

By ALEXIS REHRMANN

"Before my mother passed away, she was telling me that she was always going to be there — for my graduations and all that," said Devonta Phillips, 13, his words fast and barely audible in the darkened living room of his mother's apartment, where he lives with his half sister. "I just thought she was going to live a long time. I didn't think she was going to die before my graduation."

With those words, Devonta disappeared down the hall, reeling from his mother's death and her absence at his sixth-grade graduation ceremony in June.

Sabrina R. Hand died of cancer in September 2005. She was 36 and left behind three children. Their memories of her have not faded, and while Ralph Hand 18, went to live with his father, Devonta and his sister, Amanda Hand, 19, are slowly piecing together a new home on their own. Ms. Hand feels strongly that it is what her mother would have wanted.

"I know my mom would want me to take care of him," she said. "I know she wouldn't want me to separate us. I wanted to take care of my brother and be the one that he asked all the questions of."

Ms. Hand was in the 11th grade when her concerns about her mother's increasing weakness, in January 2005, prompted her to leave school. "She would lose her balance and fall," Ms. Hand said. "I wanted to be here when she woke up."

She knew her mother was ill, but Ms.

Hand did not know the cause.

By March, Ms. Hand said, after accompanying her mother to doctors' appointments, it was clear to Ms. Hand that it was cancer. They sometimes talked about the illness, but many details were kept private. "She didn't want to scare us," Ms. Hand said.

Instead, Ms. Hand's mother talked about the importance of education. She wanted her daughter to graduate from high school. "She took me herself to the G.E.D. school and signed me up for it," recalled Ms. Hand, who began classes that May.

Ms. Hand took G.E.D. classes for two months but left in July when her mother went into the hospital, where she remained until her death two months later.

In some ways Ms. Hand was prepared to be the head of a household. She had practice in cooking, shopping and cleaning. "My mom made sure that everybody had their own chores in the house," she said. Devonta now does chores that his sister assigns: washing the dishes, taking out the garbage and cleaning his room.

But some of Ms. Hand's responsibilities were new. Navigating the public as-

## An Older Sister Who Has Become Head of the Family



Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

Amanda Hand in her late mother's apartment in Brooklyn, which she shares with her half brother, Devonta Philips. He is in counseling and has been wrestling with the emotional problems of losing his mother.

sistance bureaucracy was a challenge. Ms. Hand receives \$108 in public assistance each month, supplemented by \$237 in food stamps. Federal housing assistance and welfare cover the \$651 rent on their two-bedroom Brooklyn apartment.

Devonta also receives \$646 a month in Supplemental Security Income because he has asthma. Ms. Hand has some other support; her father and godparents help out, but she said, "I'm very independent, so I don't really ask for much."

The loss of their mother weighed on everyone and was particularly hard on Devonta. "Every kid goes through their own thing," Ms. Hand said. "He was a lot sadder."

When one of his teachers suggested that Devonta needed counseling, Ms. Hand followed through. It was determined that Devonta had an adjustment disorder, a situational depression that can occur when a person is unable to cope with a specific source of stress.

In August, Devonta and Ms. Hand began family counseling at the East New York Family Center, part of the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service, one of seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund.

The weekly counseling is making a difference. "He's opening up more," said Fatumata Murray, the social worker who sees the family. "He was very shy. He's more willing to talk about his feelings. It's progress."

Ms. Murray also worked with the fam-

ily to set goals, including getting Devonta reinvolved in after-school activities and re-enrolling Ms. Hand in school and helping her to find a job. Ms. Hand plans to finish her G.E.D. this spring and then study architecture. Someday, she would like to build a house of her own.

For now, she is living in her mother's old apartment. Ms. Murray requested \$2,000 in Neediest Cases money to buy a dining room table and chairs, a coffee table and a big L-shaped couch that Ms. Hand selected carefully. "A conversational couch," she said, explaining that when Devonta is ready to have friends over, they will have a place to hang out.

They are also looking for a new apartment. "I just want to start over, me and him," Ms. Hand said. "I sleep in her room. It's depressing for her not to be here."

Devonta, who had come back to the living room, said he would never forget his mother. "The memories slap me in the head all day," he said. In a new apartment, he hopes he can leave the bad memories behind. He will continue to remember his mother as the peacemaker, who counseled her children not to fight, and how she asked him about school every day. "It's not like we did anything," he said. "We always just sat down and talked."

And he will remember that his mother did make it to his fifth-grade graduation, even though she was sick. "It took her a long time to get up the steps," Ms. Hand said. "We had to come real early to be there."

