Paula Cortez

Identifying Data: Paula Cortez is a 43-year-old Catholic Hispanic female residing in New York City, NY. Paula was born in Colombia. When she was 17 years old, Paula left Colombia and moved to New York where she met David, who later became her husband. Paula and David have one son, Miguel, 20 years old. They divorced after 5 years of marriage. Paula has a five-year-old daughter, Maria, from a different relationship.

Presenting Problem: Paula has multiple medical issues, and there is concern about whether she will be able to continue to care for her youngest child, Maria. Paula has been overwhelmed, especially since she again stopped taking her medication. Paula is also concerned about the wellness of Maria.

Family Dynamics: Paula comes from a moderately well-to-do family. Paula reports suffering physical and emotional abuse at the hands of both her parents, eventually fleeing to New York to get away from the abuse. Paula comes from an authoritarian family where her role was to be “seen and not heard.” Paula states that she did not feel valued by any of her family members and reports never receiving the attention she needed. As a teenager, she realized she felt “not good enough” in her family system, which led to her leaving for New York and looking for “someone to love me.” Her parents still reside in Colombia with Paula’s two siblings.

Paula met David when she sought to purchase drugs. They married when Paula was 18 years old. The couple divorced after 5 years of marriage. Paula raised Miguel, mostly by herself, until he was 8 years old, at which time she was forced to relinquish custody due to her medical condition. Paula maintains a relationship with her son, Miguel, and her ex-husband, David. Miguel takes part in caring for his half-sister, Maria.

Paula does believe her job as a mother is to take care of Maria but is finding that more and more challenging with her physical illnesses.

Employment History: Paula worked for a clothing designer, but she realized that her true passion was painting. She has a collection of more than 100 drawings and paintings, many of which track the course of her personal and emotional journey. Paula held a fulltime job for a number of years before her health prevented her from working. She is now unemployed and receives Supplemental Security Disability Insurance (SSD) and Medicaid. Miguel does his best to help his mom but only works part time at a local supermarket delivering groceries.

Paula currently uses federal and state services. Paula successfully applied for WIC, the federal Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children. Given Paula’s low income, health, and Medicaid status, Paula is able to receive in-home childcare assistance through New York’s public assistance program.

Social History: Paula is bilingual, fluent in both Spanish and English. Although Paula identifies as Catholic, she does not consider religion to be a big part of her life. Paula lives with her daughter in an apartment in Queens, NY. Paula is socially isolated as she has limited contact with her family in Colombia and lacks a peer network of any kind in her neighborhood.

Five (5) years ago Paula met a man (Jesus) at a flower shop. They spoke several times. He would visit her at her apartment to have sex. Since they had an active sex life, Paula thought he was a “stand-up guy” and really liked him. She believed he would take care of her. Soon everything changed. Paula began to suspect that he was using drugs, because he had started to become controlling and demanding. He showed up at her apartment at all times of the night demanding to be let in. He called her relentlessly, and when she did not pick up the phone, he left her mean and threatening messages. Paula was fearful for her safety and thought her past behavior with drugs and sex brought on bad relationships with men and that she did not deserve better. After a couple of months, Paula realized she was pregnant. Jesus stated he did not want anything to do with the “kid” and stopped coming over, but he continued to contact and threaten Paula by phone. Paula has no contact with Jesus at this point in time due to a restraining order.

Mental Health History: Paula was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. She experiences periods of mania lasting for a couple of weeks then goes into a depressive state for months when not properly medicated. Paula has a tendency toward paranoia. Paula has a history of not complying with her psychiatric medication treatment because she does not like the way it makes her feel. She often discontinues it without telling her psychiatrist. Paula has had multiple psychiatric hospitalizations but has remained out of the hospital for the past 5 years. Paula accepts her bipolar diagnosis but demonstrates limited insight into the relationship between her symptoms and her medication.

Paula reports that when she was pregnant, she was fearful for her safety due to the baby’s father’s anger about the pregnancy. Jesus’ relentless phone calls and voicemails rattled Paula. She believed she had nowhere to turn. At that time, she became scared, slept poorly, and her paranoia increased significantly. After completing a suicide assessment 5 years ago, it was noted that Paula was decompensating quickly and was at risk of harming herself and/or her baby. Paula was involuntarily admitted to the psychiatric unit of the hospital. Paula remained on the unit for 2 weeks.

Educational History: Paula completed high school in Colombia. Paula had hoped to attend the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) in New York City, but getting divorced, then raising Miguel on her own interfered with her plans. Miguel attends college full time in New York City.

Medical History: Paula was diagnosed as HIV positive 15 years ago. Paula acquired AIDS three years later when she was diagnosed with a severe brain infection and a Tcell count of less than 200. Paula’s brain infection left her completely paralyzed on the right side. She lost function in her right arm and hand as well as the ability to walk. After a long stay in an acute care hospital in New York City, Paula was transferred to a skilled nursing facility (SNF) where she thought she would die. After being in the skilled nursing facility for more than a year, Paula regained the ability to walk, although she does so with a severe limp. She also regained some function in her right arm. Her right hand (her dominant hand) remains semi-paralyzed and limp. Over the course of several years, Paula taught herself to paint with her left hand and was able to return to her beloved art.

Paula began treatment for her HIV/AIDS with highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART). Since she ran away from the family home, married and divorced a drug user, then was in an abusive relationship, Paula thought she deserved what she got in life. She responded well to HAART and her HIV/AIDS was well controlled. In addition to her HIV/AIDS disease, Paula is diagnosed with Hepatitis C (Hep C). While this condition was controlled, it has reached a point where Paula’s doctor is recommending she begin a new treatment. Paula also has significant circulatory problems, which cause her severe pain in her lower extremities. She uses prescribed narcotic pain medication to control her symptoms. Paula’s circulatory problems have also led to chronic ulcers on her feet that will not heal. Treatment for her foot ulcers demands frequent visits to a wound care clinic. Paula’s pain paired with the foot ulcers make it difficult for her to ambulate and leave her home. Paula has a tendency not to comply with her medical treatment. She often disregards instructions from her doctors and resorts to holistic treatments like treating her ulcers with chamomile tea. When she stops her treatment, she deteriorates quickly. Maria was born HIV negative and received the appropriate HAART treatment after birth. She spent a week in the neonatal intensive care unit as she had to detox from the effects of the pain medication Paula took throughout her pregnancy.

Legal History: Previously, Paula used the AIDS Law Project, a not-for-profit organi nization that helps individuals with HIV address legal issues, such as those related to the child’s father . At that time, Paula filed a police report in response to Jesus' escalating threats and successfully got a restraining order. Once the order was served, the phone calls and visits stopped, and Paula regained a temporary sense of control over her life. Paula completed the appropriate permanency planning paperwork with the assistance of the organization The Family Center. She named Miguel as her daughter’s guardian should something happen to her.

Alcohol and Drug Use History: Paula became an intravenous drug user (IVDU), using cocaine and heroin, at age 17. David was one of Paula’s “drug buddies” and suppliers. Paula continued to use drugs in the United States for several years; however, she stopped when she got pregnant with Miguel. David continued to use drugs, which led to the failure of their marriage.

Strengths: Paula has shown her resilience over the years. She has artistic skills and has found a way to utilize them. Paula has the foresight to seek social services to help her and her children survive. Paula has no legal involvement. She has the ability to bounce back from her many physical and health challenges to continue to care for her child and maintain her household.

David Cortez: father, 46 years old

Paula Cortez: mother, 43 years old

Miguel Cortez: son, 20 years old

Jesus (unknown):

Maria’s father, 44 years old

Maria Cortez: daughter, 5 years old