

The New York Times

THE NEEDIEST CASES

January 12, 2012

A Credit Nightmare, but Coming Out Better in the End

By Rebecca White



Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

Maria Ortiz, with her daughter, Princess, was puzzled by job rejections until her credit report revealed faulty information.

Sitting on her living room sofa, her knees together, her hands clasped tidily on her lap, Maria Ortiz was the picture of professionalism. Wearing a black suit, her hair pulled back, she was smiling confidently. It was the end of another long day, one that started at 6 in the morning, before the rest of her family had even hit the snooze button.

But Ms. Ortiz, 48, a single mother of two and the sole caretaker of her elderly mother, does not mind waking early to get her son ready for school or preparing dinner for her family every night. And she does not mind the hourlong commute from Astoria, Queens, to her job in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. After spending nearly three years untangling a knot of financial bad luck, she is grateful for normal routines.

In August 2008, Ms. Ortiz was laid off from her job as a manager at a laundromat in Astoria.

“I started folding,” she said in a quiet, humble voice that barely hinted at the hardships she has experienced. “Then they trained me on the computer, and then I became a manager.”

Ms. Ortiz had earned almost \$500 a week as a manager on a full-time schedule. When she lost her job, her income was cut in half: she had to support her son, Luis Pellot, then 13, her daughter, Princess Pellot, then 16, and her mother, who has Alzheimer’s disease, on \$252 in weekly unemployment benefits. She says she gets no financial support from her children’s father. Her monthly rent was \$611, and with utilities, food and credit card bills, she feared that her family would not make ends meet.

In February 2010, after nearly two years of looking for work, Ms. Ortiz was desperate. She had never been unemployed for that long. She sought assistance from the East River Development Alliance's work-force development program. A caseworker helped Ms. Ortiz with her résumé and career-planning strategies.

"They started sending me out on interviews," Ms. Ortiz said. "Some of them, I thought I had experience in what they were asking for, but they would call me and tell me no."

Ms. Ortiz was baffled by the repeated rejections until her caseworker checked her credit report. Everything made sense then: it showed that damaging, faulty information had been added to her report.

"It said I owe over \$75,000 and that I have two cars," Ms. Ortiz squealed. "I don't drive! It said I have a mortgage. I don't have a house!"

Quickly realizing that she needed to correct the false information, Ms. Ortiz and her caseworker sent letters to more than 20 companies and the credit bureaus to set straight which debts were veritably hers.

"I did have a lot of credit cards, but I always paid them on time," she said. "I only had \$500 of credit card debt, maybe less, and they weren't outstanding."

Her credit reputation has since been restored, and she has achieved a nearly perfect TransUnion score, 798, but the blemish on her record took several months to reverse and was not without consequences.

In the summer of 2010, Ms. Ortiz went to a second interview for a position as a bank teller on Long Island.

"I thought I was going to get the job, but they ran my report and told me no," she said. Despite the letters Ms. Ortiz had sent out, her report still reflected incorrect information.

With money and time running out — her unemployment benefits were to end in September — Ms. Ortiz took a different course. She went on public assistance and began receiving \$500 a month in food stamps and an additional \$110 biweekly, but this was not enough to buoy her family of four.

On the advice of her career counselor at the East River Development Alliance, Ms. Ortiz applied to the Grace Institute, which helps women prepare for the job market, to enhance her professional skills.

"A lot of jobs were asking for computer skills I didn't have," she said.

Ms. Ortiz was accepted into the institute in July 2010, but did not have the money to pay for books and materials. She approached the development alliance and was referred to a partner organization, [the Community Service Society of New York](#), one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund. She received \$225 for materials and books and began classes that September.

A newly confident Ms. Ortiz graduated from the Grace Institute in spring 2011 and re-entered the world of résumés and interviews to great success. In August 2011, she was hired as an intake coordinator at the Paul J. Cooper Center for Human Services in Brooklyn, which provides residential services and treatment for chemical dependency and mental health issues, earning \$10 an hour. She is currently up for a raise, she said.

As circuitous as it was, the rocky road she traveled may have been worthwhile, Ms. Ortiz admitted.

"My new job's a lot better," she said, her eyes gleaming with pride. "In the laundry, I had to be standing the whole time, sometimes 10 hours a day.

"Now, I have my own office."