



# Jennifer Beltran: Serving the Community



Fierce competitor: Jennifer Beltran celebrates with her University of Illinois teammates. They score a point during the 2011 NCAA women's college volleyball championship. *AP Images/Darren Abate*

Most university students in the United States relax over spring break. But Jennifer Beltran does not. She is at work. Jennifer is a star volleyball player. She plays for the University of Illinois. She spends her spring break helping to run a volleyball camp. Her students are from an elementary school in the inner city of Los Angeles.

"I get to interact with them, I get to talk to them, and, hopefully, in some ways, I get to inspire them," Jennifer said.

Jennifer is now a successful student and athlete. But she grew up in the inner city of Los Angeles. She knows that it is hard to grow up in a neighborhood without many resources. Her mother is a single parent from El Salvador. It was difficult for Jennifer's mom to support her.

"I didn't have anyone to look up to who was a father figure. My biological father was there on and off when I was really young, but it wasn't the way it should have been," she explained.

Then she met Gustavo Beltran.

## FATHER FIGURE

Gustavo was a kindergarten aide at Jennifer's school. He found out she was the only child of a single mother. He wanted to help Jennifer. He became her father figure. He began babysitting her after school. He helped her with homework. He helped her with her after-school sports.

Gustavo soon saw that Jennifer was a great athlete. He saw that she was very good at volleyball. Gustavo has a wife named Virna. They both gave their time and money to Jennifer. They wanted



Ready to serve: Jennifer Beltran pauses. She serves for the University of Illinois in a 2011 national semifinals game against the University of Southern California. *ZUMA Press/San Antonio Express-News/Tom Reel*

her to turn her talent into an opportunity.

Jennifer recalls that Gustavo and his wife “were there every step of the way — making sure to correct my every mistake, making sure to encourage me, making sure to remind me of where volleyball could take me and what I could do with it.”

The Beltrons spent all their money on Jennifer’s volleyball career. “They did a lot of things for me that sometimes a normal parent wouldn’t do for their kid,” Jennifer said.

Jennifer was born with the last name Bonilla. But she took her mentor’s last name. She wanted to show him how thankful she is.

“Gustavo is like a father to me,” she told ESPN.

### PROVIDING OPPORTUNITIES

The Beltrons’ emotional and financial support paid off. Today Jennifer goes to the University of Illinois. This is one of the most athletically competitive universities in the United States. She is on an athletic scholarship. Jennifer is receiving a top education for free. She is the first member of her family to attend college.

“A lot of times, it’s hard for kids in my community to find support like that and I totally understand why. I was just fortunate that I found -” she stopped herself “- that a family found me.”

Jennifer is thankful to Gustavo. She is glad that he pushed her toward volleyball. She says volleyball gave her opportunities she did not know about. She never thought she would go to college. Her biggest goal is to earn a degree in kinesiology. Kinesiology is the study of human movement. After that, she hopes to play overseas with the U.S. national volleyball team.

When she is not at school, Jennifer goes home to help with volleyball camp.

“The reason I always come back is because I want these kids to have an opportunity too,” she said. “I want to be that example, to say you can do it too.”

Her mentor, Gustavo, runs the camp.