

For the last two years, 23-year-old Rea has put her life back together. Today, she is the devoted mother of 16-month-old Mateo, a committed partner to Marcos and a driven nursing student.

Rea and Marcos started dating when they were in 7th grade. By the time they reached 21, they were planning for a family and building a life together. But, relationships have their ups and downs, and this one hit a rough spot. Their break-up wreaked havoc on Rea, whose strained relationship with her family meant that she didn't have much of a support system.

"Things weren't great," she said. "I had been working on the pre-requisites for nursing school, and I dropped out of school. I lost my job as a certified nursing assistant (CNA), and I was drinking every single day. I was in such a bad place."

Then Rea found out she was pregnant. The Women's Choice Center, where Rea went to confirm her pregnancy, provided her with information about Nurse-Family Partnership® (NFP) at VNA Genesis. For Rea, connecting with the program was a turning point.

"I figured I would try Nurse-Family Partnership. I thought some support is better than nothing,



Rea (shown left) and Marcos (shown right) are working to give their son, Mateo (center), the best start in life.

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and I knew I needed help. When I met Nikki, I immediately felt better. There was someone on my side. Someone wanted me to be successful, and that goes a long way."

As nurse Nikki visited Rea and began teaching her about having a healthy pregnancy and helping her prepare for the baby's arrival, she also began gently nudging Rea to think about her future and the steps she could take to prepare for it.

Along the way, Rea and Marcos reconciled.

Mateo arrived on Aug. 16, 2019. Rea's family history meant that she didn't have them to rely on for advice or support. Nikki stepped in, helping Rea succeed in breastfeeding and providing information and emotional support during a health scare with the baby.

Mateo was fussy as a newborn, which doctors attributed to colic. At three months old, though, he was rushed to Iowa City for medical care where they discovered gas bubbles and recommended surgery to resolve the digestive issues.

"I didn't want him to have surgery and to have those complications if there were other options – especially when he was so young," said Rea. "Nikki encouraged me to keep asking questions and to keep looking for alternatives." In the end, Mateo was able to avoid surgery, and Rea learned the confidence to advocate for her child and his health.

With Mateo on his way to being a happy and healthy little boy, Rea was able to start taking steps toward financial stability for herself and her family. With Nikki's encouragement, Rea re-enrolled in college, passed the entrance exams for the nursing program and was inducted into the honor society. Rea anticipates finishing nursing school in May 2022.

"Nikki held me to a higher standard, and that felt good. Setting goals with her makes me aim for something, and she offers me accountability," said Rea. "I'd always been self-motivated, and I don't want to disappoint myself or others. I just got off track. I know that at the end of the week or month, Nikki is going to ask how I'm progressing on my goals. I don't want to disappoint either of us."

When Marcos and Rea decided to start looking for a home that would allow them more space for Mateo and provide him with a yard to play in, Nikki helped them stay realistic about their budget. They found a fixer-upper that was perfect for them, and they have been working to make it their own.

Balancing parenting, school, home renovations and building a healthy relationship requires juggling, and nurse Nikki has seen firsthand Rea's resourcefulness and work ethic. They've continued their close relationship through virtual appointments since the COVID-19 pandemic required Nurse-Family Partnership to shift to telehealth. The two are able to continue the NFP program via video call.

"She has worked so hard to get into nursing school. She's a great mom and is so concerned about his development and having learning tools at home. She and her boyfriend have a stable relationship. He works full-time and is committed to Rea and the baby," said Nikki. "She wants more for herself and her child. She believes he deserves better than the way she grew up."

Rea looks back at the last two years and knows she has come a long way. "I was so selfish. Everything was about me. That's not how it is anymore," she said.

When Rea learned of a friend who was pregnant and struggling, she recommended Nurse-Family



At age 1, Mateo is a happy and healthy toddler.

Partnership. "I told her how influential it could be. Having someone like Nikki to talk to and trust, someone who is knowledgeable and helps you get ready to be a mom, means everything. You can't underestimate the importance of having a support system. It might not sound like major things – she didn't help me financially or pick our house out or anything – but her words and her knowledge were enough."

As the first person in her family to have breastfed, Rea is confident she would not have persisted if it hadn't been for Nikki's support. She is also thankful that she had someone to ask questions of and to learn from in place of having family to lean on during her pregnancy and the early months of Mateo's life. Beyond the nursing expertise Nikki offered, Rea is thankful for the role of cheerleader Nikki was willing to play.

"I don't think I would be in the same place without Nikki. I don't know that I would be back in school. I don't know that I would have had the motivation to do everything I had to do to get my license back," she said. "All the little ways she supported me helped create who I am today and the mom I have been able to become."