



Five years ago, **Willy and Esperanza** walked into the Greater Cleveland Food Bank for the first time and their lives were changed for the better. They weren't exactly sure what services were by the Food Bank, but they were interested to learn more.

Esperanza (Espe) and Willy are originally from the Philippines. They came to the United States in 1994, first settling in Ohio, moving to Washington for a brief time, and then coming back to the Cleveland area to settle. "We have a daughter here," explained Willy.

One day in 2014, Espe and Willy were visiting the Social Security Office next door to the Food Bank. "We saw there were lots of people coming to the Food Bank. Then, we came here and asked why there were so many people. We went upstairs to the Help Center and we met Akilah," Espe explained. That was the beginning of a wonderful relationship between Willy, Espe, and Akilah.

Akilah immediately stepped in to aid Willy and Espe. She gave them information on food pantries in their town, got them the future dates for Food Bank produce distributions, and started a SNAP application.

But soon, language barriers proved an issue for Willy and Espe during their benefits application. "The paperwork is very confusing to people who speak and read English," Akilah explained. "We asked for an interpreter." Unfortunately, Espe and Willy weren't able to get an interpreter to assist in their SNAP application interview. However, Akilah was permitted to sit

in on the interview. Eventually, Espe and Willy were able to acquire SNAP benefits, which were able to supplement the small amount of income they received from working part time.

Then, Akilah explains “They cut their hours and we had to work to get their food stamps increased. And then, their employer dropped them. So, they had a loss of income and we had to get them an increase in benefits.” Throughout their employment struggles, Espe and Willy turned to Akilah and the Food Bank time and time again. Now, Akilah is Espe and Willy’s authorized representative for Jobs and Family Services. “She is the one helping us” said Espe. “If we have a problem we don’t understand, we go to her. She’s like my family.”



Willy, Espe, and Akilah at the Food Bank’s Produce Distribution.

Over the last five years, life hasn’t always been easy for Espe and Willy. They’ve been married for 58 years and have six children and 21 grandchildren. Recently, they lost a granddaughter. The loss was hard, but Akilah was still there to support them. “When they lost their grandchild,” she explained, “I found out I was related to their grandchild. I became family.” Espe smiled, a small tear appearing in the corner of her eye. The connection between these two and Akilah is apparent.



Volunteer at a Food Bank Produce Distribution.

Beyond receiving assistance from Akilah and the Greater Cleveland Food Bank’s Help Center, Espe and Willy attend the Food Bank’s monthly produce distributions at the Food Bank’s distribution center. “We like it because we can cook the vegetables. And after you eat, you can have the fruit,” Espe explains. Each month, the Food Bank distributes fresh fruits and vegetables and other nutritious foods to hundreds of families.

“She’s a good cook. So she can cook things people might not know what to do with,” Akilah said about Espe, who talked excitedly about some of her favorite, traditional Filipino dishes.

“She’s always cooking Filipino food with the vegetables we get here. And rice! I love the rice. We eat rice 2-3 times a day,”

Willy said with a smile. He explained that he'd eat more rice, but his doctor told him to cut back since his sugar levels are a bit higher than normal.

“There would be a big difference without Akilah,” explained Espe, “Less food. I'm so happy!” Now, Espe and Willy don't work. They receive a small, fixed income from Social Security. The benefits they receive, thanks to help from Akilah, make ends meet.

And Akilah is happy to help. “Now, they just bring everything and put it on my desk and trust me to make the right decision,” she explained with a smile. “The biggest challenge is the language barrier. We've just been able to muddle through it. I think there's one central language that everybody knows – and it's love. Because I care about them and they care about me, we're able to have an open line of communication because they are so nice, understanding and patient with me.”

“She's the one to call when we need help,” Espe said. “She's my daughter.”

In the end, Espe and Willy's lives have been improved dramatically, despite hardship. Over the last five years, they've endured loss – loss of income, work, and a loved one. That's not an easy burden for anyone to bear. But despite these challenges, these two seniors are thriving, thanks to the support they received from Akilah and others in the Greater Cleveland Food Bank's Help Center.



Espe registering to receive free, fresh produce at the Food Bank's Produce Distribution.

