

# The New York Times

THE NEEDIEST CASES

## After Trial and Error, an Aspiring Chef Seeks a Break

By C. J. HUGHES

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Todd Heisler/The New York Times

Lance Johnson, 36, is looking for work after being laid off last spring at a sandwich shop in Queens.



*Every year since 1911, New York Times Neediest Cases Fund has provided direct assistance to children, families and the elderly in New York. Articles will appear daily through Jan. 30, illustrating the difference that even a modest amount of money can make in easing the struggles of the poor.*

*Last year, 10,428 donors contributed \$6,280,242, which was distributed to those in need through seven New York charities.*

Coming up with a tasty recipe for lasagna required lots of trial and error for Lance Johnson, who dreams of becoming a chef.

“You’ve got to mess it up a couple times before you get it perfect,” Mr. Johnson, 36, said in a statement that could easily sum up the early part of his life.

When he was 12, his mother died, which caused him to lose focus in school in a tough section of Brownsville, Brooklyn. “I didn’t really know how to deal with it because I was so young,” he said.

One night three years later, Mr. Johnson was on his bicycle, headed to a deli to buy a soda for his grandmother. He was pedaling through a housing project when a gunfight broke out; a bullet entered his chest near his heart.

“I was used to shots, because I would hear them all the time,” he said. “But I felt like a jolt in the chest.”

After two weeks in the hospital, he was back on his feet, but nine months later, his brother, Gregory, whom he had been close to, died.

Hoping to escape from the drugs, violence and crime in his neighborhood, Mr. Johnson moved to stay with a cousin in Binghamton, N.Y.

One night in 1993, he was out with two friends who decided to rob a store that sold lottery tickets. Mr. Johnson, who says he had no idea what they were up to, waited by the car. As a result, he went to prison for three years. Around this time, his only sister, Kisha, also died.

Mr. Johnson got out of prison in 1996, but more brushes with the law followed, most of which had to do with parole violations, and usually involved alcohol.

And jobs came and went quickly, like the one stocking shelves at a sneaker store, Jimmy Jazz, in Astoria, Queens. In 2005, Mr. Johnson became licensed to remove asbestos from old New York buildings, a job that paid well but was inconsistent, he said.

After his last time behind bars, in 2009, for a fight with three men who jumped him as he was getting out of a cab in Binghamton, Mr. Johnson resolved to turn his life around.

“I wanted to start from the bottom to see if I could do it myself without any help,” he said.

Without a dependable place to stay in New York, Mr. Johnson ended up in a Bellevue Hospital Center shelter on Wards Island. But theft was rampant, he said, so he left after three weeks.

He eventually landed on the couch of a cousin in the Lillian Wald Houses in Manhattan. Sitting at a chessboard table in a plaza next to that project recently, Mr. Johnson said he was finally in a much better place.

Ten months sober, and attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings three times a week, he managed this year to get maintenance work at a sandwich shop in Long Island City, Queens. But with business slow, the shop laid him off last spring.

In July, the [Community Service Society of New York](#), one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, came to his aid with \$700, which paid for his dues at the union for asbestos workers.

But as he looks for work, other bills are piling up. Culinary school remains a distant dream.

Mr. Johnson also hopes to make amends with his four children, whom he has seen intermittently, including his oldest daughter, who is at [Cornell University](#). He wants to provide more of a family than he had. “I hope it’s not too late,” he said.