

## Nonprofit provides cars for struggling families

Wheels of Success will give out many Monday.

BY SARAH HUTCHINS  
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TAMPA — Amparo Castillo had a good life before Connie. She was happily married with a daughter, had steady work as an overnight manager at a McDonald's and lived in a nice apartment in Brandon.

But when Castillo's husband was laid off last year, the family lost its car and moved to a small trailer in Thonotosassa.

Suddenly Castillo's commute to work involved recruiting rides

from friends, taking long trips on the bus or walking a dangerous 5 miles. It was a trek she made without complaint.

"I was embarrassed," said Castillo, 39. "I was a manager, and I didn't have a car."

As she made the walk to work one night last summer, Castillo said her store manager spotted her. The manager referred Castillo to Wheels of Success, a nonprofit group that provides struggling families with used cars.

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**Amparo Castillo received a 1999 Chrysler Concorde from Wheels of Success at the organization's annual Labor Day event last year. On Monday, Castillo will get paperwork to transfer the car, which her daughter dubbed "Connie," into her name.**

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## Group gives cars to families in need

Castillo would be the 25th person from the Caspers McDonald's franchise to receive a car from the organization.

"I almost dropped the phone," Castillo said, remembering when she got the call telling her she would get a car.

A Wheels of Success board member handed Castillo the keys to her tan 1999 Chrysler Concorde at the organization's annual Labor Day event last summer. Hers was one of 20 families to receive a car on the holiday.

On Monday, the nonprofit will hand out double the number of keys. The day also will be memorable for last year's recipients. After 12 months of making payments and donating service hours, they will get the titles to their cars.

But even without the paperwork, Castillo said the car feels like her own. Her 9-year-old daughter, inspired by the Chrysler's sloping hood and headlights, even gave it a name: Connie the Catfish.

Wheels of Success founder Susan Jacobs started the nonprofit group in 2003. She said the organization has provided almost 350 cars and the same number of car-related services to area residents since its incorporation.

While donors provide the cars, Jacobs says the program isn't a handout. Recipients pay about \$50 a month for a year and, following in Jacobs' footsteps, "pay it forward" with service hours. All of the money and labor goes towards connecting more applicants with vehicles.

Jacobs knows what it's like to live without a car. Several years after a divorce, she found herself in an abusive relationship. She got out, but left her house and car behind. To get to her job in telemarketing, she relied on friends, the bus and hitchhiking.

One day the owner of a "buy here pay

here" lot heard Jacobs' story and made her an offer: He would loan her his worst cars — the ones too bad to sell — until she was back on her feet. Jacobs never forgot the gesture.

Several years later, while working at a staffing company, Jacobs began investigating transportation services in the Tampa Bay area. After finding few options, she looked into starting a nonprofit that would solve the transportation troubles that once plagued her and many of her clients. Wheels of Success was born.

To participate in the program, applicants must be working full time and able to handle the costs associated with car ownership. The vehicles are intended for individuals and families who have gone through a "catastrophic incident," such as abuse, a spouse's death or loss of income. An employer or agency must refer them to the organization.

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As Jacobs sifts through applications, she said she looks for concrete benefits a car could provide a recipient: a raise, a better job, higher education. However, the intangible improvements — more time with kids, being able to keep doctors appointments, less stress — are equally important.

“Those other things that you take for granted,” Jacobs said, “they make you a better employee.”

Sam Cox, his wife, Katharina, and 4-month-old son will be one of the families to receive a car this Labor Day. Cox, 21, said his lack of reliable transportation cost him his job at a convenience store. He was offered a promotion to assistant manager, he said, but without a car he couldn't accept the position. Turning down the offer meant losing his job entirely.

Cox recently found work as a maintenance man for the Pinellas County Housing Authority, but he'll need a car if he wants to hold onto this job.

The family, which lives with relatives in Pinellas, thinks a car can get them back on their feet. Cox can keep his job and go back to school. Katharina can learn to drive, and the young family can start saving for their own place.

“It's really inspiring,” he said of Wheels of Success. “If it can change someone else's life that fast, maybe it can help us, too.”

Castillo knows Connie won't be in her life forever. As soon as she's stable, she plans to pick out a car of her own.

When that day comes, Castillo says she already has a plan for the Chrysler.

“I'm going to give it back,” she said.

For now, Castillo will continue to reap the benefits of having dependable transportation. The family moved out of the Thonotosassa trailer and into a rental house in Temple Terrace. When school starts, Castillo will be able to drive her daughter instead of hoping she catches the bus. And, best of all, she received a promotion at work. Soon Castillo will be a second assistant.

“It's been one miracle after another,” she said.

The new job comes with better hours and salaried, not hourly, pay. It wouldn't have been possible without a car.

“I have reliable transportation,” Castillo said. “My availability is wide open.”

Jacobs said Castillo is a true success story. For her one-year anniversary with Connie, the nonprofit will give Castillo the gift of paper. A title, to be exact.

For Castillo, that means one thing: “Connie is mine.”

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