

CN & J 1100 Sharon Park Dr., #32, Menlo Park
 Carol Carnevale, Nicole Aron, & James Steele
 DRE# 00946687, 00952657, 01872027
 (650) 740-7954 | (650) 796-2523

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Holiday Fund: Upward Scholars drives multigenerational impact in San Mateo County

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Elia practices English with a volunteer at an Upward Scholars Conversation Club. The nonprofit benefits from donations to The Almanac Holiday Fund. Courtesy Upward Scholars.

Upward Scholars has helped over 1,200 adult immigrants in the Bay Area pursue upward mobility through a community college education by providing them with financial and academic support, career development and holistic services. Every year, our wraparound support — aided by dedicated volunteers and community members — impacts the lives of hundreds of students and their families.

One of our success stories is Elia, who left her home in Michoacan, Mexico, at the age of 26, seeking better financial opportunities in the United States for herself and her two young daughters. When she arrived, she set about obtaining a driver's license so that she could get to and from work. But as she prepared to take the exam, tragedy struck. Elia suffered a significant work injury that resulted in limited mobility in her legs. The prognosis was not hopeful — her doctors said she would be completely paralyzed in 10 to 15 years. Out of concern for public safety, driving was out of the question.

Today, 20 years later, Elia has beat the odds. Not only has her condition not worsened to the degree her doctors originally expected, Elia has worked to maintain much of her mobility through regular walks around her neighborhood in Redwood City. She has also earned her GED from Sequoia Adult School and is well on her way to completing an associate degree from Cañada College, where she's made the Dean's List more than once. She has raised three children while working as an adult caregiver and caring for her ill father. But she hasn't gotten a driver's license, which has made everything else in her life harder, making her dependent on unreliable public transit and ride-sharing.



Upward Scholars is one of this year's beneficiaries of The Almanac Holiday Fund. Donations are divided evenly between 10 nonprofits that serve local residents, and can be made online at almanacnews.com/holiday_fund.

Though reluctant at first, earlier this year Elia began working toward getting her driver's license, with encouragement from her children, the clients she cares for, and the Upward Scholars staff. When Elia has a goal, she pursues it — and this fall, she passed the written test! While she still needs to take the driving test, Elia is excited about the future. Even a simple thing like getting a license can drive multigenerational impact: "It would make life so much easier. I would be able to drive my son to school; get to work and back much faster; attend in-person classes, especially when I transfer to a university; get to finally visit my daughter in Vallejo; and take my father to his doctor appointments," she says. Her whole family would reap the benefits.

Elia appreciates the support Upward Scholars has given her since 2018. From textbook and food assistance to scholarship application support and Student Safety Net funding for rent, she knows her family would not have fared nearly so well during the pandemic were it not for Upward Scholars. When we first shared Elia's story with the Upward Scholars community, the support she received was astounding. Thanks to the generosity of an Upward Scholars donor, Elia now benefits from yet another kind of support: private driving lessons. Soon, Elia will be ready to take her driving exam and will be able to use her new skills to support her family in ways she's always wanted to.

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For information about donating time, talent, or treasure to Upward Scholars, contact Jessica, Upward Scholars Marketing & Development Manager, at jessica@upwardscholars.org. Or, if you're curious to learn more about us, visit our website, upwardscholars.org. You can tutor or help a student like Elia practice their English skills, lend your specialized skills to the Upward Scholars team, or contribute funds to support our work.

Dr. Linda Prieto is the executive director of Upward Scholars.

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