

Why Dallas-based Nexus allows moms in addiction recovery to bring their kids along

As we celebrate Mother's Day, this Arlington woman's story speaks to the power of hope and restored family relationships.



By [Sharon Grigsby](#)

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Mayra Ortiz and her son, Anthony, at Nexus Recovery Center on Tuesday. Since completing the 90-day program there, while Anthony benefited from services and childcare, Ortiz has participated in Nexus' outpatient classes. (Juan Figueroa / Staff Photographer)

The moms I hold in my heart this Mother's Day exist a world away from the women feted with breakfast in bed, charm bracelets and spring bouquets.

My wishes go out to mothers temporarily living with their children at [Nexus Recovery Center](#), women working to stay clean and sober while restoring the relationship most important to them — the one with their kids.

Located in Far East Dallas, Nexus is the only recovery center in North Texas that allows children to be there with their moms. The nonprofit has operated quietly for 53 years — without the attention it deserves.

Not having a safe place to leave their children is a big reason many mothers don't seek help for substance use disorder. They try to gut it out long after they are no longer emotionally present. When addiction engulfs them, often their children go into the foster care system.

The women who come here are often broken, hopeless and lacking any financial means. Repeatedly, these women are told they are bad moms, they are weak and they aren't going to make it.

That's wrong. These mothers are strong and Nexus helps them grow stronger. The moms practice sobriety while learning parenting skills. The children receive critical developmental help and start to trust again.



Heather Ormand, who has been in recovery for 13-plus years and served as president and CEO of Nexus for four years, in her office Tuesday at the recovery center's far east Dallas campus. (Juan Figueroa / Staff Photographer)

Heather Ormand, Nexus' president and CEO, knows how difficult getting sober is. She took her last drink more than 13 years ago. "I was such a wreck," she recalled. "I couldn't take care of myself."

Yet she still had a job. She had an apartment and a car. She had the resources to get help.

That is not the case for the women who come to Nexus. While Ormand has felt the same shame and worthlessness, "what I came into this journey with is so much different than what they are coming into it with."

Mayra Ortiz, 31, and her 5-month-old baby, Anthony, are a beautiful example of the women who transform their lives with the help of Nexus. The 12 years or so before the Arlington woman found this place of healing were mostly dark and ugly — and no different than the journeys that bring most mothers here.

Ortiz, who grew up in a good home, experimented with pot as a teen. After graduating from Mansfield Summit High School, she got into a relationship that became abusive and turned to smoking meth as a way to cope.

After four years, she called her mom at 3 a.m. and asked for help to escape both her methamphetamine habit and the man who beat her up. Ortiz stayed off drugs for almost two years — until she visited an old friend who busted out a bowl of meth.

She was immediately back in the game.

The next seven years were a nightmare of drugs, lies and law-breaking. Ortiz gave birth to two children whom she relinquished to family members. She discovered fentanyl, disguised as Percocet, and many days she took dozens of the little blue pills. She sold the "percs" to support her habit.

"I derailed completely," she told me. "I had no need or want to do anything but the drug."



A detail of the "Painting positivity" wall on the hallway of a dormitory at Nexus Recovery Center Tuesday. (Juan Figueroa / Staff Photographer)

Sober from alcohol for more than 19 years, I remember the soul-crushing grip Ortiz described. I also understand why she can't find the words to adequately explain what changed late last year. That's why so many of us choose to describe it as a miracle.

Ortiz's life-transforming moment came while she was pregnant with her third child. Her baby's father, in jail on drug charges, knew Ortiz was desperate and still using. He reached out to a friend who persuaded her to accept help.

Anthony was born in December, and Ortiz was introduced to Nexus the next month.

Nexus offers a 30-day option for adult women and a 90-day stay for pregnant women and women with children. With Child Protective Services monitoring Ortiz's situation, a family member kept Anthony while she did the 30-day program. CPS allowed Ortiz and Anthony to do the longer stint together.

Children up to age 12 may live with their mothers in the recovery center dorms. They attend the Nexus Child Development Center and receive health services while their moms participate in intensive counseling sessions and parenting classes. Evenings are devoted to games and family activities before each mom has private time with her children.

Brook Mathis, Ortiz's residential counselor, described her as motivated and ready.

"No matter what she was facing — and we had some tough sessions — she always walked out with a positive perspective, more determined and more motivated."

Ortiz credited Mathis as the driving force behind her progress. "She's the one who got me to act right," Ortiz laughed as Mathis gave her a big hello hug.



Milly Jackson (left), one of the Nexus recovery advocates, plays with Anthony, the 5-month-old son of Mayra Ortiz (center) during a walk through the recovery center campus Tuesday.(Juan Figueroa / Staff Photographer)

She graduated from the 90-day program last month and, with Nexus' help, is now in a three-month transitional stay at Arlington Life. Nexus' myriad wraparound services help moms and their kids with immunizations, document retrieval, driving tests, CPS issues, housing and jobs — every detail to prepare them to be successful in their next chapter.

At least three times a week, Ortiz participates in Nexus' intensive outpatient classes. She's also job hunting and waiting for an apartment to come open through the Arlington Life program.

As Ortiz, Anthony and I walked around the Nexus campus, mother and baby repeatedly lit up with huge smiles as their eyes locked on to one another. Anthony, with dark brown eyes and thick black hair, responded to Ortiz's frequent laughter with a delighted shimmy. Throughout the hour, he was unfazed by occasional shrieks in his child care room or cameras aimed in his direction.

Staff and clients clamored to talk to Ortiz and hold Anthony, who was willing but always happy to get back in his mom's arms. When a staff member joked about it being time for Anthony's first haircut, Ortiz shouted, "No, no cutting his hair. I love it."

For our first interview, Ortiz had dressed casually, her T-shirt emblazoned with "Think Happy Thoughts." On the second visit, as Ortiz proudly introduced me to Anthony, she wanted both of them to look their best.

Then came this anecdote known to moms everywhere: "I had him in such a cute outfit and then he 'blew out' his diaper in the classroom," she said. "Now I worry people won't think I know how to properly dress my son."

"Mayra's been one of our best moms," said Natalie Sullivan, director of the Nexus Child Development Center. "She made it clear from day one that she was here to handle business for the sake of her child and to create better lives for both of them."

Ortiz has resumed contact with her 5-year-old son, who lives with her mother, and hopes to get to know her 2-year-old daughter as well. Shame and guilt creep in often, especially when it comes to her first two kids, she said.



Mayra Ortiz and her son, Anthony, in his childcare class at the Nexus Child Development Center at Nexus Tuesday. While Ortiz takes outpatient classes, Anthony is cared for in the same classroom where he spent his days when Ortiz was in the residential program. (Juan Figueroa / Staff Photographer)

Thanks to Nexus, she has coping tools. "If only I had known Nexus existed back then, I promise you I would not have gone so long on drugs," she said. "I love Nexus. I really plan on working here one day."

More than half of the operation's 170-person staff is in recovery from alcohol or drug use. The campus serves more than 2,000 women and 200 children annually. The mother's program at the facility, built in the 1950s as a men's college, has space for 30 women and at least that many children.

After years of fundraising, the recovery center will break ground this month on the first of a five-phase rebuild and expansion of its 11-acre property. Ormand hopes to open the new admissions and medical detox building early next year.

Nexus receives 68% of its annual budget from public dollars, most of it from a federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration block grant administered by the state. The remaining 32% comes from North Texas individuals and family foundations.

The state allows Nexus to house the kids of its clients, but it reimburses only for costs associated with the adults. Private contributions cover the children's services, including child care, health assessments and speech and occupational therapy.

Ormand noted about two-thirds of foster care removals in Texas are related to an adult's substance use disorder. "If that family can stay here intact, rather than get into the foster care system, that's best for everyone," she said.

Instead of moms continuing to have kids without adequate resources or skills, Ormand said, at Nexus they can learn to care for themselves and the children they already have so they are a more successful family.



The dormitory room where Mayra Ortiz and Anthony resided during their 90-day stay at Nexus. (Juan Figueroa / Staff Photographer)

On Mother's Day, Ortiz will take Anthony to see her mom and other special mother figures who have been part of her recovery.

She'll also save a copy of the Sunday newspaper until Anthony is old enough to understand their story's significance. "I want to be able to look back at those photos with him and say, 'Look what we did together.' "

"That's a thousand percent what they are doing," Ormand said. "They are doing it together."



By [Sharon Grigsby](#)

As the DMN City Columnist and a fifth-generation Texan, I'm focused on all things Dallas. I made what I expected to be a short career stopover here in 1980 and, this many years later, I'm still working to make Dallas a better city for all its residents. You'll also find me writing about mental health care and substance abuse issues.