

MY

Who faces hunger in Arizona?

STORY



Jesus Barrios
Tucson, Arizona

I've lived in Tucson all my life. I grew up poor. My dad left when I was six, so my mom became my mom and dad. That's why I love her so much—she's so strong. She was always working, so I had to learn how to cook at a real early age.

As a family, we were on-and-off SNAP. We'd also go get food boxes from Community Food Bank, where I work now. All of us kids got free lunches in school.

I started working at 16. When I graduated in 2002, I was going to go to cooking school but I ended up working construction. Last year, I was turning 35, and I thought, "What have I always wanted to do with my life? Cook." I started researching programs, and I was picking up a box at the food bank, when I saw a flyer for *Caridad*.* I applied and got accepted.

I was working a graveyard shift as a janitor at the time, but eventually had to quit so I could concentrate on studying. It was tough but it paid off at the end. I passed the ServSafe test and got certified. Two months later, a job opened up here—and I got it!

I started about a year ago, and I'm now a cook for the contract meals program. Since we picked up the Meals-on-Wheels contract, it has been really busy. Plus there's the YMCA, Boys & Girls Club, senior meals, the community. We do so much, but it's still so little, in terms of how much hunger there is. It's mind-boggling.

Every time a commercial for Community Food Bank comes on TV, my mom says, "My son works there!" I've never worked for a place where I can hold my head so high. All the people who work here root for each other. I'm so motivated to get into the kitchen. Also, this is my first job with benefits. Oh my god, it's such a big difference. To have all these options, if anything goes wrong. In my other jobs, that was all on me.

Everyone here has a love for food. You'll hear people say, "My nana used to cook this," or "my mom used to cook that." We take in each other's stories, each other's lives through food. And we give power to each other through food. It's amazing.

** Caridad Community Kitchen is a 12-week culinary training program at the Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona in Tucson. It is a SNAP Employment and Training service provider.*