Through Loss and Uncertainty, a Young Man Persists on the Road to Independence

By KARI HASKELL

When Paul James, 18, of Brooklyn lost his mother, Amelia, six years ago, his heart and home broke apart.

She died of breast cancer at 52, and her son was shuffled among relatives. Along the way, he grew into a man but retained a childlike longing for the stability he once had.

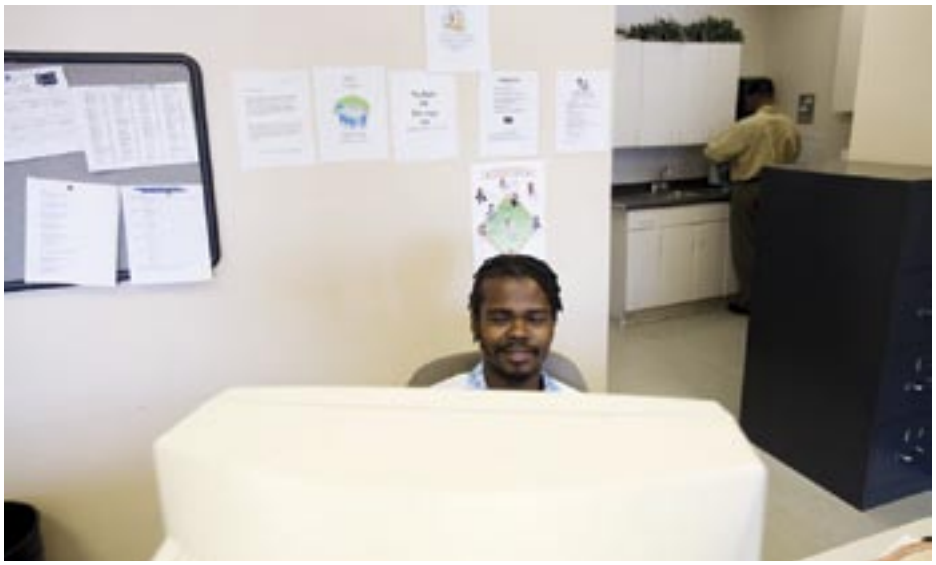
''I think about her every day,'' he said recently at the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service's Adolescent Employment and Education Program. The bureau is one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund.

Settling into the corner booth in the center's student lounge, his smile lighted up the room when the conversation turned to his mother.

''She was as strict as she was laid back,'' he said with a slight Guyanese lilt. ''I can still hear her,'' he said. After a pause, he added, ''I can hear her sing.''

As a nurse, she had been the main provider for him and his brother and three sisters, he said. His father, Leonard, who worked at the city's Housing Authority and who lived with them, he said, did not take an active role in their upbringing.

Still, he led a content and carefree life until age 7, when his mother was diagnosed as having cancer. The disease, he said, robbed him not only of a parent, but also of his adolescence.



Jeremy M. Lange for The New York Times

Paul James, 18, got his general equivalency diploma and a rented room with the help of the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service.

Forced to fend for himself for years, a teenage father has a grip on his future.

''The chemo, I call it the misery,'' he said in melancholic tone. ''She didn't want anyone to see her crying, but I was the youngest, her baby. I was always with her.''

Surgery and chemotherapy drained her energy and took her black hair, and as she recognized her mortality, she began stressing the importance of becoming independent.

''She told me that I would have a tougher life than my brother's and sisters', but I would make it out without their help,'' he said.

Five years later, her doctors found that the cancer had spread throughout her body. Within two weeks, she died. To honor her wish, she was buried in her native Guyana.

The family began to fracture upon the return to New York from the funeral, Mr. James said. His siblings were forced to take on added responsibilities before his father returned to Guyana for good, he said.

As his siblings began having their own families, Mr. James was bounced from home to home and felt he was treated like a burden. After one too many quarrels, he sought refuge at the home of a close friend in Brooklyn. But with the instability, he missed school. Eager to get an education, he asked his friend's parents to take custody of him so he could register for classes. But his father, who still had legal guardianship, refused to relinquish custody, and as a result, he was deported to Guyana.

'I thought it was going to be all right, but I know how the country is,'' he said. ''Guyana -- it's poor, hard to find a job or get an education.''

A relative there took him in, and his uncle gave him a job as an office assistant at his shipping company. A short relationship produced a son, Malachi, in 2004.

After the birth, both young parents looked for better lives. ''I want to be a better father to him than mine was,'' Mr. James said.

His ex-girlfriend, Felecia Stevens, 24, moved to Barbados with Malachi last year. Mr. James returned to New York on Christmas Day 2005, almost a month after his 18th birthday, to pursue a general equivalency diploma. A friend living in East New York offered him a place to stay, and soon after, he learned about the education program nearby at the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service.

At the agency, he got more than he expected. He received tutoring five days a week and counseling to deal with his emotional scars. He also gained a confidante, Brigid Turner, his case manager. But during G.E.D. testing in July, once again his living arrangement turned sour.

''Immediately we wanted to find him a place to live, but there was no one,'' Ms. Turner said.

Finding him always on time for classes and polite, she hired him as an intern for $5 an hour. The earnings helped him contribute to his friend's household and gave him time to pass the G.E.D.

Nevertheless, he found himself again without a bed and went into the shelter system before finding a room in a Guyanese family's Flatbush home. To cover the $360 monthly rent, Ms. Turner collaborated with the director, Tamaylia Samms and a mentor, Phillip Colas, at the agency, to request emergency housing funds provided by the Neediest Cases.

For the first time since his mother died, Mr. James said, he has a stable home and can focus on getting a job and having a future with his son.

''Thanks to the Neediest, I have my own keys now,'' he said.