STORY OF IMPACT
JANET'S JOURNEY: ELGIN MOM EMBRACES COMMUNITY

"My heart is pounding." Janet took a deep breath and smiled at her children sitting next to her.

Benjamin Jr., a two-and-half-year-old toddler, sat in his stroller, giggling as he played peek-a-boo with the shade. Three-month-old Janet Jr. cooed from her carrier on the other side of her mom.

Janet Sr. sat on a gray upholstered chair inside the arts building at Elgin Community College on a bitterly cold winter afternoon. She was attending United Way of Metro Chicago's "Uniting for the Holidays" event in the school's parking lot where she was picking up some extra food, books, diapers, and other resources for her young family – resources that make a big difference, she said.

> "The holiday season is a time to appreciate what you have because sometimes we take that for granted. This is a little reminder of all that we do have.
>
> **JANET**
> **Participant**
> in Enriching Partnerships for Early Learning

"A lot of families have been going through some hardships throughout the year. Some people don't have the resources, reading materials, or food," Janet said. "It's nice to get a little extra help towards the end of the year."

Janet offered to share her story, but she admitted she was nervous. As a proud mom, she wanted to push herself outside her comfort zone – and model this for her children. She had already seen her son, Benjamin Jr., practice this skill at Enriching Partnerships for Early Learning (EPEL). Supported by United Way, the nonprofit focuses on early learning and development, family support, and health to help young learners from birth to five years grow into healthy and thriving children.

With other toddlers at EPEL, Benjamin Jr. has exercised his creativity through kid-friendly crafts. Local librarians have helped him develop early language skills during storytime. Benjamin has also started making new friends.

"At EPEL, they play with other kids their age and socialize a little bit," Janet said. "This is important to break through their comfort zone. Growing up, you're going to have to do that and socialize with different people."

Janet knew what that felt like – pushing through discomfort and trying something new – whether sharing her story with United Way or meeting other families through EPEL. "I've met some pretty good mom friends," Janet said. "Not only is socializing good for the kids, but also for the stay-at-home moms. We've built a community at EPEL."

Like the EPEL community, the greater Elgin community is tight knit with many multi-generational families like Janet's calling the northwest suburb of Chicago home. The giving spirit of the people of Elgin was on full display that December afternoon at the Uniting for the Holidays event. Hundreds of cars lined up in the Elgin Community College

parking lot. Holiday tunes played from a speaker as families drove through the lot and stopped at stations to receive a meal box and a frozen turkey, books, and diapers.

Janet sat behind the wheel of her SUV, with Benjamin Jr. and Janet Jr. strapped into their car seats in the back and her aunt in the passenger seat. Despite the bite from the winter wind, Janet rolled down her window and chatted with EPEL staff. She smiled at these familiar faces – her friends.

As she made her way along the drive-thru, Janet stopped and got out of her car to take a photo with a volunteer packing trunks with meal boxes. Together, they shared a moment of gratitude – for this community, for coming together to make the holiday season a little brighter.

"This time of year brings everyone together. It makes us thankful that we're able to have food on our plate, whether it's something we personally purchased or we were thankful enough to receive today," said Janet.

"The holiday season is a time to appreciate what you have because sometimes we take that for granted. This is a little reminder of all that we do have."

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