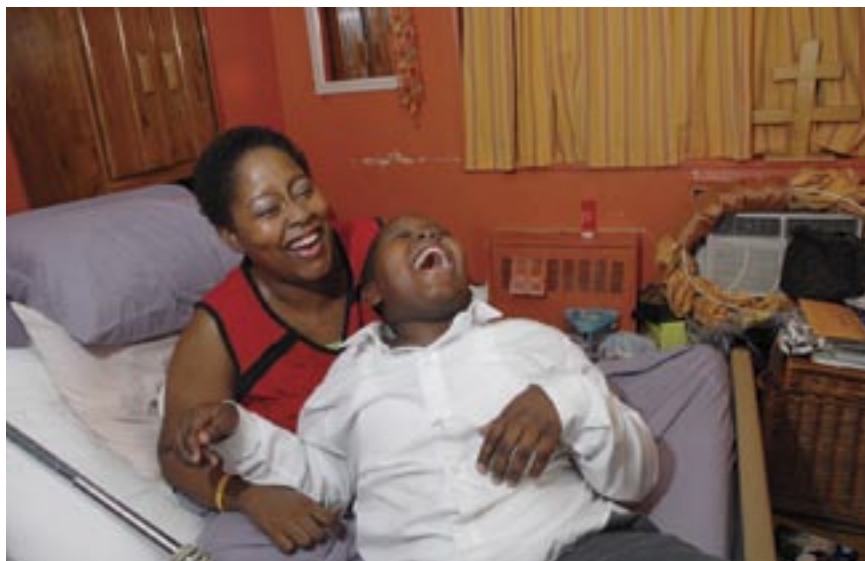


Grateful for Each Breath, as Well as Life's Other Wonders



Jeremy M. Lange for The New York Times

Natasha Hawkins, who has long had cancer, with her 10-year-old son, known as Yani, in Brooklyn.

By KARI HASKELL

When Natasha Hawkins was 19, her body was pumped full of chemicals. The chemotherapy diminished the spread of thymoma, cancer of the thymus gland, and, she thought, her chances of ever having children.

"My doctors told me that they were trying to save my life -- no babies," Ms. Hawkins said.

A few years later, though, she became pregnant. "When I found out, I just opened my arms to God," said Ms. Hawkins, now 35. "I had to say thank you."

When her son was born, on Jan. 15, 1996, at 8 pounds, 5 ounces, she knew exactly what she was going to name him: Omoiyanu Ishmael. "It means 'the miracle child that God hears,'" said Ms. Hawkins, sitting up in a hospital bed and inhaling oxygen from a tank in her mother's co-op apartment in Fort Greene, Brooklyn.

A few minutes later, her 10-year-old miracle, known as Yani, arrived home from Public School 20, the Clinton Hill School. He made a beeline for his mother, embraced her warmly and said with pride, "I got 90 on a test today."

Ms. Hawkins beamed. "He is my little leader in training," she said. "He is the smartest."

Next year, she hopes he will attend Philippa Schuyler Middle School in Brooklyn, a school for the gifted and talented.

The two have lived with Ms. Hawkins's mother, Lucille Hawkins, 61, in

her complex since an electrical fire damaged their apartment on Pacific Street in Brooklyn in August 2005. The co-op has three bedrooms. Also living there is Mrs. Hawkins's other daughter, Christianna Melissa, 19, whom she adopted at 3 years old.

Mrs. Hawkins, a retired events coordinator for a bank, was also a foster mother for 20 years and adopted a son named Omar, who died of brain cancer when he was 12.

"He died three days before my 30th birthday," said Ms. Hawkins.

Her eyes welled up, and she wiped away the tears. She said that watching him die -- and hoping to be around for her son -- has made her fight that much harder to live.

Ms. Hawkins recalled when she first started chemotherapy. "That was the first time I lost my hair," she said, rolling her eyes and laughing. "I was devastated, oh please. I was bald."

To be fashionable, she wore fabulous wigs, Ms. Hawkins said. "My mother, she made it funny. She made it not as bad as it could be."

Ms. Hawkins's cancer went into remission for most of her 20s, but then returned. She has become weaker and can no longer handle chemotherapy. With care from her mother, her son and two nurses, she takes eight medications a day. She has been using the oxygen since she moved in with her mother after the fire,

she said.

"That's when I started to wear this thing all the time," she said, lifting a tube going to her nose. "My carbon levels are increasing; my oxygen will decrease if I don't have this."

Sitting up in the hospital bed, she pushed a pillow under her right side to cushion an inoperable fluid mass that has grown to the size of a grapefruit. She tires quickly and rarely walks. When she goes out, she uses an old, heavy electric wheelchair.

While the nurses tend to her medical needs, Mattie Williams, a home care attendant, helps with Yani's care. Ms. Williams's services are provided by the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service, one of the seven charitable agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund.

Ms. Williams takes Yani to the park, the library and school events and helps him with his homework. "She is phenomenal," Ms. Hawkins said.

Ms. Williams began working with the family in the fall of 2005.

Five months later, while the apartment was being fixed, Ms. Hawkins received a past-due rent notice. She owed \$455. She also owed \$589.06 for an electric bill. "I did not know I still had to pay" the rent for a home that was unlivable, she said.

She was told that she was still responsible for \$92 a month, her portion of the subsidized rent, she said. On her income of \$558 a month in public assistance, plus \$200 in food stamps and \$92 in public aid for Yani, she just did not have the money.

Ms. Williams approached the bureau for help, and through the Neediest Cases Fund the outstanding bills were covered. "I am so grateful," said Ms. Hawkins, who had worked in earlier years, primarily in retail or secretarial jobs.

She is paying the \$92 a month rent to remain qualified for subsidized housing. Her apartment has been largely repaired, but she wants to live in her mother's building and is No. 135 on the waiting list.

Her mother said, "I need to have her near me."

"But those things we go through," said Ms. Hawkins, taking everything in stride.

"I am just grateful that God sees fit to bless me day to day," she said. "He allowed me to have this beautiful child. And he allows me to breathe the breath of life every day. Every day that I take in one, I am glad. But for the grace of God, that could've been my last breath just a minute ago."