

HRA helps couple out of poverty

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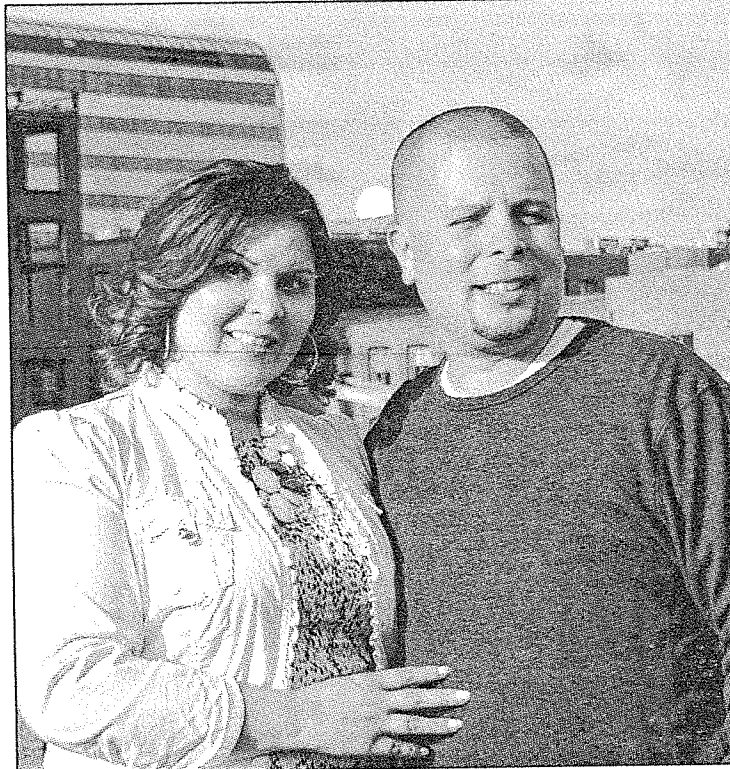
NEW BRITAIN — A local couple who struggled with poverty a decade ago has become a success story for the Human Resources Agency of New Britain.

Sheila Fuster and Luis Ortiz are New Britain natives, now living in Hartford, who faced a string of difficult circumstances in the mid-2000s.

While employed at Dunkin Donuts, Fuster's car broke down and she had no money to fix it. Without transportation she lost her job, and when unemployment wasn't enough to pay the rent she got evicted.

Ortiz, who worked several low-paying jobs without a high school diploma, had been laid off from a plumbing job when he met Fuster on his birthday in 2006. The two quickly fell in love and realized they both wanted the same thing — to get out of poverty.

With two children in tow, Fuster was receiving state aid and living in public housing. HRA's Energy Program kept her family warm and helped with rental assistance when money ran out. A local food pantry helped feed them. The children attended HRA's Head Start Program while she worked, and The VITA (Volunteer Income Tax



Sheila Fuster and Luis Ortiz received assistance from HRA.

Assistance) Program saved her money.

Ortiz, meanwhile, had been living with his parents and cutting hair at a local barber shop. He encouraged Fuster to earn her GED. In turn, she encouraged him to return to plumbing. The couple worked together to reach

their goals.

After earning her high school diploma, Fuster went on to earn an associate's degree and bachelor's degree in human services. She eventually applied for a job at the Wheeler Clinic, serving as an outreach case manager for substance abuse and mental health.

She is now working on getting a master's degree in marriage and family therapy, and she wants to open her own marriage and family counseling center.

Ortiz followed through in applying for a plumbing job Fuster saw advertised. It took time, but he was eventually offered a job as a third-year apprentice. Next year, he will complete his fifth year as a plumber/pipefitter, with his next goal to become a welder.

Today, Fuster and Ortiz are proud to no longer qualify for poverty assistance. Fuster's only regret is "I wasn't always there for my kids while I was in school."

Ortiz is happy to be working hard, making good money and having more time to enjoy their family. "I want our kids to do what they believe and to stick to it," he said.

The couple's lesson is that hard work is worth it, and HRA agrees. The organization's mission is to help low-income people become self-sufficient. Hard work and goal-setting are important, but sometimes a little extra help is needed.

Last year, HRA helped more than 24,000 individuals and families in greater New Britain.

For information on how to get assistance or get involved, visit hranbct.org.