



The New York Times

Neediest Cases 2011 - 2012



Since 1911, *The New York Times* Neediest Cases Fund has provided direct assistance to children, families and the elderly in New York. To celebrate the centennial anniversary of the Neediest Cases Campaign, *The New York Times* published 100 articles, which appeared daily from November 2011 through February 2012, featuring inspiring stories of those who have been helped at seven major New York City nonprofit organizations, including Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens.

Without the continued support of caring individuals and *The New York Times* Neediest Cases Fund, many would be without the help they so desperately need. Contributions from supporters like you ensure the continuation of this Fund and, more importantly, the survival of our programs and services for children, youth, adults, seniors, the developmentally disabled, those struggling with mental illness and the isolated. You can help by making your check payable to “Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens” (please indicate that it is a “Neediest Cases” gift).

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March 2012

Dear Friends,

In 2011, we celebrated the 100th anniversary of *The New York Times* Neediest Cases Fund. As one of seven beneficiary agencies of the Neediest Cases Fund, Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens utilizes this indispensable resource to serve our neighbors, ensuring that every dollar raised by the Fund reaches those who need it most.

To commemorate the Fund's centennial, *The New York Times* published 100 Neediest Cases articles in 100 days. Enclosed you will find stories of those we have helped through the Fund and whose lives have been changed by the work of Catholic Charities. Lives such as Natasha Sydney's, a single mother with three daughters who lost her job and was forced to move in with her mother to make ends meet. Unable to keep up with storage fees, the storage company auctioned all of her belongings including furniture, clothing and household items. Ms. Sydney, now gainfully employed as a home health aide, was fortunate to obtain a new apartment; however, she could not afford to replace what was lost. With the Neediest Cases Fund, we were able to purchase beds for her and her children.

As soon as Ms. Sydney's story was published in *The New York Times*, we received calls from generous individuals hoping to furnish her entire apartment which, aside from the beds, remained bare. Through this generosity, Ms. Sydney's home is now fully furnished, along with another one of our families in need. Donors, who could not help Ms. Sydney, were happy to help other families like hers. While each individual has a personal story that is unique to them, each Neediest Cases story is representative of the lives of many of the families we serve.

Each year, *The New York Times* Neediest Cases Campaign casts a powerful spotlight on individuals struggling to survive. With help from the money raised by the Neediest Cases Fund, Catholic Charities can continue to provide stability in times of crisis and help individuals achieve greater self-sufficiency.

We are deeply grateful for our partnership with *The New York Times* and to the thousands of individuals who contribute to the Neediest Cases Fund and to Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens. Without the continued support of caring individuals and the Neediest Cases Fund, thousands of our neighbors would be without the help they so desperately need. Please accept this booklet as a token of our appreciation for your support and invaluable partnership in this important work.

Sincerely,



Robert Siebel
Chief Executive Officer

Far From Home and Fighting a Rare Disease



Elfreda McMillan and staff at the SUNY Parkside Dialysis Center in Brooklyn gather around Thonn McMillan as he receives dialysis treatment. Photo Credit: Sephora Rosario.



By ANDREA RICE

Numbers tell a stark story of Thonn McMillan's battle for survival against

a rare disease that has wreaked havoc on his body.

He is 17 years old and weighs 85 pounds. Two 15-gauge needles are inserted into a skin graft in his fragile left arm when he undergoes dialysis. He takes 28 pills and limits his drinking water to 12 ounces every day to ensure the dialysis proceeds without complications. He spends three days a week for nearly four hours at a time

receiving treatment because of a disease that has a grand and barely pronounceable name, Wegener's granulomatosis, and causes inflammation of the arteries and veins, making it hard for blood to flow to the body's organs.

Thonn's disease was left untreated in Grenada for so long, his mother said, that his kidneys, lungs, heart and brain have been damaged. Evidently, he had been treated for tuberculosis instead.

On a recent Thursday, Thonn sat in a chair at SUNY-Parkside Dialysis Center in Brooklyn and quietly endured the medical regimen, his eyes affixed to a science comic book, States of

Matter. After dialysis, patients can feel weak and nauseated, sometimes experiencing significant head, chest and stomach pain — and the tears often flow.

"The bad thing is when they cry, you cry," said Patricia Hackney, a nurse administrator at SUNY-Parkside Dialysis.

But on this day, Thonn did not cry. His eyes, wise beyond his years, conveyed his struggles. But his mother, Elfreda McMillan, told of his journey. In 2009, Ms. McMillan, 47, left her three daughters, husband and 4-year-old grandson behind in Grenada to bring Thonn to New York. She hoped medicine and technology here would find out

what was wrong. The doctors in Grenada were unable to provide the correct diagnosis, she said, and Thonn's lungs began to collapse.

In New York, scans showed he had a large tumorlike mass in his lungs, and he had surgery to drain it. He also suffered seizures. Dialysis became his means of survival.

When the kidneys fail, dialysis removes the toxins accumulated in the body that those organs would normally flush out. The first needle brings about 350 cubic centimeters of blood into a machine that cleans it. The second injects the clean blood back into the body. Because the skin forms calluses from the punctures, the graft eases the pain of the insertions.

"The first day I saw the dialysis, I could not take it," Ms. McMillan said. When Thonn's father visited during their first year in New York, she recalled, he cried, too.

"There was a year when he made me cry so much and he said, 'Mommy, I pray to God that he won't take you now because I need you to take care of me,' " Ms. McMillan said. "And, oh, how I cried that day."

Since arriving in the United States, the two have been staying with a cousin, her boyfriend and their two children on Rockaway Parkway in Brooklyn. Ms. McMillan and her son share a bed in a small room cluttered with medical to-do lists and their possessions, including Thonn's guitar and drawings.



"There was a year when he made me cry so much and he said, 'Mommy, I pray to God that he won't take you now because I need you to take care of me,' " Ms. McMillan said.

He specializes in faces, Mickey Mouse, President Obama, Queen Latifah, the doctors and nurses at the hospital. A basketball fan, Thonn is unable to play sports because his bones are so fragile.

When his mother teased him about a girl he saw the other day, he said, "Yeah, she was pretty — but that don't mean nothing."

Since he was in New York getting medical treatment, Ms. McMillan decided to enroll him in school. Thonn wants to be an architect, and is a sophomore at South Shore High School/Academy for Conservation and the Environment in Canarsie,

Brooklyn. Math is his favorite subject, she said.

Because they are on visitors' visas, Ms. McMillan is unable to work legally in the United States. They rely on the generosity of family and their social workers at Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens, one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund. She said Thonn's medical expenses are covered in full by the Neighborhood Health Providers, a Medicaid managed-care program.

He spends every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday receiving dialysis, so he misses those days of school. To help him keep up with his studies, Catholic Charities drew \$579.99 from the Neediest Cases Fund toward the purchase of an HP Pavilion laptop. Thonn also received a \$275 Target gift card to buy clothes.

Ms. McMillan is working with a lawyer, who helps them pro bono, to renew their visas every six months. Mother and son have not been back to Grenada to see their family for fear that they would not be able to re-enter the United States. Most patients like Thonn are typically put on a transplant list to receive a new kidney. But because of his immigration status, he is not eligible.

"He wishes he could get a kidney and everything will be O.K.," his mother said. "He wants to live and grow up and be what he wants to be."

After Months of Making Do, a Mother Is Ready to Once Again Make a Home



Once homeless, Elizabeth and James Johnson-McKinney and their daughter Destiny enjoy their new home. Photo Credit: Sephora Rosario.



By MARVIN ANDERSON

Elizabeth Johnson-McKinney surprised her son, Xavier,

when she told him they were moving to a bigger house.

"I told my son a lie," she said. "I couldn't tell him the reality."

Ms. Johnson-McKinney — homeless, hungry and one month pregnant — was actually moving her family to a HELP USA shelter in Brooklyn.

"I couldn't sleep," she recalled. That first night in the shelter, she sat next to her husband, James McKinney, 30, watching her two sleeping children —

Destiny Johnson, 3, and Xavier Johnson, 6 — and rummaging through their belongings, reliving their eviction. In April, Ms. Johnson-McKinney, 25, had lost her full-time job as a case manager for Community Access, a social services organization. Her \$40,000 salary had been the family's main source of income.

"We were one paycheck away from being homeless," she said. "We never thought this would happen to us."

In May, the financial strain became so overwhelming that they could not afford the rent, and they were forced to leave their apartment in Queens, where they had lived for three years. At the shelter, every possession they owned had to fit into eight bins, the allotted limit.

The bulk of their photographs and furniture was trashed or sold as the family began a new life with practically nothing.

"Most people would have given up," said Fia Sarmi, a caseworker at Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens who helped the family. But Ms. Johnson-McKinney said she had a mission.

"This isn't our home," she recalled telling her family at the shelter. "Don't get comfortable. We're getting out."

Every day, she left the shelter — infested with roaches and water bugs, she said, and in need of repair — to take Xavier to school before searching for jobs. The employment hunt turned desperate, she said, because she feared her family members

were becoming like some of her neighbors, adjusting to life in the shelter instead of trying to leave.

"We didn't want that," she said. "My goal was to get us back to where we were — at home, eating together like a family."

The family faced another blow when Mr. McKinney was laid off from his part-time job as a security officer with Global Security Associates at Kennedy International Airport. "That's when things went downhill again," Ms. Johnson-McKinney said.

For the first time, the family had to get help for its basic needs and turned to the food pantry at Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens. Ms. Johnson-McKinney and Mr. McKinney began to argue more, and the fabric of the family seemed to rip at the seams.

"I didn't know if our marriage would survive," she said. But somehow, they grew closer as they navigated the financial straits.

"This made our family bond stronger," Mr. McKinney said. "We began to argue less. We worked together."

Tensions eased even more with the thought of a new baby or when they were in the presence of their children. Xavier and Destiny's smiles and joy were the glue that maintained the relationship, both parents said.

"We hear, 'You're the best parents in the world,' and we knew we couldn't give up," she said.

Ms. Johnson-McKinney eventually landed a job as a security officer at Broadway House Women's Shelter in Brooklyn, making \$10 an hour. It was not her dream job, but it was a new beginning, one in which she has the opportunity to inspire women who face similar obstacles.

She says she tells them: "My family keeps me dedicated. Never become satisfied here."

Mr. McKinney has had no luck finding another job, and he baby-sits for Destiny while Xavier — who has a learning disability, for which the family receives \$697 a month in Supplemental Security Income — attends school. With Ms. Johnson-McKinney constantly working overtime and stretching every dollar, the family moved out of the shelter and into a \$1,400-a-month three-bedroom apartment in Brownsville, Brooklyn, four months after the eviction.

"We couldn't have been any happier to leave," Ms. Johnson-McKinney said in her new living room. But all the family could afford was a bunk bed for the children, as well as a large red sofa and a love seat used for family dinners and gatherings.

Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens, one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, drew \$500 from the fund to buy the family a queen-size bed frame, a box spring and a mattress for the family. Ms. Sarmi, the caseworker, said the agency was also planning to

help the family find baby sitters and other services during Ms. Johnson-McKinney's pregnancy. Mother and father are hoping for a boy and have already picked out a name: Elijah.

Recently, Ms. Johnson-McKinney had a tea party with her daughter. The two spread a toy tea set across the tile floor and sipped from empty cups. They used plastic knives to cut away at the air in their living room, bare except for the red two-piece furniture set, a small television and a portrait of a sunset.

They are reclaiming their lives with small steps, Ms. Johnson-McKinney said, adding, "We are starting over."

She wants to repaint the apartment, add more furniture and replace family pictures lost during their eviction.

"I'm going to get everything we lost back," she said. "All of it."

Expectant Mother and Family Forge Ahead

With a new baby on the way, Elizabeth and her family could use all the help they can get. One reader, inspired that Elizabeth helped her family get back on their feet, sent her a monetary gift and shared a few uplifting words: "Tell her that perseverance and hard work each day will pay off. That her and her husband have reached bottom and there is nowhere else to go but the TOP!"

After Tropical Storm, Flooded Apartment Is Just One More Obstacle to Overcome



Both blind as a result of a genetic disorder, Yugely Nunez and her 1-year-old daughter, Yumely, received help to purchase furniture and winter clothing damaged by flooding during Hurricane Irene. Photo Credit: Sephora Rosario.



By MATTHEW R. WARREN

The day after Tropical Storm Irene hit New York, in August, Yugely Nuñez

walked into her basement apartment in Brooklyn and stepped into a nightmare.

As she entered the home she had evacuated days earlier,

water rushed over her flip-flops and rose above her ankles. She then noticed the odor. Her apartment, in Sunset Park, had been flooded by rain and sewage water that had seeped from under the building.

"The smell was terrible," Ms. Nuñez said in Spanish, reliving the horror she felt that day. "I started to cry."

Although she could not see the flood damage, she could sense it. Ms. Nuñez, 34, has been

legally blind her whole life.

"I see a little light and shadows, but I can't see colors or faces," she said. Her daughter, Yumely Nuñez, 1, is also legally blind, as are her mother and a sister because of a genetic condition.

Growing up in Bonao in the Dominican Republic, Ms. Nuñez faced crushing poverty. Her father, a farm worker, died when she was 14, she said, leaving her already struggling family to depend on the income of

another sister, who was 15 and earned a meager wage sewing in a factory.

"There were days when we ate and days when we didn't," Ms. Nuñez said.

Ms. Nuñez's family could not afford to send her to a school for the blind, so she taught herself to cope with her condition. "For me it wasn't difficult," she said. "I adapted to it."

Recently, walking in the apartment she shared with her husband, Raphael Nuñez, and daughter, Ms. Nuñez, who has a lean face and long, straight black hair, ran her hand across the wall, feeling her way to her bedroom. She has memorized the apartment's layout, having lived there since moving to the United States three years ago.

In front of a warped wooden dresser, Ms. Nuñez knelt to show how she opened the bottom drawer that day after the storm to find her daughter's clothes ruined. Winter coats in a closet were also damaged beyond repair.

After two days, her landlord pumped out the water, and with a home care attendant's help, the family did its best to clean the apartment, using bleach to scrub the floors, walls and furniture.

With her daughter crawling and beginning to walk, Ms. Nuñez was concerned about a couch that the flood had ravaged, peeling its leather and exposing pieces of its metal frame.



"Ms. Nuñez...ran her hand across the wall, feeling her way to her bedroom. She has memorized the apartment's layout... Ms. Nuñez knelt to show how she opened the bottom drawer that day after the storm to find her daughter's clothes ruined. Winter coats in a closet were also damaged beyond repair."

"She could have hurt herself with the jagged edges of the frame or put pieces of the leather in her mouth," Ms. Nuñez said, holding Yumely.

Before Yumely was born,

Ms. Nuñez went to Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens, one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, for help finding classes for the blind in English as a second language. After the flood, the agency drew \$375 from the fund to help the family buy a couch and \$350.58 for new winter coats and clothing for Yumely.

Because the one-bedroom apartment remains prone to flooding, the Nuñezes are looking to move out as soon as possible and are awaiting placement in public housing. The family's only source of income is \$367 a month in food stamps and \$1,001 in Social Security disability benefits that Mr. Nuñez, 60, who is retired, receives every month because of an asthma condition. They pay \$780 a month in rent.

Ms. Nuñez plans to start E.S.L. classes again, something she had delayed during her pregnancy. She would also like to take computer classes and learn to use a screen reader program for the blind so that she can find a job.

But Ms. Nuñez's biggest hopes are for Yumely, who has had two operations on her eyes to restore some of her vision. Ms. Nuñez looks forward to the day her daughter begins going to school.

"I feel good for her," Ms. Nuñez said as Yumely twirled her mother's hair. "I'm proud that she can have the things I couldn't."

Putting Others Ahead, and Then Falling Behind



Grieving from the loss of her brother, Michelle Gore and her son Dennis received help with rent arrears preventing eviction. Photo Credit: Richard Perry/The New York Times/Redux.



By ALAN FEUER

There is a certain type of woman who is good at taking care of everyone

but herself. She is the sort who, when her older brother is suffering from a lung disease, will sit beside his bed on Staten Island and encourage him, in the most determined words, to get up on his feet and move about the house. She is also the one who, when this brother dies, will set aside a portion of her \$81 weekly unemployment

check to ensure he receives a proper burial.

She is a fixer of dinner and a folder of laundry — and, most of all, a worrier over her children's well-being. You know this woman by the humorously frustrated sign she posts on a cabinet in her kitchen: "If you can't clean, don't cook." The photos on her walls say things about her that she will not say about herself: they show parents, siblings, cousins, friends and neighbors. Which is to say, they show everybody's faces except her own.

Michelle Gore is that type of woman.

"I don't know — I just want to make sure that everybody else is, you know," Ms. Gore said the other day in her living room in the Louis H. Pink Houses in East New York, Brooklyn. Is what? she was asked. She shrugged, seeming embarrassed to continue. "Is, you know, happy before I am," she said. "I don't want anyone left out."

Ms. Gore, 45, was the one left out in September, when she suddenly discovered she could not make the \$537-a-month rent on her seventh-floor apartment.

She and her two remaining siblings split the \$1,000 funeral bill. Ms. Gore, by then, was out of work. In February, she lost her job as a wheelchair attendant for a charter airline service at John F. Kennedy Airport after the company made budget cuts. This development was part of what she meant by "life."

Two things brought her to this pass, she said: death and life.

There was a lot of death in recent years. In August 2010, Ms. Gore's brother Tony Gore, who she said had been abandoned by his former wife and children, died of a leaky heart valve. That same year, the father of her youngest child, Dennis White, died of a brain aneurism. Before her other brother, Jackie, died on Staten Island in July, there were months of coughing fits and trips to the hospital.

"One day, he ran to the bathroom and was throwing up blood," recalled Ms. Gore, who would visit Jackie frequently with gifts of food and clothes and with stern words of reassurance. "Then he fell

down on the floor in his kitchen. The ambulance came, but they couldn't save him."

She and her two remaining siblings split the \$1,000 funeral bill. Ms. Gore, by then, was out of work. In February, she lost her job as a wheelchair attendant for a charter airline service at John F. Kennedy Airport after the company made budget cuts. This development was part of what she meant by "life."

Life also includes caring for Dennis, a large boy with a kind smile and a learning disability. Dennis attends Thomas Jefferson High School, where he is enrolled in the integrated co-teaching program, which is designed for students with disabilities. With the coming of autumn, there were new clothes and school supplies to buy. Dennis turned 18 in September.

Between paying for a funeral and catering to Dennis's needs, Ms. Gore found herself in the red. She sought assistance from Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens, one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund. Ms. Gore, the helper, received some help herself: \$537 to pay September's tardy rent.

"I get it from my mother," she said of her service to her family. Her mother, Mildred Gore, was from Chadbourn, N.C. She had eight children. "She's the one who taught me to keep the family together, to keep the house clean and cook and wash dishes," Ms. Gore said.

She smiled — or she tried to. "I do everything," she said.

Bereavement and Grief Counseling Available

Bereavement Services are offered to individuals on a one-on-one basis and in a support group setting at Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens. All bereaved individuals are helped regardless of faith, culture or gender orientation and, children ages three and older are welcomed at the Center for Support & Healing. In addition, Catholic Charities provides linkages to 40 bereavement support groups located within parishes throughout Brooklyn and Queens. These groups are tailored to general bereavement, as well as specific groups focused on miscarriage, neonatal, perinatal, sibling and parental loss. There are also several locations with Spanish-speaking groups. Catholic Charities Bereavement Services also offers Bereavement/Ministry of Consolation Training for Bereavement Facilitators in both English and Spanish. For more information visit www.ccbq.org or call 718-722-6214.

A Woman's Illness Recurs, but She Still Tries to Inspire Others



By MATHEW R. WARREN

Wonder Pearson knew something was wrong

when her typing speed began to drop. She had averaged 95 words a minute while working as an administrative assistant at the Internal Revenue Service in Atlanta. But in fall 1995, not only did she get drastically slower, but she also found it hard to remember what others said in meetings while she took notes, and she struggled to keep her balance.

Ms. Pearson was eventually told by a neurologist that she had lesions on her brain, and she was given a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis.

"I remember asking the doctor, 'Am I going to die?'" Ms. Pearson, 50, said recently. "He said, 'No, but your life will change tremendously.'"

At first, the disease seemed manageable to Ms. Pearson, a single mother who had a second job cleaning offices to support herself and her teenage daughter. For six months, she went on with her life as if everything were normal. Then, one evening, Ms. Pearson lay down and noticed that the right side of her body was very weak. Within hours, she was paralyzed.



Diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis, Wonder Pearson, a Brooklyn native, does not let her illness stop her from helping others. Photo Credit: Sephora Rosario.

"My muscles just gave way, and I couldn't even talk," she recalled.

For four months she was bedridden, unable to move or speak.

"It really scared me," she said. "I just lay there, and I became very depressed."

Slowly, with physical therapy and other treatment, Ms. Pearson regained her mobility and speech. She tried going back to work, but soon suffered a relapse.

A Brooklyn native, she decided to return to New York and to her mother, Roberta Young, a church pastor who adopted Ms. Pearson when she was 10. She

took a job as a secretary, but on a lunch break, she became disoriented and could not remember where her office was. Since then, she has not been able to hold a job.

"I want to go to work, but because of the ups and downs of my disease, I'm afraid," said Ms. Pearson, who has had numerous relapses over the years and is regularly struck by fatigue, blurry vision, numbness, slurred speech, memory loss and a loss of balance.

She has tried to find a job she can do from home, but so far she has been unsuccessful. She keeps herself busy by working to help others. Every second

Saturday of the month, inspired by the memory of her mother, who died of lung cancer in 2004, she hosts a women's Christian group in her apartment in Canarsie, Brooklyn.

"Everyone brings a pot of food and we fellowship," said Ms. Pearson, who speaks softly but confidently. Based in part on her experiences as a single mother, she said, "what I try to do in my program is teach women they are valuable in God's eyes."

"They don't have to compromise," she continued. "They can be courageous, independent women."

Ms. Pearson's daughter, Monique Pearson, now 31 and a high school English teacher, said she was impressed by her mother's drive to give others guidance and advice.

"Whoever my mother sees who needs a helping hand, she tries to help, despite her illness," Monique Pearson said. She has watched her mother persuade a recovering drug addict to go back to school, help another woman establish a business and teach others how to write résumés and look for jobs.

While Wonder Pearson feels she is fulfilling a calling by helping others, her own lack of employment has been a burden to her. Although Medicaid covers 80 percent of her health care costs, she owes about \$7,000 in medical bills. Ms. Pearson, who lives in public housing and pays \$304 a month in rent, receives \$1,019 a month in Social Security disability

benefits and \$111 in food stamps.

When doctors recommended that Ms. Pearson get a firmer mattress to help with muscle pain, she turned to Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens. She received \$470 from the fund to buy a mattress and \$232 for a new pair of glasses.

"It's very difficult for me to save," said Ms. Pearson, who has a shopping bag filled with unpaid bills. "Sometimes it's hard to even make my check stretch for the whole month."

Her daughter helps as much as she can, but she is a single mother with education debt.

When doctors recommended that Ms. Pearson get a firmer mattress to help with muscle pain, she turned to Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens, one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund. She received \$470 from the fund to buy a mattress and \$232 for a new pair of glasses.

Ms. Pearson cares for her 8-year-old grandson while her daughter teaches and attends classes for a second master's

degree. From home, she continues to look for work and is applying to the State Office of Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals With Disabilities to take classes in the hope that she will increase her chances of finding a job. Her dream is to expand her woman's group into a bigger space and offer cooking and computer workshops.

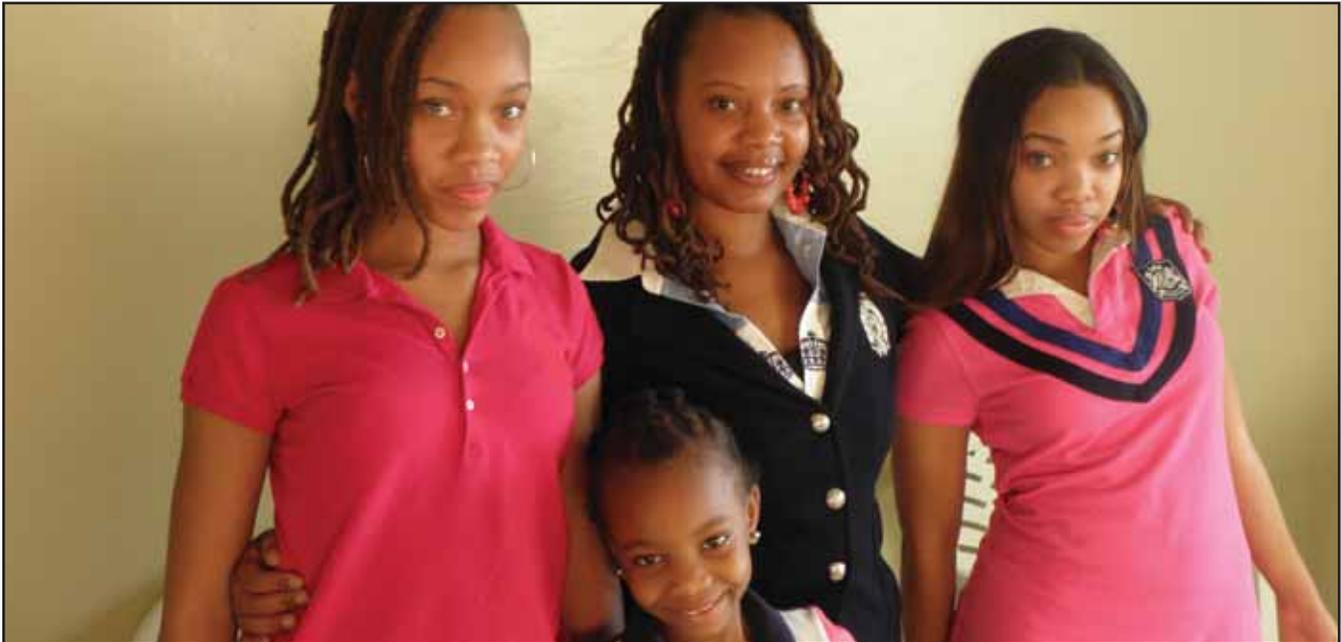
Her neurologist recently invited her to speak to a group of patients who had just received diagnoses of multiple sclerosis. Her message to them: Do not let the disease stop you from leading an active life.

And she follows that advice. "I will try before I give up," Ms. Pearson said. "I won't baby this condition."

Support Intensifies as Wonder Inspires Others

Support and love for Wonder has been so overflowing since her story ran that sometimes Wonder "feels like a celebrity." Inspired by her courage, Wonder's doctors and nurses, members of her church, friends and neighbors have all offered their support and encouragement for her work running a women's group and serving as a role model for others with Multiple Sclerosis.

Getting Her Dream Home, but Missing the Furniture



Single mother Natasha Sydney, center, with her daughters, 12-year-old Tianna, 6-year-old Myeira and 16-year-old Tyisha in their new apartment. Ms. Sydney received help furnishing their new but bare two-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn. Photo Credit: Sephora Rosario.



By ANN FARMER

Natasha Sydney's new home has a sunset view of the

Verrazano-Narrows Bridge and three "Happy Birthday" balloons hovering near the living room ceiling, but not much else.

That is because Ms. Sydney, 30, and her three daughters had nothing to furnish their two-bedroom apartment in the Sheepshead Bay Houses in Brooklyn, where they moved in August.

They borrowed some plastic lawn chairs to sit on. Unable to buy a table, they ate on

their laps. Ms. Sydney and her daughters also slept on the floor.

"I laid out here," said Ms. Sydney, pointing to the vinyl-tiled living-room floor where she had placed a comforter and pillows. She fashioned a similar arrangement in her girls' bedroom.

"It's been tough; but it was good for my back," she said, laughing.

Looking tidy in a blue blazer and slacks that were set off by her vivacious smile, Ms. Sydney said she became a mother at 14, never graduating from high school. In 2003, she landed a retail position at Bloomingdale's that paid \$600 a week plus commissions. About five years

later, as the recession prompted shoppers to cut back, she lost her job.

"I never saved for a rainy day," Ms. Sydney said with regret. After she exhausted her 401(k) to cover her rent and her commercial landlord refused to participate in the Section 8 housing program, she said, she and her daughters were forced to move. They lived with an aunt, and then with Ms. Sydney's mother, putting their possessions into storage and squeezing into a three-bedroom home that accommodated several others.

When Ms. Sydney could not keep up with the storage payments, all their belongings were auctioned off. The worst part was losing precious family

photographs. "I even had a picture of my dad at 18," she said, sighing.

Ms. Sydney received welfare for a time. But, she said: "It wasn't for me. I felt trapped."

After applying for numerous positions, she got a job two years ago as a home health aide for Attending Home Care in Brooklyn, where she now works four days a week, 12 hours a day. Her weekly salary is \$407. But she is happy to have a job. "Now I make my own money," she said.

When the New York City Housing Authority offered her an apartment in July, she barely glanced it over, so eager was she to move in with the family's few possessions: a cooking pot, a blender, a stereo and clothes. But no beds. Ms. Sydney turned to Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens, one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund.

"When she came to me the first time, she started crying," her case worker, Maria Gualy, recalled. "She said, 'I need to provide my daughters with what they deserve.'"

Through the fund, Catholic Charities gave Ms. Sydney \$700 to buy a queen-size bed and a bunk bed designed to sleep three comfortably.

"It's good," said her oldest daughter, Tyisha Tasha King, 16. "Good, good," chimed in the two younger girls, Myeira Natalia Joseph, 6, and Tianna Tafari King, 12.

"It's a new beginning," Ms. Sydney said. "I'm going in wiser. I'm more cautious."

She is enrolled in a workshop run by Operation Hope at Catholic Charities, where she is learning to manage her finances better. "I'm doing extreme couponing," she said, describing how she cuts

coupons from newspapers and visits Web sites to ferret out other discounts. "It's helping me get back to where I need to be."

"And I'm not doing fast foods," she said. Instead, she is focusing on home cooking, like the dish she made from random things in her cupboard, including spaghetti, corn, onion and Adobo seasoning on a recent night. "I don't know what it was," she said, "but they loved it."

Although Ms. Sydney receives \$392 in food stamps and \$200 in child support, there is little left over for more home furnishings. "I like color," she said, envisioning a red sofa someday brightening up the beige walls.

As the sunset faded, and not having a single living-room lamp to turn on, she got up and switched on the kitchen light. It will do for now.

Struggling Mother's Prayers are Answered

Hours after Natasha's story ran, there was an outpouring of goodwill for Natasha and her family. Numerous readers offered to donate much-needed furniture for her bare apartment, including the Mayor's Office of Community Affairs. An interior designer donated a dining table, chairs, two end tables, lamps and a leopard print bed for Mister Man, their Cockapoo puppy. A generous financial donation from a reader in Denver, Colorado helped Natasha pay part of her rent and purchase food and other household supplies such as linens, towels, kitchen appliances and dishes.

"I was truly shocked when I was told that all these people were willing to donate furniture to help me and my family live comfortable," Natasha said. "I didn't expect anything like this. I just wanted to share my story. I felt like all my prayers have been answered. We are so thankful for all the donations," Natasha added. "I haven't felt so much joy in my heart in in a long time. I thank the staff at Catholic Charities and The New York Times for making me and my family's holiday season one to remember."

A Quest for a Better Life, Interrupted by Sudden Grief



Recovering from the sudden loss of her mother and unexpected funeral costs, Janet Brown, single mother of 3 children, received help with rent arrears. Photo Credit: Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times/Redux.



By JOHN
OTIS

Janet Brown is an expert at stealing naps. The driver's seat of her minivan

often doubles as a mattress, allowing her to sleep briefly during breaks in her duties as a single mother, a full-time student, a chiropractic intern and a counselor. She sleeps two to three hours each night.

But Ms. Brown said it was worth it. "It's a lot of sacrifice, and I'm

willing to do it," she said.

Ms. Brown, 46, is pursuing a bachelor's degree in health information technology at Plaza College in Queens. She attends five classes on both Mondays and Wednesdays so that she can intern on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays at Healing Touch Chiropractic in Brooklyn. She works a graveyard shift as a direct care counselor in Manhattan, with the Cerebral Palsy Associations of New York State, four nights a week. She has also taken care of three daughters, on her own.

But Ms. Brown says her many

responsibilities are necessary if she is to achieve the life she has wanted, for herself and her daughters, since they emigrated from Jamaica in 2006. She credits her resolve to her mother, Deloris Walker, whom she had not seen for nearly six years before inviting her for a visit this past summer.

But things took a tragic turn. Ms. Walker, who still lived in Jamaica, had been complaining of pains, and doctors on the island had told her they were caused by either gall stones or an ulcer. Ms. Brown told her mother she would take her to a

doctor in Brooklyn. Ms. Walker was planning to stay for three months.

"She came off a plane at 9 o'clock at night at J.F.K.," Ms. Brown recalled of her mother's trip in June. "We took her home and then called an ambulance that same night, because she was vomiting and some black stuff was coming out, and we didn't know what was going on."

The diagnosis was more severe than any made in Jamaica. Doctors told Ms. Brown her mother had Stage 4 pancreatic cancer and gave her three months to live. But three weeks later, Ms. Walker, 66, died at Queens Hospital Center.

"She never cried, all through the sickness, even when I was crying," Ms. Brown said. "I prayed with her and she said: 'My daughter, I did not come here to turn into stick or stone. I know I have to go home one day. If this is the way, then let it be.' "

Ms. Brown could not afford to take her mother home; it would cost about \$7,000 just to get her body back on native soil. She earns \$1,509.17 a month and receives \$578 in food stamps. Her daughters' father lives in Jamaica, and though he has contributed money in the past, she said, he could not help.

Ms. Brown said she was upset that her mother would not be buried where she had lived all her life; nor would Ms. Walker's community be able to mourn her in the Jamaican tradition,

with a celebration and feast.

"People's expectation was that type of gallivanting, but I can't afford it," Ms. Brown said.

To pay the more than \$6,000 in *Ms. Brown works the graveyard shift and attends college full time, so when her mother passed away suddenly, she could not afford to take her mother home because it would cost about \$7,000 just to get her body back on native soil. She earns \$1,509.17 a month and receives \$578 in food stamps.*

funeral costs here in the United States, she drained her savings and got a loan from her 1199 S.E.I.U. Federal Credit Union. She then buried her mother, at Rosedale and Rosehill Cemetery in Linden, N.J., on Aug. 10.

But that month, Ms. Brown fell behind on her rent, which is \$1,200 a month, and she approached Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens for help. The agency, one of the seven supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, drew \$400 from the fund and pooled it with \$800 more to pay her landlord.

"It cleared a big gap for me," Ms. Brown said. "I'm still struggling to pay, but I'm not behind, and for that, I thank God."

Ms. Brown hopes her determination will set an example for her children. "When my daughters get older and see how life works, they will understand what I'm doing, and all I have done," she said. "And they will know: that is a real woman."

Help from Faraway Places

Hours after Janet's story ran, a generous reader in Georgia offered financial assistance, which helped Janet purchase a new laptop for school, as well as winter clothes and household supplies. Janet is grateful for the invaluable assistance she received, which has helped make her life easier as she juggles all of her responsibilities. Being a single mother, attending college full-time to obtain a bachelor's degree in health information technology, completing her internship, and working the graveyard shift as a direct care counselor is no easy task for Janet. However, Catholic Charities continues to be there for her as she continues to heal from the grief of losing her mother unexpectedly.

From Florida to Brooklyn to Care for Her Ailing Sister



Sister Sandra Dorne cares for Patricia Trivisani in their home with their beloved Chihuahuas. Photo Credit: Michael Kirby Smith/The New York Times/Redux.



By ANASTASIA
ECONOMIDES

When Sandra Dorne received a call in 2010 from a niece saying that Ms. Dorne's older

sister was in desperate need of care, she did not think twice. She packed her life into a small suitcase, left her waitressing job in Orlando, Fla., and three days later booked a \$150 one-way plane ticket to Allentown, Pa.

From there, Ms. Dorne, now 57, took a bus to Brooklyn, where her ailing sister, Patricia Trivisani, 69, lived with two Chihuahuas.

"I didn't like Florida anyway,"

Ms. Dorne said. "After my husband died, being in the same place where he was was sad. It's also too hot there. I'm originally a Jersey girl."

Ms. Dorne discovered that Ms. Trivisani, a retired litigation records clerk, was eating only cereal and noodles, and taking too many pills. She had been hospitalized after a neighbor found her on the floor — she had accidentally overdosed on prescription pills.

"She was taking 50 a day," Ms. Dorne said. "I'm not a doctor, but I knew that was too much."

Ms. Trivisani is coping with a plethora of health problems: fibromyalgia, osteoporosis, acid reflux disease, congestive heart

failure, hypertension, cataracts, dislocated spinal disks and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

"I'll be honest — I cry sometimes in bed," Ms. Trivisani said. "I wish I can be out and working. I don't want to live this way."

Yet she still has the strength to bicker with her sister, including about who can better recall the past and what pill treats what condition.

"We have our differences; it's the Aquarius in us," Ms. Trivisani said. (She and her sister both have birthdays in January.)

"It's just because you don't listen," Ms. Dorne said. "You are

stubborn.”

Ms. Trivisani has always faced hardships. She was abused by her stepmother, she said, and her husband, now dead, was a serious gambler. She accumulated \$14,000 in credit card debt because of medical expenses. She also bears the emotional pain of having had numerous miscarriages and having lost a son two days after he was born.

“Why couldn’t God let me have one?” Ms. Trivisani said of children. “All the others have kids,” she added, referring to her six other siblings. Ms. Dorne has nine great-grandchildren.

Ms. Trivisani has tried to fill that void with her dogs. She has two, a brother and a sister. She keeps ashes of her previous pets in a cupboard in the living room. The rest of the apartment is decorated with religious statues, crosses and family photos. Her other siblings are scattered throughout New Jersey and New York, but Ms. Trivisani said Ms. Dorne, who lived the farthest away, was the only one to rush to her side.

The sisters have short haircuts and wear matching bracelets of Roman Catholic saints, though Ms. Dorne is not a Catholic. They live on Ms. Trivisani’s Social Security benefits, \$1,158 a month, and the \$320 in food stamps that she receives.

“Me and Pat’s always been close,” Ms. Dorne said. “She took care of me because I was the baby sister.”

But Ms. Trivisani, pointing at her own worn shoe soles, said, “I feel bad for her; I can’t get her clothes or shoes.”

The two have to prioritize which of Ms. Trivisani’s medicines to buy, always getting heart pills first.

Medicaid can ease the financial stress by covering the cost of medicines and paying for a home-care attendant for Ms. Trivisani. But she does not qualify because her income is too high, according to Medicaid guidelines. To be eligible, she must have a total monthly income of \$787 or less. But Ms. Trivisani said the guidelines did not take into account how much was left after she paid \$560 a month in rent and about \$400 in monthly bills.

When social workers at Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens, one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, heard of the sisters’ predicament, they helped Ms. Trivisani get \$250 from the fund to cover the fee for her enrollment in a pooled-income trust to set her on the path to qualifying for Medicaid.

Under the arrangement, Ms. Trivisani said, she would contribute \$371 a month to the trust, which would be used to pay part of her rent and other living expenses, effectively leaving her with lower income on hand, enough to meet the eligibility for Medicaid, which would then help her get a home attendant. Her application is

pending.

Ms. Trivisani is eager for the day when she can afford hearing aids, diapers for herself and shampoo that costs more than 79 cents a bottle.

In Ms. Trivisani’s living room recently, a mirrored plaque inscribed with a poem about sisterly love was propped on a table. Ms. Dorne said she had bought it in New Jersey for \$1. The last line of the inscription reads, “You’re loved and always will be.”

Ms. Dorne says she does not plan to ever leave her sister.

“If I caught anyone hurting her,” Ms. Dorne said, “I’d beat them senseless.”

Care and Compassion Take Various Forms

Compassionate readers gave what they could to help Patricia cope with her daily struggles. One reader from Virginia sent Patricia a small monetary gift to help purchase personal care items. Another reader, who also lives with her sister, sent Patricia a box full of much-needed toiletries such as adult diapers, shampoo, conditioner, lotion and even included doggie treats for their canine companions.

Helping Lift a Daughter From Illness



Born with numerous disabilities, 12-year-old Bianca Torres and her mother Lynn Blue walk to the playground after school. Photo Credit: James Estrin/The New York Times/Redux.



By C. J. HUGHES

On a brisk afternoon, a mother and daughter scaled a jungle gym, crossed a bridge and took off down a pair of slides in Evergreen Park, in Ridgewood, Queens.

"You're winning! You're winning!" Lynn Blue yelled as her daughter, Bianca Torres, inched ahead. "You won!"

In some ways, Ms. Blue, 45, was also celebrating Bianca's victory over a grim list of medical problems that had cast a pall

over her childhood.

Bianca, 12, was born with a collapsed larynx, cleft palate and dislocated legs. She is prone to seizures, and spent the first two weeks of her life in the intensive-care unit of Long Island Jewish Medical Center, where machines kept her breathing.

Every few months, it seemed, she returned to the hospital for surgery, to fix her legs, a problem with a joint in her hand, and ptosis, or droopy eyelids. Her lids were essentially stretched open with silicone "rubber bands," Ms. Blue said.

Basic functions, like eating, were a constant, exhausting struggle

for Bianca. Her weakened larynx and cleft palate made sucking difficult, and she had to use special bottles. A hose was hooked up to her mouth and to an oxygen pump to make sure food went down.

Bianca was unable to cry because of her throat and mouth problems, and to gauge whether Bianca was in pain, Ms. Blue had to follow her around when she crawled, watching her face. Bianca could have choked to death otherwise, Ms. Blue said.

She said she did not get much sleep. "I was bouncing off the walls," she said.

Ms. Blue also had to carry

Bianca up at least three flights of stairs to their apartment every day — sometimes several times a day — because Bianca’s legs were not up to the task.

“There were days I thought, I wouldn’t wish this on my enemy,” Ms. Blue said.

Today, Bianca, whose long black hair is cut in bangs, and who giddily waves at nearly every person she passes on the sidewalks, is in much better shape.

She wears a brace on her left leg and is only now starting to climb the stairs on her own. Though her larynx is firmer and she is learning sign language at the Walter Crowley Intermediate School, Bianca is mostly unable to speak. She communicates mainly through squeaks and grunts.

Bruises from bad falls and fevers that flare because of her weakened immune system send Bianca to the emergency room about twice a month, said Ms. Blue, whose own health has suffered, too.

Ms. Blue battled depression after the birth of her first daughter, Ashley, who is now in college, and it sharply intensified as Bianca grew up. For the past five years, Ms. Blue has been seeing a therapist weekly through Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens.

The years spent carrying Bianca up and down the stairs have also taken a toll on her knees and hips, which now must be replaced, Ms. Blue said.

She would like to move to a ground-floor unit. But money is extremely tight. Ms. Blue was forced to leave her job as an office assistant at a car dealership to care for Bianca and cannot afford the round-the-clock help that might let her return to work.

Bianca’s father, Victor Torres, pays about \$550 a month in child support, and Supplemental Security Income provides an additional \$410. Yet, after paying her \$842 rent, Ms. Blue has just \$118 remaining for utilities, which leaves her short.

Ms. Blue reached out to Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens, one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases

Fund, which covered her Verizon bill (\$36) and her Consolidated Edison bill (\$184.45). She also received a \$150 gift card to help buy diapers for Bianca. Food, meanwhile, comes from the charity’s pantry.

For all the hardships Ms. Blue has experienced raising Bianca, she said she would not have it any other way. She said that over the years people around her had suggested that her daughter might have been better off institutionalized, but she scoffed at the idea. In fact, watching Bianca triumph over setback after setback, to see her make it to her preteen years, is inspiring, Ms. Blue said.

“She’s my sunshine,” she said.

Gifts from the Heart ...

Lynn Blue’s story touched the hearts of many people as far away as Wisconsin and Canada. One reader was so “moved by her courage and commitment to her daughter,” that she sent Lynn much-needed financial assistance to pay her electric and gas bills to prevent discontinuation of services. And just in time for Christmas, another caring reader sent 12-year-old Bianca a box of Christmas cheer: an electric blue and hot-pink Old Navy outfit with matching Ugg-style boots that fit over her leg braces, a deluxe Dora the Explorer play set and watch, and a Christmas card with a small monetary gift. Lynn was so touched by this act of generosity: “I cried when I saw my daughter’s face light up as she opened the presents and card signed from ‘a friend in New Jersey.’ She just kept smiling and smiling and smiling.” The good news continued as her daughter’s principal read the article and offered Lynn a position as a school-aide. “This whole experience was heartfelt. It made me cry to know that there are kind hearts out there in a time of need,” Lynn said.

Just Getting By, Until the Day She Could Not Move



Suffering from Parkinson's disease, Connie Nelson received rental assistance to keep her home that she shares with her daughters Karen and Connie and their ShihTzu Mugzy. Photo Credit: Sephora Rosario.



By JENNIFER
MASCIA

Connie Nelson is in love with the view from her 18th-floor balcony: The glittering towers and spires of Lower Manhattan have beckoned her each day for 20 years.

"This is what made me take the apartment," she said one evening as she gazed upon the

distant skyline.

But Ms. Nelson, 52, is not exactly basking in luxury. She lives in a federally subsidized high-rise complex in Brooklyn on the border of East New York and Canarsie, two struggling neighborhoods just blocks from where she grew up.

One of nine siblings, she is a product of the area's troubled schools, but her poise and reserve bear none of the marks of a turbulent childhood, a fact she attributes to solid parenting.

"When I was a kid, I used to see other kids getting severely beaten by their parents," she said. Her mother told her that such conduct was wrong. "It really did something to me," Ms. Nelson said. "I never hit my kids."

Her father was a production manager in the fashion district, and her mother was a home health attendant, who, she said, taught her daughters "that we were to work — don't go waiting on a man" for support.

Ms. Nelson married after high school and balanced raising four children with clerical work. But her husband left after the birth of their youngest child, and hers were the only guiding hands left to instill values in her children.

"I took my kids around the junkies and bums and told them what can happen if they go off course," she said. "I told them, you have to be a plus in life and not a negative."

Her older daughter, also named Connie, 26, is studying business management but "she wants to be a doctor, a neonatal I.C.U. doctor," Ms. Nelson said. Her other daughter, Karen, 16, is an honor-roll student at Williamsburg Charter High School, tackling a schedule filled with advanced-placement courses.

Her son Craig, 36, is a police officer in Manhattan, and her other son, Kevin, 31, is a Marine who served 11 years as a communications specialist in Kuwait, Afghanistan and Iraq before returning to New York this year.

"He used to call me and tell me he was living on a net 80 feet in the air," Ms. Nelson said, describing how his unit made beds in the treetops during missions. "I'm glad he made it back safe. His whole platoon made it out. I couldn't breathe, but I kept holding on to my faith."

Her eyes welled up with tears. "He doesn't tell me much," Ms. Nelson added. "He knows I'm sensitive."

She was found to have a progressive neurological disorder marked by involuntary spasms. There is no cure... She could not return to work because of pain that radiates from her ankle to her hip, she said. Her son helps with the phone bill, and Ms. Nelson receives \$628 in Social Security disability benefits and \$347 in food stamps each month, but that was not enough to cover her rent and buy essentials. "I had to sell my TV so we could eat," Ms. Nelson said quietly.

Six years ago, she was on her way to the supermarket when she tripped on a crack in the street, fell, and dislocated two disks in her back. She embarked on a rigorous course of physical therapy and returned to her \$9.25-an-hour job at the United States Open, where she worked in merchandise display.

But one morning in 2009, Ms. Nelson awoke and could

not move. The diagnosis was rheumatoid arthritis.

She was also found to have essential tremor, a progressive neurological disorder marked by involuntary spasms. There is no cure, but the tremors can be soothed with medication. She could not return to work because of pain that radiates from her ankle to her hip, she said.

In January, Ms. Nelson's ex-husband was laid off, and a judge lowered his child support payments to \$69 a week from \$223, throwing her finances into dire straits. Her son Kevin helps with the phone bill, and Ms. Nelson receives \$628 in Social Security disability benefits and \$347 in food stamps each month, but that was not enough to cover her \$461 rent and buy essentials.

"I had to sell my TV so we could eat," Ms. Nelson said quietly.

Ms. Nelson was referred to Catholic Charities of Brooklyn and Queens, one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, and received a month's rent from the fund. Soon after, she was able to get her rent lowered by \$200, but is still struggling to provide for her younger daughter.

Ms. Nelson misses working. But she has Mugzy, a 2-year-old Shih Tzu, who is therapeutic for her.

"Right now, all I do is try to go outside and get some exercise because they told me to keep moving," she said.

A Queens Woman Begins Her Third Career, as a Designer



Inspired by fashion designers Carolina Herrera and Ralph Lauren, Bertha Astor designs and sews her first collection of women's clothing in her basement apartment in Corona, Queens. Photo Credit: Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times/Redux.



By SARAH MASLIN NIR

A dream can be deferred for only so long. When Bertha Astor,

48, left her native Puerto Rico to move to New York at 27, she had a degree in biology from Pontifical Catholic University, she said. She spent a decade putting that education to good use, working as a laboratory technician at pharmaceuticals

companies. Later, she obtained a certificate in office administration and spent a decade in jobs in that field.

But childhood memories of helping her mother — a clerk who made clothes and sometimes sold them — sew buttons onto dresses still loomed large. And the body-hugging dresses that her grandmother Consuela, a professional seamstress, made for Ms. Astor's Saturday nights on the town stayed on her mind.

"I always have the dream to come up with fashion," Ms. Astor said. But, she said, "The resources for me to pursue a dream as a fashion designer — it was nearly impossible in Puerto Rico."

Sober work as a lab assistant and an administrative assistant were the only jobs available to her, she said. With a new life to scrape together when she and her husband, Jose Olivar, now 49, moved to New York as newlyweds, who could afford to dream of runways and ruching?

"I did it for the love of money back then," Ms. Astor said of her career path. "I wasn't passionate about it." But she added, "I have to survive." Couture it was not, but at least she had financial security, for a while. She was laid off from her job as an executive assistant at Beth Israel Medical Center in 2008, she said, and has found only temporary or part-time work since.

But Ms. Astor, who seems to grow younger by 30 years when she speaks of the masters of the craft she loves — like Carolina Herrera, whose elegant aesthetic she adores; or her fashion idol, Ralph Lauren, whom she admires for being a self-made man — saw a silver brocade lining.

At 47, Ms. Astor at last went to fashion school. "I said, 'If I don't step forward for what I really want, I'm not going to be able to do it ever,' " she said. "I said, 'Well, this is my time; I'm going to do it now, and nobody is going to stop it.' "

Her husband supported her. "You have to pursue your passion before life runs out," said Mr. Olivar, who was laid off from his job as an electronics technician four years ago and has become a self-employed videographer.

Unemployment payments of \$94 a week and income from her husband's event-based video business tided her over during her studies at Wood Tobe-Coburn School in Manhattan. In addition, Ms. Astor took out a

loan to pay for school.

While attending classes full time, from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., she took on a night job, working after school, sometimes four days a week, but still managed to do her homework.

"I was getting home at midnight and sketching to 3 o'clock in the morning," she said. Ms. Astor, the oldest person in her classes by decades (classmates called her "Mama Bertha," she said), flourished, obtaining a 3.87 grade point average and winning design competitions, including one for the perfect little black dress. A draped sleeveless number with Cleopatraesque brocade detailing, it is proudly displayed on a dress form in her basement apartment in Corona, Queens.

Ms. Astor graduated in January. Afterward, it was back to sending out hundreds of résumés for jobs in her old field, coupled with frantic work to create her first collection: 20 fall pieces, like a houndstooth-lined swing coat with a pilgrim collar, an iridescent reversible kimono and a vermilion silk Shantung blazer with matching bloomers — all sewed herself on her tiny Kenmore machine.

For the first time, however, the jobs did not immediately come. In late summer, her unemployment benefits ran out. By September, she was in arrears in rent on the \$1,000-a-month apartment that she and her husband shared with Mya, their miniature Doberman pinscher, and Cholita, a Boston terrier



"Mini Silk Tunic" designed by Bertha Astor. Bertha's creations can be found on her Web site at: <http://www.obradoirodemoda.com>.

they rescued last year.

A social worker at a hospital where she once worked told her of Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens, one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund. The agency gave Ms. Astor \$400 from the fund to help with her back rent. It was enough to stabilize her life.

In October, Ms. Astor started a job as a practice secretarial associate at a hospital in Queens. But each night in her basement apartment-cum-design studio, she sews and dreams of her ultimate fantasy, a runway show at Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week, and of her next step, a brick-and-mortar shop.

And one day, perhaps, sartorial success on par with her hero, Mr. Lauren? "He started from nothing," she said. "If he started from nothing, why wouldn't I?"

Sacrificing to Nurture Her Sons' Academic Aspirations



Maria Valdes Flores at her home in Sunset Park, Brooklyn with her sons Ashton, left, and Kevin, right. An aspiring architect, Kevin received help to purchase an iMac so that he can create architectural designs at home. Photo Credit: Benjamin Petit/The New York Times/Redux.



By C. J. HUGHES

Listening to Kevin Del Villar rattle off ideas for how to

improve Sunset Park, near his Brooklyn home, one might think he has been an urban planner or architect for years.

Walls that collect rainwater so that it can be reused for landscaping. "Trees" made of solar panels that also shade benches. Swings that generate electricity with every kick of

one's feet.

"It's going to be expensive to do, there's no doubt," Kevin said as he flipped through ink drawings. "But I estimate it will be paid off in the next three years, in terms of energy savings."

But this would-be Frank Gehry is just 16, a sophomore studying architecture at the High School of Art and Design in Manhattan. And his passion for the profession seems to have few bounds. The plan for Sunset Park was not part of any homework assignment. Kevin took it on as a personal

project after attending neighborhood meetings on the topic. A teenager who still has lunchboxes in his bedroom has taken on a project that adult architects might find daunting, yet that does not surprise Kevin's mother, Maria Valdes Flores.

"He's not a regular teenager," Ms. Flores said. "He's not the kind of boy who likes to go out much. He's into his papers and his projects."

A lot of that serious-mindedness can be attributed to how Ms. Flores, 49, has raised Kevin and his brother, Ashton, 13, despite

their tumultuous childhoods.

Ms. Flores said her ex-husband, the boys' father, physically abused the boys when they were younger. She said she, too, was a victim. Soon after Kevin was born, she said, her then-husband locked her and their son out of their apartment because he could not stand the baby's crying. The situation deteriorated quickly, and after one violent night in 1998, when Ms. Flores wound up in a hospital, she decided to seek a divorce. It was granted in 2001.

Court documents from 2004 — during the time the father had custody rights, Ms. Flores said — detail accusations of his kicking the boys in the legs and back, among other abuse. He was charged with two counts each of assault, menacing, harassment and endangering the welfare of a child.

Ms. Flores was granted a U-visa, given to victims of certain crimes, like domestic violence. She said that after the boys' father lost custody, he vanished, ignoring orders to pay \$80,000 in child support. But he has tried to get in touch over the years, as in 2007, when he contacted Kevin on Facebook.

"I almost quit it after that," Kevin said of the social network. "I felt cyberterrorized." In fact, he said, he plans to drop his father's surname when he is legally allowed to do so.

Being a single mother of two has been challenging for Ms. Flores, a native of Argentina who is employed privately as

an events planner for Jewish families in Ditmas Park, Brooklyn. Among other duties, Ms. Flores, who is fluent in Spanish and English, makes sure the Spanish-speaking chefs hired by the families for holiday parties follow kosher dietary rules when preparing meals.

But the work is done on a freelance basis, which means that when she called in sick once for many days in a row, she was not paid at all. In a good month, Ms. Flores can earn \$2,000, and her longtime boyfriend, Pablo Cruz, a handyman, chips in when he can. But the rent on her two-bedroom apartment is \$1,100 a month, and utility, insurance and gas bills eat up most of what is left of her earnings. Food stamps help, though.

With money tight, Ms. Flores had few places to turn last fall when Kevin needed a computer for his school assignments. She sought help from Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens, one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund.

In October, the agency drew \$1,199 from the fund to buy an iMac for Kevin, which sits proudly on a desk in Ms. Flores's tidy, spare home.

Other bills, however, are piling up, like the one for SAT preparation classes, which Kevin just finished; Ms. Flores also paid for similar courses for Ashton to improve his chances of being admitted to a Roman Catholic high school, like Xavier High in Manhattan.

Ms. Flores hopes that if Kevin and Ashton excel in school they might someday find the steady, high-paying work that has mostly eluded her in this country. That is why she encourages any activities that could give them an academic edge — like park-renovation projects.

"It's so important," she said. "If you're not educated here, you're not going to go very far."

The Future Looks Even Brighter

Future architect 16-year-old Kevin Flores was recently selected to participate in the 2012 Design Prep Scholars Program at the prestigious Smithsonian Institution Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum. Beginning this spring, he will join a group of 18 scholars from various high schools. Kevin will explore various design techniques as well as enhance his portfolio and his knowledge of architecture.

Kevin also hopes to have an internship with Councilwoman Sara M. Gonzalez this summer where he will assist in the design of a playground for the Sunset Park, Brooklyn community, hoping to incorporate his ideas on energy production. In the meantime, he continues to study for the SAT and prepares to apply to various colleges.

A Survivor of Haiti's Quake, and Now of Leukemia, Too



Survivors of the earthquake in Haiti, Danielo Morpeau, pictured with his mother, Benodette, was diagnosed with Leukemia soon after arriving in New York from Haiti. The Morpeau family received rental assistance to keep their home in Queens. Photo Credit: Sephora Rosario.



By MARVIN ANDERSON

In a faint voice, Danielo Morpeau, who is still learning English and

speaks with a slight Haitian accent, read two of the first words he learned while living in New York: "melatonin," to aid sleep, and "Celexa," to treat depression.

Danielo, 14, sitting on a futon in his family's living room in Queens, had pulled out his small brown prescription bottles

from beneath a table. He has leukemia, which, his father said, manifested itself after the family left Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in the wake of the January 2010 earthquake that ravaged the country.

"It began with a cough," Danielo's father, Paul Eddy Morpeau, 47, said. "We're from Haiti, where it's rarely cold, and we thought it was normal after living in New York."

But the coughing, which began in September 2010, six months after the family's arrival in Queens, only grew, and Danielo became weaker.

"He never got better," Mr. Morpeau said. "Only worse."

After two months of continual coughing and a growing fatigue, Danielo had blood tests at the Long Island Jewish Medical Center. When the results came back, in December 2010, he was rushed on doctors' orders to the hospital.

"I remember that day," Mr. Morpeau said. "I was at work and I left immediately to the hospital. We were told he had cancer."

With a few hugs, kisses and tears, Mr. Morpeau, his wife,

Benodette Morpeau, and their daughter, Ondine, watched as Danielo was taken into isolation for treatment.

"I could only take my Bible with me," Danielo recalled.

He spent seven months getting treatment as his family, wrapped in sterile clothes from head to toe, remained by his side and prayed for his recovery.

The process was grueling, Ms. Morpeau, 47, said as she, too, sat on the futon, which serves as Danielo's bed and is next to a small folding cot where Ondine, 16, sleeps.

Ms. Morpeau began crying as she looked through pictures of Danielo in the hospital. He was unconscious in nearly all the photos. He was also bald and skinny, with tubes protruding from his arms and nose. His sister is sitting next to him in one photo, watching. That is all they could do for months, Ms. Morpeau said.

"I came with my sick son and every day he's getting worse," she said she remembers thinking to herself. "We didn't come here expecting to have a sick son."

It was an ordeal to watch him suffer in a new country while he was unable to communicate, said Ms. Morpeau, who speaks Creole and French. It was also challenging to live someplace that did not feel like home, she said.

The Morpeaus are coping with haunting memories of

the earthquake as they try to build a new life in a one-bedroom apartment that sits atop a church. Ms. Morpeau had been a teacher when her school crumbled in the quake. Mr. Morpeau had worked as a network administrator for the nonprofit organization CARE Ayiti. When they arrived in Queens, they struggled to find work and pay rent. That was all overshadowed by Danielo's illness.

But his parents said the reason he had the opportunity to beat cancer was because he was in the United States.

"Cancer is a death sentence in Haiti," Mr. Morpeau said. "There's no hope."

The Morpeaus immigrated under the temporary protected status given to Haitians after the earthquake.

The mother and sister of Mr. Morpeau live in Far Rockaway, Queens, but he said he could not rely on relatives for financial help during Danielo's treatment. "Many families were stretched," said Sylviane Mauriol, the family's caseworker at Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens, one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund. She added, "It was about means and the state of the economy."

But the Morpeaus did get emotional support from their relatives and a Haitian earthquake survivors support group created by caseworkers at Catholic Charities. Danielo's homecoming from the hospital

in July, however, did not put an end to the family's challenges. Mr. Morpeau had lost his job around that time because his employment authorization card had expired.

The family, ineligible for public assistance or benefits, had relied solely on Mr. Morpeau's income from his security job at Kennedy International Airport to pay the \$800 rent. But the family fell behind. Ms. Mauriol used \$400 in Neediest Cases money to pay half the back rent, while Catholic Charities paid the balance.

"It's not easy for us," Mr. Morpeau said, "and that money was very helpful."

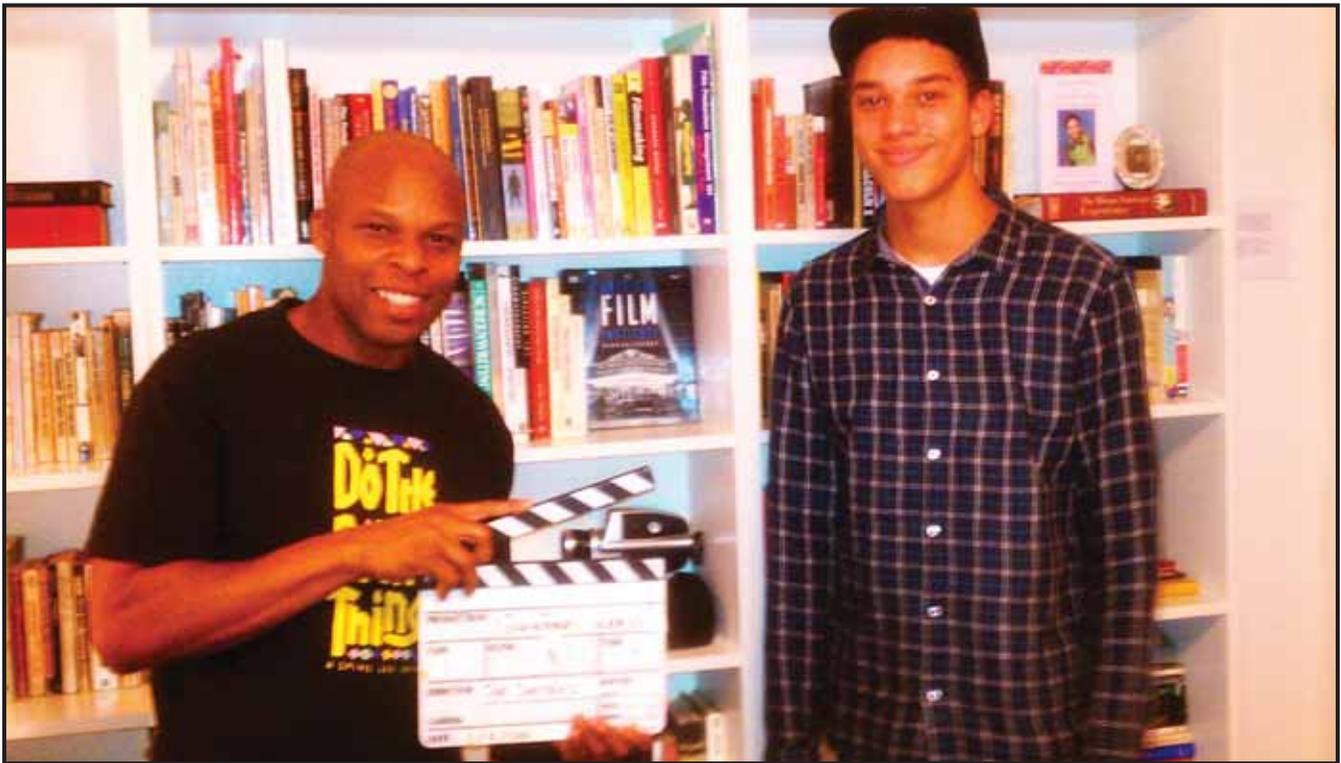
The creators of the Haitian support group, Lystra Madoo-Devine and John Woolley, helped Mr. Morpeau find another job as a security officer after he renewed his employment authorization card. Ms. Morpeau is attending a home health aide program in Brooklyn.

Danielo's leukemia is in remission, but he continues to get therapy, covered by the state's Child Health Plus insurance program. He now has a full head of hair, and is attending Intermediate School 238.

The rest of the Morpeaus are doing better, too, as they strive to help those left behind in Haiti.

"We have hope and each other," Mr. Morpeau said. "God helps us. God can do anything."

Keeping Film Aspirations Intact While Building a Life of Sobriety



Aspiring filmmaker, Joseph Salters and his 17-year-old son Madison in their new apartment. Photo Credit: Sephora Rosario.



By JED
LIPINSKI

The bookshelves in Joseph Salters's bedroom

tell the story of his life. On the bottom shelf sit well-thumbed paperbacks with titles like "Adult Children of Alcoholics" and "Narcotics Anonymous." The top shelf is lined with Shakespeare plays and a copy of "Screenwriting Tricks of the Trade."

And on the middle shelf, Mr.

Salters, 51, has assembled a small shrine to cinema. Here, a DVD of Michelangelo Antonioni's "L'Avventura" rests beside a Super 8 camera and a clapper from his first student film, titled "Grandma's Hands."

"I'm proud of that film," Mr. Salters said, adding that he had made it as part of a 15-week training course at the Digital Film Academy in Manhattan. "Actually, I'm amazed I pulled it off. I was in the throes of drug and alcohol addiction at the time."

Mr. Salters has spent his life battling addiction. He said he

first experienced it through his father, who, Mr. Salters added, was a "full-blown alcoholic" before he died in 1989. But he became personally acquainted with its effects while enrolled at Syracuse University, where he majored in economics. A combination of heavy drinking and student loan debt caused him to drop out before receiving his degree, he said.

After that, Mr. Salters earned his stockbroker's license and got a job on Wall Street. Over the next two decades, he worked as an operations clerk, a mutual fund specialist and a client

relationship manager.

One surprising thing he discovered: on Wall Street, not everyone is rich. "I earned less than \$30,000 a year most of that time," he said.

He also learned that Wall Street was not the place for him. The "work hard, play hard" mentality exacerbated his addictions to cocaine and alcohol, he said, and he was eventually fired for what he called "procedural errors."

"Instead of researching mutual funds, I'd be making fliers for my R & B band," he said.

The birth of his daughter, Chelsea, now 22, motivated Mr. Salters to stop using drugs and alcohol. He remained clean and sober for 12 years, he said, and during that time he was married briefly and had a son, Madison, now 17.

But in 2004, Mr. Salters relapsed. It was not until two years later, after he enrolled in film school, that he decided to quit for good. He left Wall Street and joined Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous.

"Film gave me a new purpose in life," said Mr. Salters, who was wearing a T-shirt with the name of the Spike Lee film "Do the Right Thing."

Intent on writing and directing his own films one day, Mr. Salters got a job as a freelance film production assistant in 2008. Around this time, his children, who had been living with their mothers, came to live with him

at his railroad apartment in Bushwick, Brooklyn.

The apartment was in poor shape, however.

"We had a severe bed-bug problem," Mr. Salters said.

And despite having repaired his life, he found it hard to support his family on a production assistant's salary. Last summer, Mr. Salters fell behind on the rent, amassing \$3,000 in arrears. His landlord slipped an eviction letter in his mailbox.

Mr. Salters sought help from New York City's Human Resources Administration, and received a one-shot infusion of \$1,750 to help with this debt. He then contacted Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens, one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, and received an additional \$700.

Mr. Salters and his landlord negotiated a payment plan for the balance.

In November, with financial assistance from Mr. Salters's brother, he and his children relocated to a quiet, bed-bugless three-bedroom apartment in the Bronx. Madison, who said he was a "D student" while living in Australia with his mother, is now on the honor roll at the Academy of Urban Planning in Brooklyn. Chelsea, who is completing her senior year at the Fashion Institute of Technology, also has a sales job at Bloomingdale's and helps pay for household expenses.

Despite having repaired his life, he found it hard to support his family on a production assistant's salary. Last summer, Mr. Salters fell behind on the rent, amassing \$3,000 in arrears. His landlord slipped an eviction letter in his mailbox.

Mr. Salters said his next goal was to become a truck driver for Theatrical Teamsters Local 817, an organization for union workers in the entertainment industry. He is saving money to take the New York State commercial driver's license course, which he estimates will cost around \$1,200.

"I want to establish a pension and take care of my family," Mr. Salters said.

But he has not forgotten his dream of directing a feature film. Also on his bookshelf is a mesh baseball cap with the name of his future production company, SaltShaker FilmWerks, emblazoned in spray paint above the brim.

"It's never been worn," he said, smiling.

Donors Offer Money, Time and Encouragement



Numerous donors generously gave Natasha Sydney and her family much-needed furniture for her bare apartment, including a leopard print bed for their Cockapoo, Mister Man.



By EBA
HAMID

Natalie Jenner has a deal with herself. "If I read an article

and it moves me to tears, I think I have to do something," she said.

It happens about once a year.

In November, Ms. Jenner, who lives just outside of Toronto, read a Neediest Cases article in The New York Times about Charles Smith, a single father and chef who found out in 2008

that he had cancer and who strived to teach his young son Cie-Jay the value of giving back to the community.

Ms. Jenner, who has a young daughter and whose husband had also battled cancer, said that she related to Mr. Smith's story and that he proved to be "an outstanding role model."

"This story really got to me," she said. "I really wanted to help."

Readers like Ms. Jenner have responded in stellar numbers by donating large and small amounts to the centennial fund-raising campaign of The

New York Times Neediest Cases Fund. The portraits of individuals and families began on Nov. 6 and will continue daily through Feb. 10.

One hundred years after the Neediest Cases Fund began, it has continued to attract new donors like Ms. Jenner, who said, "I didn't know about the fund before." And donors who have been contributing for decades are continuing the tradition. "Please accept my 79th annual contribution," one donor wrote. "This is our 50th consecutive donation," yet another letter began, adding, "We wish we could afford a larger one." Enclosed with the

letter was a \$3,000 check.

The Neediest Cases Fund works with seven multiservice agencies that serve New Yorkers of all denominations: Brooklyn Community Services, Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New York, Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens, the Children's Aid Society, the Community Service Society of New York, the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies and UJA-Federation of New York. The New York Times Company covers all administrative costs.

The fund invests unrestricted contributions of \$100,000 or more from trusts and estates in an endowment. The income goes into the next year's campaign. As of Thursday, donors had contributed \$6,186,752 to the current campaign.

Over the past 100 years, donors have sent in \$250 million, said Desirée Dancy, the vice president of the Neediest Cases Fund.

This year, readers have offered beds, clothing, furniture and medical services to those profiled. They have also sent in donations for as little as \$1 and as much as \$50,000.

"We're just always amazed at the generosity of our donors," Ms. Dancy said. "Every year they heed the call to action."

Articles like the one about Zahra Nahim and Fawzi Hasab, Iraqi refugees who lost two sons to sectarian violence and now live in Brooklyn, inspired one

donor to offer to buy the family's monthly groceries "for as long as I can" and another to inquire how to cover their expenses.

A portrait of Ndayishimiye Gabo, who had spent years in a refugee camp in Tanzania and was on the verge of losing his family's Bronx apartment, moved a reader to donate more than \$6,000 so that the family could avoid eviction. Another reader sent clothing, shoes and toys to Lynn Blue and her daughter, Bianca Torres, 12, who was born with a collapsed larynx, cleft palate and dislocated legs.

Dmitriy Frenkel, featured on Jan. 2, was another recipient of readers' generosity. Polio had left his right foot disfigured, and Mr. Frenkel needs specially molded shoes. Money from the Neediest Cases Fund helped him buy his current pair. A reader, who said his father had suffered from a similar ailment, offered to buy several pairs of the shoes for Mr. Frenkel.

Donors also sought to pay Jonathan Ferreira's tuition and expenses at Utica College. A pet lover made arrangements to take Marisol Santiago — who worried about the health of her dog after surviving a hit-and-run accident and lung cancer and falling behind on rent — to her own veterinarian, Dr. Gene Solomon, at the Center for Veterinary Care on the Upper East Side. They also went to a dog groomer, and from there to a pet store, where Ms. Santiago's dog, Princess, got a coat, a harness, a leash and some treats.

Ms. Jenner said that after she decided to donate, she told her young daughter of her plan to help Mr. Smith's son Cie-Jay have the "holiday he deserves."

Mr. Smith was unable to work because of his cancer treatments, and he was supporting himself and Cie-Jay through \$1,365 a month in Social Security disability benefits and \$360 a month in food stamps. When Cie-Jay was starting second grade in Brooklyn and needed a uniform, Mr. Smith received a grant from Brooklyn Community Services to cover the cost.

Ms. Jenner said she had asked her daughter if she was willing to give up a "big" Christmas present to help the Smiths.

"She was game," Ms. Jenner said.

They sent a \$200 check.

"She said to me that it made her feel so warm inside, and it made her want to do that again," Ms. Jenner said of her daughter, who still was "lucky to be visited by Santa."

Sephora Rosario of Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens said that donating spoke to a greater purpose. Sometimes people who cannot afford money send in cards or letters saying that the people profiled are in their prayers, Ms. Rosario said.

"On a basic, fundamental level," she added, "we all want to know we're not alone."

A Family Holds On to Its Musical Dreams, Despite a Promoter's Lies



Single mother Sylvia Brown and her children no longer sleep on the floor since receiving much-needed beds after moving to NYC from Kansas. Jeremy, Shavel, Cedric Jr., Sylvia Brown and Janyla stand in front of their new home in Brooklyn. Photo Credit: Sephora Rosario.



By ANN FARMER

Sylvia Brown knows the ending to the old saying: If something sounds too good to be true But there was something about a music promoter's promise of recording careers for her two eldest children that made Ms. Brown and her whole brood

spend almost every penny they had to move to New York City from Kansas City, Mo., on a Greyhound bus in July.

Once they got here, however, the hip-hop promoter, who had sent them recording contracts to lure them to New York, never answered their calls, Ms. Brown said. Now Ms. Brown, 40, and her four children, ages 4 to 23, are clustered in an apartment in Brooklyn, patching together a pragmatic existence while

holding fast to their dreams, musical and otherwise.

Ms. Brown, a loquacious woman with a smooth, red pageboy and big hoop earrings, is also a believer in another saying. "If you can make it here, you can make it anywhere," she said of New York, adding that she just wanted her family to have a better life in the city.

Her eldest daughter, Shavel Monique Rice-Moore, 23, has pursued rap music since she

was 7, entering talent shows and uploading her songs on YouTube. Through social media, she had communicated with a New York record producer who flew the family out in November 2010 for a recording session with Ms. Rice-Moore and her brother Cedric Deron Evans Jr., 20.

"It was like a movie," Ms. Rice-Moore said.

But with a twist that was not so surprising but still unpleasant.

Months later, when the whole family moved to New York, Ms. Rice-Moore said, "he disappeared."

"He didn't pick up the phone," she continued. "And still today, no phone calls."

"We were very hurt," Ms. Brown chimed in. "I gave up my job, my apartment, my life to come here." She had worked as a nurse's aide in hospitals and nursing homes, and as a hospice caregiver before coming to New York.

"It seemed like the real deal," Ms. Brown added.

"But it wasn't," Ms. Rice-Moore said, grimacing. She had passed up flight attendant school to relocate, even forfeiting a down payment.

The first week after they arrived in New York, Ms. Brown found work at a McDonald's, making \$7.25 an hour. "I'd come home," she said, "and all I could do was fall over in the bed."

She had also secured a federally subsidized housing voucher

that allowed her family to live rent free in a three-bedroom apartment in Brownsville, which is meagerly furnished with items they had picked up on the street. (None of her children's fathers help financially except for her youngest daughter's, Ms. Brown said.)

The family receives \$790 a month in food stamps. "We always run out," Ms. Brown said.

The higher cost of living in New York has been one of many adjustments for the family.

"It's more of a cultural difference," said Ms. Brown, who added that she had already met New Yorkers with a variety of ethnicities that she had never encountered in Kansas City. "It's really cool."

In September, Ms. Brown got a part-time job with Universal Survey that paid her 40 cents more an hour and drew on her ability to engage people over the phone.

"I'm a people person," she said. "You need to have a good attitude."

But because Ms. Brown cannot afford day care, Ms. Rice-Moore, who had found part-time work at Macy's, now mostly baby-sits for her sister, Janyla, 4.

"It's either I work or she works," Ms. Brown said.

Her older son, Cedric, is looking for work. Her other son, Jeremy, 18, is in high school.

The family had disposed of all furniture before boarding

that bus to New York. They were sleeping on the floor of their apartment when Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens, one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, drew \$801 from the fund in September to buy them four beds.

The fund also paid off a nagging \$504 bill from Consolidated Edison, which arose when the family ran the air-conditioner during a heat spell shortly after arriving.

"That helped me a lot," Ms. Brown said. "It got me back on track."

The family has, of course, considered returning to Kansas City.

"Every week I was saying: 'This isn't working out. We might as well move back,'" Ms. Brown said.

But then her new job came through, and she is exploring affordable educational opportunities that she hopes will lead to a career as a medical assistant.

Plus, the help she received from the Neediest Cases Fund has affirmed her faith, she said.

"Even in the midst of everything going on that was negative," Ms. Brown said, "God showed me that I was still in his hand."

'Everyday Superheroes' Assist Those in Need



By EBA
HAMID

The offers began to pour in shortly after Natasha Sydney's story was published

as part of the 100th campaign of The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund.

Ms. Sydney, a struggling mother of three daughters, had little money to furnish her apartment in Brooklyn. Offers of furniture came from readers and the Mayor's Community Affairs Unit, Sephora Rosario of Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens said. An interior designer gave Ms. Sydney a dining table, chairs, two end tables and lamps. The family's puppy, Mister Man, even got a leopard print bed.

That generosity was repeated again and again for those whose financial hardship, medical calamities and loss of shelter were featured in the 2011-12 campaign. The profiles began on Nov. 6 with the story of Elfreda McMillan and her son, Thonn, a teenager whose 85-pound body has been ravaged by a rare disease, and ended on Feb. 10 with an article about Isabella Rivera, an 86-year-old widow who survived the death of a son, a fire and a stabbing by a naked attacker.

Donors responded in greater numbers than in the past three



CCBQ client Wonder Pearson (left) pictured here with her caseworker Fia Sarmi, doesn't let her illness stop her from helping others in need. Wonder received tons of support from many, including friends and neighbors, that she says she feels like a celebrity. Photo Credit: Sephora Rosario

campaigns, reversing a trend of falling totals and helping the fund top \$7 million for the first time in five years.

A total of 10,995 gifts yielded \$6,688,854, and with a 100th-anniversary matching donation of \$315,000 from the fund's endowment, the total climbed to \$7,003,854.

In the previous campaign, 10,457 donors contributed \$6,061,024. In the 2007-8 campaign, 11,340 donors gave \$7,642,135.88.

Readers' response to the portraits of needy New Yorkers was good news, said Michael Golden, the president of the fund and vice chairman of The New York Times Company.

"I think what it really says is that the readers and viewers of The New York Times are touched by these stories and want to help people that they don't know in

this time when there is a lot of misfortune," Mr. Golden said.

The fund works with seven multiservice agencies: Brooklyn Community Services, Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New York, Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens, the Children's Aid Society, the Community Service Society of New York, the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies and UJA-Federation of New York. The New York Times Company covers all administrative costs. Unrestricted contributions of \$100,000 or more from trusts and estates are invested in an endowment. The income goes into the next year's campaign.

This campaign, donations and support came in many forms, including from Wall Street. As has been the tradition for years, analysts from Goldman Sachs and Citigroup delivered to The New York Times's headquarters in Midtown the proceeds of

their fund-raising drives.

Charlotte Xu and Xinna Zhang, who together led the effort at Goldman, and Kristina Nolte and Bianca Tylek, both of Citigroup, brought in envelopes containing checks, cash and loose change in February. In all, they raised nearly \$190,000, down 36 percent from last year's combined effort.

Ms. Nolte and Ms. Tylek, the leaders of the fund-raising committee at Citigroup, approached the effort with the kind of strategies ingrained in Wall Street culture. Their committee spawned subcommittees, and totaled 35 people. Spreadsheets were involved. Announcements were made at monthly meetings. Citigroup even ran a Neediest Cases banner on its internal Web page.

But first, the analysts went to senior officials at the bank.

"In October, we began to meet with the heads of all the different businesses," Ms. Tylek said. "It was really important to go to them and say: 'This is our marketing plan. Can you support this? Can you sort of get the ball rolling?'"

Ms. Nolte added, "By having senior leadership really invested from the get-go, they were able to make this year a really strong beginning."

They raised money through sing-offs and auctioned off events like a wine tour and a spa night that were sponsored by senior company officials, Ms.

Nolte said.

More gifts came in from the company's "dress-down day," according to Ms. Tylek: Employees paid \$20 each to free themselves from their business attire.

In the end, Citigroup raised \$101,672, surpassing the goal of \$70,000 and beating its previous donation, \$95,000.

At Goldman, Ms. Xu said, support for the fund-raising drive came from the top down.

"The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund has been in Goldman for many, many years," she said. "It's just been a really good tradition in our firm."

Over all, 50 to 60 people were involved, Ms. Zhang said. They held bake sales, raffled off lunches with senior company officials and had a weight-loss contest. They hung up a story board with past Neediest Cases profiles to inspire donations.

Ms. Zhang said volunteers also placed piggy banks around the company's pantry areas to inspire donations.

The contributions totaled \$82,094.87.

Among those who have benefited from the fund is Carolina Martinez, a parent outreach coordinator in an after-school program held at Public School 225 in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn. After Ms. Martinez was featured in November, she said, she received a living-room makeover from "The Nate Berkus Show."

The show also provided laptops for Ms. Martinez and her two sons and remodeled a bedroom of one of the boys.

"It was a joy that's very hard for me to explain," Ms. Martinez said. The episode is scheduled to run in May, she added.

Readers were also drawn to the story of Michael Mercado, 20, a cancer survivor who is studying to become an auto mechanic at Lincoln Technical Institute in Queens.

"Dear Mr. Mercado, Your strength and resiliency are inspiring," one person wrote. A couple in Westfield, N.J., sent a letter with a \$1,000 check for Mr. Mercado.

A car dealer offered Mr. Mercado a job interview (once he completes school). And Lincoln Tech waived his outstanding loans and tuition, totaling \$34,688, according to the Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty, a beneficiary of UJA-Federation of New York.

Lystra Madoo-Devine, the site manager at the Queens Community Center of Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens called donors "everyday superheroes" for helping those who have hit hard times.

"The need was recognized a hundred years ago," she said, "and the need still continues."

A Century of Providing Help and Hope

For a century, The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund has provided countless struggling families and individuals in New York City with essential financial assistance so that they may lead a more dignified life. Through the Neediest Cases Fund, Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens is able to provide stability in critical times of need and empower families and individuals in our communities as they move through difficult times into greater self-sufficiency.

Thanks to our partnership with The New York Times and to the caring individuals who generously give to the Neediest Cases Fund and to Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens, our neighbors can receive the help they so desperately need. Among those whose lives have been changed thanks to the support of the Neediest Cases Fund, Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens, and compassionate individuals, are the following:

Paul Morpeau

Paul Morpeau, his wife Benodette and two-teenaged children, Ondine and Danielo, lost everything in the earthquake that devastated Haiti in January 2010. Trying to rebuild their lives in New York, Paul Morpeau joined the Catholic Charities Haitian Earthquake Support Group, where he received help with employment training and opportunities, benefits and food. However, Paul and Benodette were not prepared for the devastating news that their son, Danielo, now 14, had leukemia. As Danielo underwent chemotherapy, Paul worked

as a security guard until his employment authorization card expired. Through the Neediest Cases Fund, Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens was able to help the Morpeau family with rental assistance. Paul was able to renew his employment authorization card and, with the help of Catholic Charities, obtain a new job. Thanks to the personal efforts of the support group's volunteer co-facilitator, John Woolley, Paul found work as a security guard at Comunilife, Inc. Danielo's leukemia is in remission, although he continues to receive medical treatment. A seemingly shy teenager, Danielo's hair has grown back and he is back in school.

Ferdinand Kabigting

A renowned artist in his native Philippines, 72-year-old Ferdinand Kabigting suffered a debilitating stroke that left him paralyzed on the right side of his body and the left side of his face. Suffering from double vision, he was forced to wear an eye patch in order to see properly. With the support of his wife, Ferdinand started the difficult path of painting again. Teaching himself to paint with his left hand and with various disabilities, Ferdinand took his paint brush to canvas once again. After several arduous months, Ferdinand was painting watercolor landscapes and portraits and even had his own art show. Through the Neediest Cases Fund, Catholic Charities was able to provide Ferdinand with paint supplies. Ferdinand's story of hope in the midst of adversity struck the hearts of many readers. In particular, one

reader—a novice artist who had suffered a mild stroke—was inspired by Ferdinand's story, which was published in *The New York Times* in December 2008. This reader has continued to give generously to Ferdinand and help him purchase paint supplies so that he can continue his passion. Over the years, she has never forgotten him.

Sasha Meza

At 15 years of age, Sasha Meza had undergone numerous surgeries to combat her stunted growth and disabilities caused by cerebral palsy. A vibrant and loving teenager, Sasha suffers from spastic quadriplegia, hearing and vision loss, and other physical and mental disabilities. When Sasha's eyes stopped producing tears, the Meza family struggled with how to preserve her eyesight. Unable to afford the special eyeglasses specifically designed to retain moisture that Sasha needed, Yelba Meza, Sasha's grandmother, came to Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens for help. Through the Neediest Cases Fund, Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens was able to help purchase the special eyeglasses that Sasha needed. After her story ran in January 2008, numerous readers felt compelled to help Sasha live a happy and joy-filled life in spite of her physical challenges. One generous reader sent presents, toys and clothes for Sasha and her siblings, while another caring individual bought Sasha a two-tiered pink and green birthday cake for her sweet-sixteen celebration.

2011 AT A GLANCE

4,500,000 meals prepared for those in need

110,000 people helped throughout Brooklyn and Queens

49,907 transportation rides provided to seniors for medical appointments, and more

8,000 older adults given comprehensive services at 16 senior centers

3,750 affordable housing units for seniors, families and the formerly homeless

3,000 hours of visits by caring volunteers to frail and homebound seniors who live in isolation

2,968 at-risk women and children given specialized services at our WIC Centers

2,946 staff employed at CCBO including full time, part time, and relief staff

2,800 children educated using Montessori approach in 22 Early Childhood Development Centers and Day Care centers

420 refugees and asylum seekers given assistance with housing, health care, and more

410 youth received summer work experience through Summer Youth Employment Program

400 low-income individuals trained at our Early Childhood Teacher Training Program

203 developmentally disabled adults live independently at our 21 residences



Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens

Community Centers and satellite offices are located throughout Brooklyn and Queens to provide a wide array of services to support families and individuals as well as serve as a gateway to all Catholic Charities' programs and services:

Brooklyn Community Centers

191 Joralemon Street
Brooklyn, NY 11201
Phone: 718-722-6001

Queens Community Centers

23-40 Astoria Boulevard
Astoria, NY 11102
Phone: 718-726-9790

www.ccbq.org