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THE NEEDIEST CASES

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## Soul in Rhythm, Even When Life Isn't

By Mathew R. Warren



Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

Demetrice Gumbs, 21, has lived in shelters since leaving the homes of her biological mother and the woman who raised her. She is now pursuing her high school equivalency diploma and certification as a bus monitor.

When the stress of being homeless becomes overwhelming, Demetrice Gumbs dances in the small room of the Brooklyn shelter where she has lived for the past year.

“When I dance, I’m not myself,” said Ms. Gumbs, 21, who practices the choreography she sees in music videos. “My brain is focused on getting my anger out and just being free.”

When Ms. Gumbs was 3 months old, she said, her father knocked on the door of a close family friend, Patricia Wright, and asked for help raising her. Her biological mother, she said, was addicted to crack cocaine and could not care for her. Ms. Wright later received legal custody, Ms. Gumbs said.

Although she and her father never lived together, he worked near her home in the Williamsbridge section of the Bronx and remained in her life until he died of complications from AIDS when she was 11, she said.

“After he passed away, I had dreams about him,” Ms. Gumbs said, her eyes gazing up behind her rectangular glasses. “He would let me know he was in heaven. He told me how long it took him to get there, that the line was long. He would make me laugh in my dreams.”

Ms. Gumbs grew up not knowing about her biological mother, she said, and learned the truth at 13 from Ms. Wright.

“You don’t choose drugs over your kid,” Ms. Gumbs said. “I don’t care how addictive it is; you don’t do that. That’s no excuse.” Feeling resentful, she started to rebel.

“After that I felt like I don’t have to listen to you anymore because you’re not my real mother,” Ms. Gumbs said, recalling how her relationship with Ms. Wright got worse and how her life began to fall apart.

After a fight with a group of girls at Fordham High School for the Arts, where Ms. Gumbs had been studying dance, she transferred to another high school in the Bronx in her senior year. But no longer dancing every day, she dropped out.

When Ms. Gumbs was 18, her biggest wish came true: her biological mother, Darnella Price, contacted her. Ms. Gumbs said Ms. Price told her that she had been clean of drugs for a year. Ms. Gumbs soon decided to live with her mother, desiring to “be like everybody else,” she said.

But the reunion was not all Ms. Gumbs had hoped for. She found her mother to be distant, more focused on a boyfriend, she said. One night, she said, her mother’s boyfriend cornered her as she stood in front of a closet preparing for school and tried to force her to kiss him. She screamed, pushed him away and ran from the room. Ms. Gumbs said her mother acted unconcerned when she told her. So Ms. Gumbs packed her things and moved back in with Ms. Wright.

“For me to wait 18 years to see my birth mother, and then when I finally met her it was nothing like what I thought it would be,” she said, “that was a waste of time.”

Ms. Price, 47, said that she had asked her daughter to leave because she had been disrespectful and that her boyfriend “never said anything to her but hi, and that’s it.” She said that drugs became a part of her life only four years ago but that she was clean now.

Back home, Ms. Gumbs began arguing with Ms. Wright’s son because she felt he was trying to control her, she said, and Ms. Wright asked her to move out.

Ms. Wright, 57, said Ms. Gumbs, wanting her independence, decided to leave on her own.

Ms. Gumbs ended up at the Franklin Avenue women’s shelter in the Bronx, sharing a room with 30 other women. “I hated it,” she said. “The first night I went there I cried all night. Some of them were prostitutes; some were still on drugs. I was like, ‘Oh, my God, I have to get out of here.’ ”

After a month, she was placed in a transitional housing shelter in Brooklyn, where she has lived for the past year. She is pursuing a high school equivalency diploma, and she recently started working with Cub Scouts in schools across the city on safety and first aid. She works three hours a day, five days a week, and earns \$9 an hour.

Ms. Gumbs also decided to pursue certification as a school bus monitor at Technic Driving School in Brooklyn last March. But she could not afford the tuition.

This year, Ms. Gumbs turned to the [Community Service Society of New York](#), one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, which gave her a \$300 grant from the fund.

Ms. Gumbs hopes the training will help her find a second job so she can save money and move into her own apartment. For now, she continues to dance alone in her room at the shelter, with hopes to one day study with the [Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater](#).

“I want dancing to be a profession one day,” she said. “I want my career to go far.”