

The New York Times

The Neediest Cases

December 16, 2008

Settled Down, a Father Strives for Something Better

By Javier C. Hernandez

The Joseph family kitchen is a 6-by-6-foot closet off a cramped bedroom in an apartment in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. There are Cheerios and peanut-butter crackers, and a minifridge filled with take-out boxes. Above the microwave hangs a picture of a man walking in clouds.

“Help me believe in what I could be, and all that I am,” the framed text reads. “Teach me to take one day at a time.”

With five children and monthly expenses that dwarf his paycheck, Clifford L. Joseph has turned to that motto each day for inspiration.

He has come a long way from the recklessness of his 20s and the nomadic hop, from apartment to apartment and job to job, that consumed his 30s.

Now, Mr. Joseph, 39, a clerical associate at the Department of Environmental Protection who earns about \$650 a week, hopes to get a better job and earn enough to leave behind the worries of feeding his family.

“I’m getting a slow start,” Mr. Joseph said. “I’m assuming the best is yet to come.”

Raised by foster parents in Rochester, N.Y., he felt a void left by his biological parents and struggled to focus on his studies.

He became frustrated as he saw his social circle get caught up in drugs and violent behavior. His own behavior teetered on the rambunctious. At 19, he had his first child, and over the next two years, he had two more.

The pressures of young parenting, coupled with persistent misgivings about his identity, were overwhelming. He decided to act, asking a friend who worked at a hospital to search a database for Doreatha Covington, his biological mother.

Within minutes, he had her phone number, and the next day, the two met. At their reunion, she introduced him to the rest of the family. She died a few months later, after years of drug abuse, but he remains in touch with other family members.

Seeking a fresh start, Mr. Joseph moved to New York City in 1996. The burdens of raising young children (he shares custody with the two mothers of his children) and a fractured romantic life impeded his progress. He took temporary jobs and moved several times as he sought to shield his children from drugs and violence.

In 2006, finding himself on the brink of homelessness, he moved back to Rochester while he looked for permanent work in New York City. Two violations on his record (one for unpaid parking tickets in 2005; the other for disorderly conduct in 2004) stalled his search. “It was depressing; it was hard,” he said. “I hate starting over.”

He suffered another setback in 2006, when unpaid utility bills led to his electricity being shut off, and he had to boil water to keep warm. This resulted in an outbreak of mold that ruined about \$1,200 worth of clothes, books, toys and a mattress.

Later that year, Mr. Joseph turned to the Community Service Society, one of the seven agencies supported by The [New York Times Neediest Cases Fund](#), and received \$1,800 for a new futon and one month’s rent on a one-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn.

“It took some of the stress off,” he said. “It helped me live a quieter life.”

In early 2007, he found the job at the Department of Environmental Protection.

His children — Porche, 19; Quandell, 18; Kiara, 17; Tyler, 11; and Asia, 10 — appreciated the stability. The two who still live with him, Tyler and Asia, have excelled in school.

But the influx of monthly bills — \$700 for rent, \$240 for MetroCards, \$100 for his phone — still far exceeds Mr. Joseph’s ability to pay. He hopes that by passing a real estate exam and marketing his acting skills on the side (he has performed in several community plays), he will be able to find a job that will pay for a bigger apartment with a real kitchen.

“You just have to be thankful for certain things,” he said. “You think of other people who have worse situations. You count your blessings.”

How to Help

Checks payable to The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund may be sent to:

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To delay may mean to forget.