

With Homemaker's Help, Ill Mother Keeps Her 2 Sons



Robert Stolarik for The New York Times

Yvonne Islam with her sons, Isaiah, 9, left, and Demetrius, 8, at their apartment in Brooklyn. Ms. Islam's health problems include diabetes.

By JOSEPH P. FRIED



Some of Yvonne Islam's very difficult circumstances can be described as a vicious circle. She, however, prefers another image.

Ms. Islam, a 43-year-old Brooklyn resident, suffers from so many ailments -- obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, arthritis and severe depression -- that she is too physically and mentally exhausted to manage her own life and the lives of her two sons, 8 and 9, without help. Her mobility is so limited that she cannot escort them to and from their elementary school three blocks away.

Meanwhile, her prescribed medication to treat the depression has the side effect of increasing her lethargy, which is one of the conditions that make her feel depressed to begin with, according to her case coordinator at the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service, a social services agency aiding the family.

In speaking about her depression, Ms. Islam said, "It's like a yo-yo -- it goes up, it goes down."

Later, she said of her weight, "It goes up and down, like a yo-yo."

The course of Ms. Islam's life in the last eight years has been descent toward family disintegration, followed by tenuous

ascent to the relatively stable, but still troubled, situation the family is currently in.

"I cry a lot," Ms. Islam said, sitting in the living room of her apartment in East New York. "What I'm going through. Everything." Among her concerns, she said, is that the boys, too, are becoming seriously overweight. Both are also asthmatic.

Ms. Islam, who has 10 siblings -- an 11th died last year -- said she did not finish high school but instead went to work as a nursing home aide, a job she held until, at 22, she gave birth to her first child, a daughter.

She and the child's father divorced after six years of marriage, Ms. Islam said, and her daughter, now 21, has attended college out of state, though she has recently been back in New York working.

Ms. Islam, in a relationship with another man, gave birth to her first son, Isaiah, in 1997, and to her second son, Demetrius, in 1998, a year in which she also suffered a devastating loss when her mother died of cancer.

Ms. Islam and her children were living with her mother, who she said was her helpmate, anchor and mentor. "She always told me what's best for my children," Ms. Islam recalled.

She and the boys' father ended their relationship after Demetrius was born.

Raising two little boys and her daughter, then a teenager, without her mother was a task that overwhelmed her, Ms. Islam said.

She said she received little attention from most of her siblings, but one who is attentive, Mike Searls, 57, said he stopped by daily to see how things were going and helped out in emergencies.

For example, he paid expenses for Ms. Islam and the boys for a time recently after the city temporarily halted her welfare payments and food stamps, Mr. Searls said.

"They said she didn't keep an appointment," he said.

Ms. Islam attributed the cessation to a mix-up.

The family receives \$320 in welfare payments and \$309 worth of food stamps each month, according to the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service, which is providing a full-time homemaker.

Out of the \$320, Mr. Searls said, his sister pays the \$168 in monthly rent for her apartment in a low-income city housing complex. Medicaid covers the family's medical costs.

The Brooklyn Bureau, one of seven charities supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, began sending the homemaker in 2002.

Doris Barreto, Ms. Islam's case coordinator at the Brooklyn Bureau, said the city's Administration for Children's Services paid the bureau to provide the homemaker. It was an effort to avoid having to place the children in foster care to assure they were properly cared for, Ms. Barreto said.

The homemaker performs tasks like preparing meals, shopping, cleaning, escorting the boys to and from school and accompanying Ms. Islam on her limited ventures from the apartment.

Recently, another emergency cropped up. The boys' bunk bed broke, and as the children slept on its two halves, an army of cockroaches that had made a home in a hole in the bed crawled over them, Ms. Barreto said.

Ms. Islam lacked money for a new bunk bed, so Ms. Barreto used \$715 from the Neediest Cases Fund to buy one. "It was wonderful, great," Ms. Islam said of the contribution, which restored a decent sleeping environment for her sons.

As for what she hoped for beyond being able to meet such immediate needs, Ms. Islam said, "For all of us to lose weight."

Then, referring to the brothers and sisters with whom she has had little or no contact over the years, she added, "And for all of us to come together."