

Now There Is Only Light

Agency: Volunteers of America, Dakotas

Program: Even Start

Service: Gives economically and educationally disadvantaged parents in Sioux Falls the tools necessary to support early literacy and language development of young children. Coordinates with early childhood programs to provide literacy and language development to children enrolled and assists parents in fulfilling their role as their child's first teacher.

Need: Nearly half of Even Start families have an annual household income of \$6000. Studies have shown that women with less than a 9th grad education earn \$15,000 compared to women with a high school degree who earn \$23,000 on average.

Impact: Research shows family experiences with language in the first three years account for 60% of difference in language development at age three and again at third grade. In addition, children whose mothers complete high school earn higher scores on national achievement tests and perform better in school than children whose mothers did not graduate.

Before their move to America, Hanna and her family saw images of America, promising hope, a brighter future, a nation that cares for its citizens.

"I came to America only knowing ABCs," Hanna states. "I had only completed 8th grade, and knew no English."

With little grasp of their new language, Hanna and her family settled into Sioux Falls, working, joining a church, and making friends. A few years went by, living pay check to pay check, feeding three children. And then Hanna lost her job and found herself sinking into depression.

"I needed help, but didn't know how to ask for it, didn't know that help existed," Hanna continues. "With no English, I couldn't ask, but didn't even know what I could ask for."

But the birth of her fifth child opened a door to Hanna and her family. While in the hospital a visitor entered her room and said the magic words, "Would you like some help?"

Those magic words led Hanna to having a home visit with a nurse who she shared her desire to learn English with. She was immediately placed into the Even Start program, which specializes in not only early childhood education, but also ensuring parents receive an education as well.

"The doors felt like they had been shut for such a long time," Hanna explains. "All I could see when I looked around was black, but Even Start opened up the doors, and now there is only light."

Hanna's Even Start Family Educator has been visiting her weekly for a year, and Hanna's spoken English is now crisp and easy to understand. And she was able to find steady employment.

Hanna is just one of 40 families that will participate in Volunteers of America, Dakotas' Even Start program, thanks to funding for Sioux Empire United Way.

Opening doors to an education, not only for their children, but for the parents as well, "I'm not done yet, I will improve my writing and reading and also learn about computers."

