



Sofia developing her grasp and sense of rhythm while creating motivational music during an Occupational Therapy session.

All Hail Princess Sofia!

Written by Katherine Evans

When eleven-year-old Sofia Borrego arrives for her Occupational Therapy (OT) session, it's time to break out the music. Sofia loves music and today's soundtrack from Disney's *Mulan* motivates her as she builds her core strength. "We start her session on the swing to get her engaged and using her muscles," Amy Jensen, Director of OT, explains. Sofia is especially fond of Disney princesses and *Mulan* is no exception. Through swinging, Sofia works on her balance and her protective reactions—when Sofia loses her balance, she's able to steady herself, a major achievement!

Sofia has been part of our Villa family since July 2013, and in that time she has not only blossomed physically, but has also grown academically and socially. Villa staff and classmates delight in Sofia's emerging personality: she loves the color red, toys that light up, music, and yes, princesses! As a Villa student Sofia receives services through the School, the Hjelte-Phillips Speech and Language Center and Villa's OT Clinic.

Initially, Sofia's parents were hesitant to enroll her at Villa. "We wanted her to stay in a local school. Then we took a tour and met Carol," Sofia's father, Tony Borrego explains. Carol Cruz, Sofia's first Villa classroom teacher, was able to brainstorm a variety of strategies for Sofia's success. "She listed off twenty suggestions," says Tony, "and we were awestruck. We felt she really understood." One of the Borrego family's major goals for Sofia was to develop friendships.



Sofia practicing pool safety at the Rose Bowl Aquatic Center with guidance from the swim instructor.

Nowadays, with the support of Villa staff, Sofia participates in group activities with her peers and even has a best buddy in class. "She will reach for his hand to initiate interaction," Sofia's current teacher, Lauren Davis shares, "and that engagement with one of her peers is so awesome for Sofia. She's progressing and advocating for herself in terms of what she wants or doesn't want as well."

Interdisciplinary collaboration is key to Sofia's growth. Social Group, a weekly program run by Villa's Speech & Language Center, is one such collaborative effort that enables Sofia and her classmates to practice valuable social phrases. "Sofia says hi with her low-five," says Speech-Language Pathologist Ariel Hegedus. "She's initiating reaching for pictures from a field of picture choices and using her gaze to make a choice from pictures," Ariel adds. Sofia can use pictures to communicate

where she is going, such as to the classroom or to the pool.

The pool is one of Sofia's favorite places. She loves swimming and visits the Rose Bowl Aquatic Center with her classmates each week. Thanks to the generosity of the San Marino Rotary Club along with other contributions from Villa friends and family, Sofia and her peers are learning about pool safety. Sofia knows how to float and how to control her airway. Swimming also gives Sofia valuable therapeutic benefits and sensory stimulation that increases her bodily awareness.

Sofia's parents are impressed by her progress. Her mother Linda Lopez notes that Sofia is more in tune with her physical environment and that she's an all-around happier little girl. "She had always been resistant to get up for school," Tony echoes, "but within her first week at Villa that morning resistance stopped." What's more, the Borrego family has gained back valuable family time. "We spent so much time pushing teachers, schools, relying on our own research," says Tony, "but when Sofia transitioned to Villa, staff came to us with suggestions. They were proactive."

It's no wonder Sofia delights in Disney heroines—the Villa community are all in agreement: Sofia deserves her own Disney epic. She is a girl who is thriving inside and out, and princess Mulan would approve!

Villa's School Program - A Comprehensive Approach

The **Villa Esperanza School** is a comprehensive program which is transforming lives of students with special needs, providing a warm and compassionate environment where parents, teachers and caregivers are included in the process. Villa's school offers highly experienced and trained teachers and staff; individualized K-12 instruction; **speech & language therapy; occupational therapy (OT)**; behavioral intervention services; music and pet therapies; training for families; and a transitional program. Best practices include DIR-Floortime based therapy; augmentative and alternative communications (AAC) and sensory integration strategies.

Funding for Villa's School, or speech and OT services, is available from school districts and private pay. If you are interested in enrolling, touring or receiving more information, please contact **Casey Gregg**, Vice President of Children and Youth Programs, (626) 449-2919, ext. 117 or **CGregg@VillaEsperanzaServices.org**.

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Teresa Tames the Bunnies

It's Wednesday morning, and twenty-four-year-old Teresa Castillo can hardly contain her excitement as she prepares for another day volunteering at the Pasadena Humane Society's (PHS) Rabbit Enrichment Program. "The Humane Society is my favorite volunteer site," Teresa shares. "I like working with the bunnies and helping them do exercise." As a client in Villa's Community Integration Program (CIP), Teresa learns valuable job skills through supervised volunteer opportunities with the goal to transition into paid employment. Teresa assists PHS staff with cleaning the rabbits' housing area, setting up their playpens, and providing them with social interaction and stimulation. Teresa knows to ask supervising staff for guidance along the way—requesting feedback is just one of the valuable employment skills she has gained through participation in CIP!

Since joining CIP in December 2015, Teresa has become more outgoing. In fact, she made such strides during her first year in CIP that she was awarded the CIP Achievement Award this past November in recognition of her outstanding work. Today, Teresa is eager to partake in new experiences like the weekly course "Functional Living for Intellectually Disabled Adults," presented by Pasadena City College in partnership with Villa. Teresa actively engages in these lectures by raising her hand, answering questions and paying attention to the variety of topics covered such as personal safety.

Vicky Castillo, Teresa's mother and Villa's Chief Financial Officer, has noticed a difference in Teresa's attitude and shares that "her self-confidence has been affected. She's livelier. The feeling of contributing is important for Teri." Like many individuals with intellectual/developmental disabilities, Teresa wants to be a productive member of her community and to take pride in her work. Volunteerism not only offers Teresa a sense of belonging, but it has also given Teresa and her mother Vicky more to talk about at home. Whether Teresa is sharing her latest experience with the bunnies at PHS or her passion for the *Star Wars* franchise, her growth through CIP is evident to her friends, family and Villa community.

If you are interested in learning more about Villa's CIP program or have volunteer opportunities for our young adults please contact Darryl Goodus, Director of CIP Pasadena at (626) 398-4435, ext. 1 or DGGoodus@VillaEsperanzaServices.org.



Teresa caring for her furry friend, Vermont, through Villa's CIP Program.

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Garrick is showing Teacher Noah his "Star Speech Student" certificate. Garrick is proud of his achievements, and we are proud of him!

May is **Better Hearing & Speech Month!**

Villa's Speech & Language staff evaluate and treat a variety of communication difficulties and provide individualized therapy for our clients.

Villa student Garrick is working with Speech & Language staff on greeting others and following instructions. With support, Garrick is now using an iPad to communicate, expanding his social interactions, and sharing his awesome sense of humor with our community.



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