

# A Single Mother Takes Charge, Trading Helplessness for Ambition



Jeremy M. Lange for The New York Times

Patricia Barnes and her son Raymond, 14, at home in Brooklyn. With new mattresses—and new coping skills—the family is sleeping easier.

By ALEXIS REHRMANN

“Blood” is spray painted over the front door of the apartment building where Patricia Barnes’s family lives. It appears again and again on the walls of the stairwell leading to their second-floor apartment.

Ms. Barnes, 38, is raising two teenagers in the tough East New York neighborhood in Brooklyn, and she is doing everything she can to keep them off these streets.

About five years ago, she sent her four younger children, now ages 11 to 13, to live with their father’s extended family in Ivory Coast, where she believed they would be safer.

“I think that is the best decision I made,” said Ms. Barnes, who calls Ivory Coast to speak with her children two or three times a week. “The way things are running around out here nowadays, I don’t want them out here. I don’t want him out here.”

By “him,” Ms. Barnes meant her son Raymond, 14, who is a high school freshman. Her daughter Chaka Ward, 17, who prefers to be called Tisha, is a sophomore.

Ms. Barnes said she began seeing worrisome changes in Raymond when he was in junior high school.

“He was doing pretty good in school, and then, I don’t know,” Ms. Barnes said. “It’s like he woke up and he just, ‘I don’t want to do it no more.’”

Raymond agreed. “I was a loose cannon,” he said, adding that he was “running wild.”

He was skipping school, outside at all hours, quick-tempered and willing to fight. Such behavior would be frustrating for any parent, but for Ms. Barnes, who sometimes

hears gunfire from her window, it was frightening. She waited up for him at night. She worried that despite his youth, Raymond’s height — at 14 he is already 6-foot-3 — might get him in adult-sized trouble.

“It felt like my whole world was crumbling,” she said. “I was losing control of him, and that’s the one thing I felt should never, ever happen.”

Ms. Barnes took any help she could find, including a warning from Raymond’s basketball coach that bad behavior would keep him on the bench.

“She slowed me down, started making me think,” Raymond said about his coach. “I really wanted to be on the team. So I started calming down, letting a lot of things slide.”

But Raymond’s behavior did not change overnight. An altercation at school led to more absences, and in December 2005, Ms. Barnes applied for a Person In Need of Supervision petition. The petition would give Family Court the power to force Raymond to attend school.

Rather than grant the petition, the court referred the family for counseling at the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service, one of seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund.

They began attending counseling sessions in February at the bureau’s East New York Family Center. Ms. Barnes goes weekly, and Tisha and Raymond accompany her monthly.

After 10 months of counseling, changes are evident in Ms. Barnes’s life. She is training for a new job and earned her G.E.D. last month.

Ms. Barnes had worked as a home health aide for years, but it was unstable income, and she relied on public assistance to make ends meet.

In October, Ms. Barnes started a job training program through public assistance. She works for the Parks Department, cleaning city parks. She describes the program as “giving you your responsibility: to be a part of the working class,” she said, “which is a beautiful thing, because I love it.”

She earns about \$320 a week and receives \$115 in food stamps each month. Her share of the rent for her subsidized four-bedroom apartment is \$150 a month. Her job training program ends in March, and she hopes to be hired permanently.

Ms. Barnes said she cherished the time she spent with her oldest children studying for the G.E.D. exam. Tisha helped her with language, and Raymond studied algebra with her.

“He actually took a genuine interest in it,” Ms. Barnes said. “It was so amazing for us to just lay across the bed and just talk about it.”

“I’m proud of my accomplishments,” she said. “Your kids have something to look up to.”

Cascille Andela, a social worker who counsels the family, said she had seen a big change in Ms. Barnes’s ability to cope with adversity.

“She is able to come home and be more relaxed, understanding, and trying to work through problems rather than getting frustrated and throwing her hands up,” Ms. Andela said.

After a home visit in which she noticed that Raymond and Ms. Barnes were both sleeping in the living room, Ms. Andela used \$965 from the Neediest Cases to replace the family’s worn mattresses.

“You’ve got to have a bed to sleep in,” Ms. Andela said. “You can’t go to work the next morning if you can’t get to sleep at night.”

Ms. Barnes hopes that her children will draw inspiration from her efforts. In December, Tisha started her first job, working at a day care center. “I don’t care where she worked as long as the little girl knows it’s going to feel good to get a paycheck,” Ms. Barnes said.

As for Raymond, he is getting in fewer fights, and is working at grade level for the first time after eight years in special education classes, where he had been placed because of his behavior. He grudgingly admits this year’s schoolwork is a little more interesting. Ms. Barnes and Ms. Andela are still working on persuading him to attend school regularly, but he is no longer roaming the streets.

Bit by bit, Ms. Barnes and her family seem to be gaining ground.

“I’ve made it my business to not let anything stop me from achieving my goals,” she said.