

SEASON OF CARING

She's still standing

Rescue mission in Tustin helps widow deal with cancer and two children.

By **ERIKA M. TORRES**
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

TUSTIN • Sondra Lewis, a single mother with two jobs, doesn't have as much time as she'd like to spend with her two children.

Lewis enjoyed a recent afternoon off from her jobs as a hairdresser and a clerk in a grocery store to play with her 6-year-old daughter, Ginger.

"Are you having f-u-n?" Lewis asked her, spelling out the last word to help increase the first-grader's spelling.

Life has been more chaotic than fun for Lewis the last couple of years.

More than two years ago, Lewis was diagnosed with cervical cancer a few months after her husband committed suicide. Having to take time off from work for

her treatments, Lewis ended up losing her job at a hospital.

"It was just one tragedy after another that befell my family," she said. "And I didn't know how to be a leader."

Despite being tired from the odd hours and time spent on her feet, Lewis doesn't complain; she's grateful to be working and to have the Orange County Rescue Mission in her life.

"It's a phenomenal support system, financially, spiritually and emotionally," Lewis said of the organization.

The Rescue Mission in Tustin is one of 20 organizations that make up The Orange County Register's Season of Caring campaign, the annual effort that raises money for local charities.

As part of Season of Caring, the Register and the Orange County Community Foundation will make a substantial donation toward organizations such as the residential home for youths in crisis.

"We've learned a lot of lessons in humili-

SEE **CARING** • PAGE 7



JEFFREY ANTENORE, FOR THE REGISTER

SURVIVORS: Sondra Lewis and her daughter Ginger, 6, walk in a Huntington Beach park.

CARING

FROM PAGE 1

ty from all of this," Lewis said.

Unable to pay rent after losing her job, Lewis moved out of the apartment she lived in for 11 years. With Ginger and her 16-year-old son, who declined to be named for this article, Lewis moved in with family members and then friends. After exhausting all their options, she realized she had nowhere else to go.

"I felt so ashamed that I had to ask for help," she said.

She wrote an e-mail to the Rescue Mission more than a year ago, and within months, she had moved into a two-bedroom apartment in Huntington Beach.

Lewis attended weekly sessions with Joel Gumbayan, a case manager at the Rescue Mission, who helped her set goals every week. The organization has helped Lewis with her electric bill, food costs and car registration. Her family has even been "adopted" by another family for the holidays through the Rescue Mission's Sleigh Bells program.

"She knows we want them to get stable and get caught up, but we don't want them to get dependent upon our services," Gumbayan said. "In light of the things she's had to go through,

To donate

Contributions to the Season of Caring may be made by sending in the coupon, calling 714-796-2280 or donating online at **www.ocregister.com/seasonofcaring**.

- 100 percent of contributions will be distributed among 20 charities that assist the hungry, homeless and disadvantaged in Orange County.
- For a listing of the agencies, go to **www.ocregister.com/seasonofcaring**.
- Together, the Orange County Community Foundation and The Orange County Register will make a substantial gift toward the campaign.

she's doing great."

Lewis has been cancer-free for a year now, is looking for a better-paying job, and her son recently won an academic achievement award for most improvement at his high school. While there are still bad days, she knows she can always count on her counselor at the Rescue Mission to lend an ear.

"As unfortunate as our situation has been, we've been so fortunate," Lewis said. "I've gained so much strength that I didn't know I had."