



**Silas and Shayla**  
**VICTORY CHRISTIAN ACADEMY**  
**LAKELAND, FL**

Ten years ago, Maria Quinones-Garcia was determined to remove her five grandchildren from their broken home and dedicate her life to their upbringing. She left her warehouse job in Reading, Penn., and made the leap of faith to Lakeland, Fla., where she hoped the children would thrive in a new environment.

Silas Lopez and Shayla Williams were among her charges, but things weren't going well for them in their new school career. Both were enrolled at a local public middle school in Lakeland, and neither excelled academically. Lacking a father figure, Silas was at times defiant and lax in his studies. Shayla, shy and anxious in such a large school where fights frequently broke out around her, often told her grandmother that she was sick and needed to stay home.

The change upon which their grandmother would insist two years ago has also been a turning point in their lives. Silas and Shayla are now students at Victory Christian Academy in Lakeland through a Step Up For Students Scholarship for low-income families, and they say they couldn't be more pleased.

The turnaround has been dramatic. Silas, now 16, found the school small when he first arrived, but its size has brought out his leadership potential and inspired him to volunteer his time to school causes, his teachers and coaches say. He wound up on the football team and raised his grade-point average to a 3.1. Shayla, now 13, climbed out of her shell and eventually tried out for the volleyball team. She's now earning As and Bs. Just as importantly, school administrators say, she's smiling more.

Of her new school, Shayla said, "there's no drama. No one fights here." Silas says he now looks forward to school. "You want to come. You expect to laugh," he said.

They even have career goals: Shayla hopes to become a pediatrician; Silas, a doctor or a teacher.

Shayla and Silas aren't the only two grandchildren to benefit from Step Up For Students. Quinones-Garcia already has sent one grandson on to college after attending Evangel Christian School in Lakeland. That grandson's success and his emerging role as a father figure for Silas persuaded Quinones-Garcia to pursue the same option again. Evangel had since closed its doors but one administrator there, Rhonda Borders, who grew close and supportive to Quinones and her family, took a job at Victory Christian. Silas and Shayla joined her.

For Quinones-Garcia, raising grandchildren by herself has not been easy. But she offers no complaints. In fact, she continues to reach out to help others in her community. She now works as a hospital chaplain and spends her time ministering to jail inmates in Polk County.

"I knew it was going to be rough," Quinones-Garcia said of her decision 10 years ago. But she tells her grandchildren today, "When you go out to do something, sometimes you have to struggle. Not everyone has the luxury of being from a rich family."

**About Victory Christian Academy**

Victory Christian Academy opened in 1998 to first-grade students and now enrolls 400 students in grades Prek-12, 62 of whom are on the Step Up For Students scholarship. Located at 1401 Griffin Road in Lakeland, the school boasts a curriculum that is "traditional in content, but innovative in approach." It emphasizes reading, critical thinking, character development and learning labs while introducing advanced concepts during group and hands-on activities. The school also administers the Stanford Achievement Test. Out of 23 high school seniors last year, 20 went on to college. The annual tuition is \$5,280 for grades K-5 and \$5,530 for grades 6-12.