

Miami Herald



JULIAN DAVIS FIU

Lucas Salazar, 5, underwent years of grueling treatment for leukemia. Lucas, who is cancer-free, poses with, from left, his sister, Luciana Salazar; his dad, Carlos Salazar; and his mom, Jessica Encalada.

He was just a toddler when he began difficult leukemia treatment NOW, HE'S CANCER-FREE

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Jessica Encalada smiles at the sound of her son Lucas' high-pitched laugh as the 5-year-old rolls in the grass outside Indian Trace Elementary School in Weston.

"I'm just grateful he's still here with us," she says.

In 2019, Lucas Salazar was diagnosed at Joe DiMaggio Children's Hospital in Hollywood with high-risk lymphoblastic leukemia. Ever since then, she has been by his side.

"He is a boy who has adapted a lot," Jessica says. "He is always smiling. I always say that he has a smile that can light up a whole hospital."

Sandra Muvdi, Lucas' case manager at the Jessica June Children's Cancer Foundation, nominated him for help from Wish



Book, noting his resilience. After grueling treatments, he is cancer-free.

In 2017, the Encalada-Salazar family immigrated to the United States from Guayaquil, Ecuador, in search of a better life. Jessica, her husband, Carlos Salazar, and their 10-year-old daughter, Luciana Salazar, settled in Weston. There they had the support of Jessica's mother and sister.

Shortly after Carlos found work, Jessica became pregnant with Lucas. He was only a toddler when his family saw unusual bruising on his legs. She took Lucas to the emergency room, where he was referred to an oncologist for testing, and

the family's battle with his illness began.

Early in his treatment, Lucas had to be isolated in the hospital because of COVID-19. Jessica was there with him — forced to leave her husband and Lucas's older sister, Luciana, who was then in middle school, in her grandmother's care.

That's when Jessica became her son's real-life superhero.

"Lucas and I practically lived in the hospital," Jessica says. "We couldn't see our family for months, and I was always in complete isolation from Lucas' father and sister."

The family adapted to a new and unexpected lifestyle. Jessica was always at the hospital with Lucas while Carlos worked late nights. Luciana found adapting to a sick sibling particularly hard. When Lucas works on art projects while undergoing treatment, he

always makes something for his sister.

But as Lucas underwent treatment, his mother said, "It was getting a bit more complicated for us to get things going at home."

Jessica and Lucas spent around two months in the ICU, where Lucas began his year-long treatment plan. Early on, it was clear his body was reacting badly to chemotherapy.

The family then began to seek other treatment.

"The oncologists gave me several options," she explained. "One was a possible bone-marrow transplant."

LONG AND ARDUOUS

Lucas was relocated to Jackson Memorial Hospital, where he would get his treatment. The oncologists sat down with Jessica in 2021 to explain how the transplant would

work. Although family members knew the procedure would be long and arduous, they remained hopeful.

"I knew I was placing my son in good hands," Jessica says. "But none of us in the family were a perfect fit for Lucas' transplant. Then a man from Texas donated his anonymously. We haven't met him, but we hope to."

The transplant took place on April 29, 2022. It was successful, but chemotherapy, radiation and oral medication followed.

"We truly saw it as a rebirth," said Jessica. "The process is very tough."

However, the family soon noticed Lucas was rapidly losing weight. A few months after his transplant, Lucas had a high fever and was diagnosed with hemolytic anemia.

To help with this, Lucas began undergoing treatments every Wednesday at Alex's Place, a pediatric facility at the University of Miami's Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center. He also began a steroid treatment that has caused swelling in his face and stomach.

At Alex's Place, Lucas is known for his lively presence.

"He is not shy," explains Carlos. "He loves to dance."

Though the future is filled with uncertainty, Lucas is now cancer-free and has accomplished his goal of going to school for the first time this year. At Indian Trace Elementary, he has had the opportunity to make new friends.

"Although Lucas' cancer journey has been long and arduous, he is close to the finish line," said Muv-

di, Lucas' case manager. "I have no doubt Lucas will have an amazing success story to share with the world and live his life to the fullest."

From Wish Book, Lucas asked for a PlayStation 5 with a game featuring his favorite superhero, Spider-Man, and a bed of his own.

His parents hope to get help with their car payments and eventually own a second vehicle.

"I know it's material things, but sometimes that which seems perhaps insignificant fills you with joy," Jessica says. "It means a lot to see Lucas happy."

This article is the product of a partnership between the Miami Herald and the Lee Caplin School of Journalism & Media at Florida International University.



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Jessica Encalada stayed with her son, Lucas Salazar, in a hospital while he was being treated for leukemia. 'Lucas and I practically lived in the hospital,' Encalada says. 'We couldn't see our family for months, and I was always in complete isolation from Lucas' father and sister.'