



Never in My Life

The story of one woman's journey to healing and the people who helped her along the way.

THE WOMAN LEANS AGAINST THE CHAIR ON HER LEFT, waiting. It isn't hesitation – she just needs to gather her strength. Slowly she begins to shuffle her feet. One tiny, sliding step follows the next. A smile stretches across her face; you can hardly see it under her blue surgical mask, but there's no mistaking the crinkle of her eyes. Her silver walker sits in the corner of the room, abandoned for at least the next few minutes. As she makes her way down the 20 foot or so stretch, each step is hard-fought, but each step is free.

Sanjuana Ramos Villanueva says she is living her miracle. She is walking, something she couldn't do for two years.

Sanjuana can't be certain how she got Lyme disease; her best guess is that she contracted it while working in Mexican farmlands as a teenager, but it will always be somewhat of a mystery. It wasn't something she was instantly aware of; it was when she was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis at the age of 21 that she knew something was wrong.

"That's when my battle with health began," she says. "Around that time is when I started reading and came across something that said in the U.S. there was a lot more help for people who had rheumatoid arthritis. And that was the reason that I came to the U.S. in 2003."

Sadly, when she arrived in Texas, she found that the resources that had been guiding her were a bit more hopeful than reality. At best she was able to manage her symptoms – but that only lasted so long. In 2012, she began to experience additional complications. Not only was her arthritis severe, but she was also experiencing foggi-ness and confusion.

"I would find that I was driving and that I wouldn't know where I was," she says. "Sometimes my heart would be too fast, and I would have panic attacks. I couldn't walk because I would feel like I was drowning." She sighs, remembering the fear and frustration that would last for years. "I would visit doctor after doctor, and they would change medications or start new ones, but it wouldn't seem to help."

It was scary, not just when Sanjuana considered her own future, but that of her husband and their young son. She was terrified to take him any place; it was a challenge to keep up with a rambunctious 6-year-old under the best of circumstances, but with stiff knees and mental cloudiness, she never felt like she could truly keep her son safe.

When she was at last diagnosed with Lyme disease in 2015, it was a relief. She could pin down a reason for the pain and foggi-ness. She dove into research and began looking for ways to manage her symptoms. She also connected with the Texas Lyme Disease Association and was able to access a physician through the organization. It finally seemed like her health was turning around.

Then, her arthritis got worse – a lot worse.

says. "My husband does my hair! It is difficult to grab my hair with my hands."

But as many challenges as the arthritis in her hands has provided her, the complications from her knees have been tenfold.

With her improved health and approval from her doctor, Sanjuana and her husband decided to try for another baby in 2017. After a miscarriage and a warning that she might not be able to get pregnant, she was thrilled to at last be expecting the baby that would become her beautiful daughter. But at eight weeks pregnant she began to have severe pain in her knees – so severe that she had to use crutches to walk.

After Sanjuana had her daughter, her symptoms only worsened, and she was desperate for a solution. She went to Mercy Clinic with the hope of receiving help. It was becoming clear that she would need knee replacements if she was ever going to walk normally again, but for a one-income family without insurance, the cost was insurmountable.

Mercy Clinic realized the severity of her case and connected her to Project Access, but Lyme disease complications, COVID-19 restrictions, and Sanjuana herself coming down with a case of COVID-19 that required hospitalization continued to push the date back.

"In the beginning she was hopeful," says Project Access Patient Access Manager Diana Bonilla. "She's her own advocate; she's really



Taking a walk through the park

Sanjuana holds up her hands. The 42-year-old's fingers are crooked and stiff, bent at awkward angles. She attempts to wiggle them, but the movements are jerky and uncontrolled. She smiles ruefully.

"Arthritis has really harmed my knees and my hands," Sanjuana

smart. But when her surgery was canceled at her preop because of her Lyme disease, from then on I think she kind of spiraled down.”

In the meantime, Sanjuana had made a severe step back in mobility. In 2020, she went from crutches to a wheelchair; she was unable to put any weight on her legs.

It was a difficult point for her emotionally. Mercy Clinic Executive Director Peggy Leitch was very concerned about Sanjuana, as it became clear that she was struggling with depression in the midst of her pain and uncertainty.

“At one point she said she thought she should just go back to Mexico to die,” Peggy remembers. “What a burden that was for us, knowing how much she needed this . . . We were very concerned that she was giving up. And understandably so. It’s been hard. What she’s been through has been very, very hard. It’s just a testimony to her.”

For Sanjuana, it’s a struggle to think about that dark time. “I had no dreams,” she says. “I had no hope.”

But that all changed in early 2022. After consulting with his partners as well as several colleagues around the country, Dr. Mark Woolf, her volunteer orthopedic surgeon through Project Access, decided to move forward with her surgery. He knew it would be challenging, and that there was a degree of risk involved that surpassed the concerns for an average knee replacement.

“Her left knee had a really bad knee contraction of 70 degrees, so if you can imagine, almost 90 degrees, as if your knee is at a right angle,” Dr. Woolf explains. “So that’s where she was. And if that weren’t bad enough, the other knee was worse – it was 90 degrees.”

Despite the challenges of the surgery and subsequent recovery, Sanjuana says it felt like the sun had finally burst into her life. She read everything she could about the procedure and watched full videos of knee replacements.

“It’s like someone picked me up and gave me a new life,” Sanjuana says. “The sadness went away.”

On May 13, 2022, the day came that Sanjuana had long anticipated – Dr. Woolf performed a full knee replacement on her left knee.

“We had to have a lot of special implants there just in case we had to do an exceptional surgery just to get the knee straight,” Dr. Woolf says. “But we were pleasantly surprised that at the time of surgery, I was able to do the left knee with a fairly straightforward technique for a total knee, with a few tweaks to get the knee out straight.”

Though they originally planned to wait six weeks for the next surgery, after much consideration Dr. Woolf decided to move forward with the second surgery just five days later, while Sanjuana was still in the hospital healing from the initial procedure.

It went very well – the treatment was more successful than Dr. Woolf had even hoped.

“There was a lot of prayer involved, and I really think that God had his hand on her, and us and our team to take care of her,” he says. “This is an exceptional case, believe me. She’s done much better than I ever would have imagined.”

Now, several months later, Sanjuana is walking with a cane or a walker, but she is taking more and more steps without any kind of aid. Dr. Woolf is very hopeful for her future, anticipating that she will be able to walk and take care of her family without difficulty. Sanjuana is dedicated to her rehabilitation – she wants to get better as quickly as possible. And every challenge she faced along the way just makes these moments sweeter.

“Every day, I look at the image I have of God hanging in my house, and I ask him to help heal my body completely,” she says. “And I think that he’s listening to me, because every time I try something new, I feel like I’m being born again.”

She hesitates, tries to find the words.



Sanjuana with Dr. Woolf

“The thing is, never in my life did somebody help me like you,” Sanjuana says.

“You” is a team of people – Dr. Woolf, the staff, ancillary services, Mercy Clinic, Project Access, and the partners that support us. Everyone who made her miracle a reality.

“I was never given anything like this,” she says. “And the gift that Project Access gave me isn’t the type of gift that everyone gives. We are all going to be grateful for the rest of our lives. And imagine me – if you guys are excited, imagine my excitement!”

Sanjuana, sitting now, leans back in her chair.

“Before my surgery, I would wake up with difficulty,” she says. “The worst part was when I had to shower. It was the hardest thing. My husband would be the one to help me, and he’d help me get into the tub. It was so hard to get my legs and feet in the tub. *Mas difícil*. And I hardly cooked. I was scared that something hot would fall on my daughter. She is the one who would help me during the day. Sometimes when I was sitting and I needed to use the restroom, my daughter, she would bring my stool to me and clean her toys from the living room so I could have a clear path. She had to mature at a very young age.”

Now, though? Everything has changed.

“Yesterday, I made the bed, I washed the dishes, and I made enchiladas. Right now, I have started doing small things. I’m tired because I walked a lot yesterday, I stood up a lot yesterday. But I am getting better.” She leans forward, eyes crinkling. “I want to run. And I’ve told my husband that, one day, I’m going to dance.”

**Would you like to donate
to Project Access to help
patients like Sanjuana?
You can do so here:**

