

## WORKING WITH CHILDREN FULFILLS LIFELONG DREAM



After completing her Project SEARCH internship at [The Hive Education](#) in Sunland Park, Estrella Villanueva was hired to work full-time in the organization's N.M. Children First Learning Center. The job has been a dream come true for Estrella.

"It's mostly daycare and education stuff," she explains. "We do activities with them, help them eat breakfast and lunch. The bigger kids serve themselves, but we feed the babies. We do activities, play music, and sing with them."

Villanueva has a learning disability she says came from not getting enough oxygen to her brain when she was born. "I had a lot of trouble reading and writing." But with her brother as her tutor, "Now I'm doing a little more. He got me to a new level." And she speaks two languages.

The 22-year-old was promoted to an assistant teacher when another staff member went on maternity leave. Those new responsibilities were the impetus to push through her reading challenges to earn a certificate in early childhood education from Eastern New Mexico University-Ruidoso. Now she is pursuing an associate degree from Doña Ana Community College in Las Cruces.

Her Project SEARCH instructor, Patricia Garcia, has no doubt that Estrella will succeed in whatever she puts her mind to. "From the get-go, she's been very ambitious," Garcia says. "She was ecstatic (to get her job) because she always wanted to work with children. Once she got the position, I saw she was always hungry to learn more. The sky's the limit; I don't see this being the end of it."



"I like the position I'm in now, but I would like to work in an elementary school," Villanueva says about her future goals, adding the kids make it all worthwhile. "When you feel like you're having a rough day, the children pull you up and put a smile on your face."

[Project SEARCH](#) is a school-to-work transition program for young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Participants gain transferable work skills and receive supports for gaining competitive, integrated employment upon completion of their internship.

"It gives you a lot of experience when you're going to be working in a job. It got me far," says Estrella. Her time in Project SEARCH taught her responsibility and even provided her with parenting skills, which are important now that she has her own new baby. "Working there helped me learn a lot of things to help me take care of my daughter. They helped me a lot in life."

Villanueva's maturity makes her a role model for current Project SEARCH participants. "She's an amazing example for our incoming interns because of her positive attitude," according to Garcia. "She's very encouraging."

Project SEARCH in New Mexico is an interagency collaboration between the New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, Health Care Authority's Developmental Disabilities Supports Division, and the UNM Center for Development & Disability-Partners for Employment. There are eight active Project SEARCH sites in New Mexico. For more information, contact your nearest NMDVR office at [dvr.state.nm.us/locations/](https://dvr.state.nm.us/locations/).

*The New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation helps individuals with disabilities find suitable employment. Vocational rehabilitation is a voluntary program supporting people who want to work. With a long history of success and proven methodology for making the best fits, NMDVR is committed to helping participants thrive in their communities. For more information, visit [dvr.state.nm.us](https://dvr.state.nm.us) or call 505-954-8500.*

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