due to that, a lot of places

won't hire me."

As her stamina has improved, so have her options. Chaves enrolled for classes at SC this semester, but like many first-year students she is struggling to learn the ins and outs of college life.

"I'm having a hard time in school because nobody prepares you for college and (no one checks in on you)," she said. "(No one) reminds you what to do next, you have to remember (yourself)."

Still, she said, she is motivated to press on despite the challenges. Like others in her situation, Chaves said she realizes education is her way out of poverty and homelessness. She is a cheerful and enthusiastic student who attends regularly and contributes to class discussions. She is not shy about sharing her experiences in hopes that she might help others to avoid what she has endured.

"Whatever you are going through, all you can do is just take it day by day and wake up and look at life as a blessing, even through the hardships," she said. "We struggle in order to learn the lessons from our struggles." ■



FEEDING BODY, MIND, SOUL

Julisa Chaves credits SWC CARES and kind faculty members for giving her the determination to push past abuse, poverty and homelessness to create a happy life for herself.