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A Mother Grateful to Have a Key to Her Own Place

By Mathew R. Warren



Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

Tiffany Tyler and her son, Shamair, at their apartment in the Bronx. They were once evicted by city marshals and lived in a shelter.

For months last year, Tiffany Tyler lay awake at night wondering if city marshals would come to her door the next day to evict her and her 10-year-old son.

“I was scared,” Ms. Tyler, 30, said. “I couldn’t breathe.”

The last time marshals banged on the door, waking her up early one morning, it was in 2001, and her son, Shamair, was a month old. Ms. Tyler was 19 and living with her older sister in Harlem; she said she had no idea they had fallen behind on rent and was shocked to learn they were being evicted.

“It was so embarrassing,” she said. “It was something I would never want to experience again.”

Ms. Tyler had been living with her sister since their mother died of liver cancer, in 1995. Her father had not been a part of her life, she said. She had graduated from high school and had worked as a telemarketer eight months into her pregnancy, but had no job at the time of the eviction, nor was she receiving financial help from Shamair’s father, she said.

The marshals gave her a few minutes to gather a few possessions, so Ms. Tyler grabbed diapers, milk and baby clothes and stuffed them in backpacks that she hung from a stroller. With a single change of clothes for herself and a photograph of her mother, she and her baby, together with her older sister, her sister’s three children and her younger brother, went to an intake center at a shelter in the Bronx.

Ms. Tyler and her son shared a small room in a shelter for almost a year, until she was approved for Section 8 housing in the South Bronx.

“I was overjoyed,” she said, smiling at the memory. “I had my own apartment. I couldn’t believe it.”

For the next seven years, she worked in telemarketing and various clerical positions. For extra money, she styled hair and prepared tax returns, a skill she had learned working as an administrative assistant at a tax office. Shamair, who loves horror movies, football and Michael Jackson, grew up without any memory of their time in a shelter, she said.

Things were going smoothly until Ms. Tyler lost her job in 2009. She went on public assistance and entered a back-to-work program with the city’s Human Resources Administration, which placed her in a temporary maintenance position with the parks department. But in October 2010, the program ended, and Ms. Tyler was again out of work.

Her only income was \$176 a week in unemployment benefits and \$200 in food stamps. She was paying \$453 of the \$728 rent for her apartment, with Section 8 covering the rest. Realizing she could not afford her rent that October, she went to her landlord to discuss her options.

To her dismay, Ms. Tyler discovered that her Section 8 had been cut off since the previous January and that she owed the difference for every month since. She said she had never received any notice from her landlord, and blamed the oversight on the rapid turnover rate of property managers in her building’s management company. The city had revoked her Section 8, Ms. Tyler said, because her landlord had not replaced a stove with two broken burners for over a year despite her numerous requests, causing her apartment to fail inspections and making it ineligible for the subsidy. Now, because of the owed rent, she received an eviction notice and was at risk of becoming homeless once again.

“My son was a baby then,” Ms. Tyler said of her first period of homelessness. “Now he’s 10 years old; it would have been heartbreaking.”

Ms. Tyler sought assistance from the Human Resources Administration and was approved for a one-shot deal of \$3,000 in December 2010, but she did not get the money right away. She used loans from a cousin and money she made doing hair and preparing tax returns to help pay her standard portion of the rent, but without Section 8, her arrears increased.

To hold off eviction, Ms. Tyler persuaded a housing court judge to extend her case. When she received the assistance from the city agency, in November 2011, she turned to the [Community Service Society of New York](#), one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, for help to cover the rest of her debt. With \$728 that the agency drew from the fund, along with help from other charities, Ms. Tyler was able to pay off her arrears in time for Thanksgiving last year.

That day, Ms. Tyler and her son, along with her sister’s family, went back to the intake center at the shelter where they had been residents, stood outside and handed out food they had made themselves.

“It made me feel really good just to be able to give,” Ms. Tyler said. “You can’t take things for granted.”

Her landlord recently replaced her stove, she said, and she hopes her Section 8 will be reinstated soon. She is excited about the arrival of tax season, and since December she has been working part time with a catering company. “I want to be able to keep a roof over his head,” Ms. Tyler said, her son, now 11, by her side. “I want to be able to breathe.”