

Lives Transformed: Carla Alvarado

The Circles USA model supports people's efforts to deepen and expand what they think is possible: for themselves, their families, and their communities. As Circle Leaders reach milestones in their journeys toward financial stability, we document their achievements as **Lives Transformed** stories to highlight joy and hope as valuable tools in combating poverty.

This year's *Lives Transformed* awardees were nominated from among thousands of exceptional Circle Leaders nationwide. Though their backgrounds and experiences vary, each exemplifies Circles USA's core values of perseverance, initiative, and service to their chapters and communities. Congratulations to our 2024 Lives Transformed cohort!

My name is Carla Alvarado. I was born in Caracas, Venezuela. In my country we were persecuted, threatened, chased, and kidnapped by the people who worked for the Maduro and Chavez dictatorships just because we disagreed with their regimes. My parents went on vacation to the United States in 2018 and, while here, received a call warning us to not come back to our country because the next thing that they would do was to take our lives. My parents decided to stay in Bluffton, South Carolina, and I've lived here since then.

I started my freshman year of high school in Bluffton. It was very scary being the new girl who did not know the language or have any friends or family with me. I was told multiple times that it was unlikely for me to go to college because most of the people "like me" just finish high school, then go on to clean houses or work in construction. But I was fully motivated to become a medical professional. To demonstrate my potential, I had to work three times harder to get out of ESOL [English Speakers of Other Languages] in only six months, getting the highest grade on my English levels. However, this was not enough for my teacher to recognize that I had enough potential to grow as a professional one day.

When I was 15 years old, my dad physically abused my mother in front of my eyes. I felt like everything I knew was going to fall apart. I was devastated because I was in a different country, far away from my close ones, and the only family that I had was breaking up. This went on for two more years of constant abuse. At school, I was at the top of my class and doing great. But I did not want to go back home, and I did not have anyone to talk to at school because my teachers reminded me how different I was, how my accent was changing—reminders of how "grateful" I was supposed to be because I was not in Venezuela.



Carla Alvarado

It was hard to feel safe until finally, one night three years ago, my siblings and I called the police on my dad. He left that night and I have not seen him since then. My senior year came around and it was time for me to apply to colleges. I applied to 10 colleges and got into all of them with scholarships included. However, when they checked my immigration status, they told me that I needed to be a permanent resident in order to receive a scholarship. I was told in front of my mom that I was not able to go to college. She was devastated.



Carla's graduation from the Technical College of the Lowcountry

I felt like I was not enough for America: I couldn't go back home, but I also was not welcomed here. I was struggling. Multiple Americans told me that I "needed to go back home"—but they did not know that I *can't* go back home. I had no dad now and my mom felt guilty because I could not have a better life. We felt trapped.

Months later, I was accepted at Technical College of the Lowcountry [TCL] here in South Carolina. Yet I did not have the ability to pay out of pocket, especially being an international student with no FAFSA eligibility. Once again, it was hard: I had a lot of pressure on my back working two jobs, finishing high school, and seeking higher ed at 18 years old.

One of the ladies at TCL told me to go to Deep Well and see if their new Circles program could help me out. I filled out an application and shortly after received a call for an interview. I was nervous, but they listened to my story. I walked back down to my car feeling very anxious because this was my last chance to pursue a better life. Then, right before getting in, I received the news that I was accepted to the Circles program —and that they would pay for my college education! I graduated from the Technical College of the Lowcountry with an Associate's Degree in Paralegal Studies; I am currently enrolled in the University of South Carolina Beaufort, pursuing my dream career as a registered nurse. All because of Circles.



Carla's Circles graduation with Shavonne Vasquez (Chapter Manager, Circles Hilton Head Island)

My Circles chapter and Allies don't know this, but they changed my life. They gave me hope and a chance to be someone great. They gave my mom the win she needed to feel like everything she's done has been worth it for me and my siblings. It opened a door for my little brother: now he knows he can do whatever makes him happy, as long as he works hard. I wish I could repay Circles for everything they did, and continue doing, for me and my family. They are truly a blessing.

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