

# Rebuilding a Self-Image Torn by Abuse and Drugs

By ANTHONY RAMIREZ

Jeremy M. Lange for The New York Times

When Shawna Madison gave birth at 13 to her first child, a girl, it was not the beginning of a nightmare, it was the beginning of one of a series of nightmares.

Her daughter's father was Shawna's father, who had begun molesting her when she was not yet 11.

What followed was a long midnight of the soul -- depression, drug addiction, promiscuity, the birth of more children, street-walking and, finally, an attack by a possible killer and hospitalization for depression.

The darkest day among many dark days was when Ms. Madison was 24 and she noticed her daughter, then 11, had begun to stand in front of a mirror, weep and methodically pull out her hair, something Ms. Madison had done when she was molested by her father. Confused, Ms. Madison asked her daughter what had happened.

The child answered that she had traded oral sex with Ms. Madison's live-in boyfriend for Oreo cookies.

Today, at 33, Ms. Madison narrates her life without euphemism and only an occasional catch in her voice.

In April, she went to the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service, one of seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund. She recently finished vocational training, an achievement because it was the first time she had completed a job program. She also overcame her drug addiction.

A donation of \$114 from the fund bought her interview clothes -- a black and white pantsuit and a white blouse -- as well as new sheets for her bed at a women's shelter.

It is a modest turnaround, Ms. Madison acknowledged, but it is a start.

Growing up in Indianapolis, one of her earliest memories, at 7, was of her alcoholic mother drinking Jim Beam and Wild Irish Rose until she blacked out.

When her father, a convicted drug dealer, came home from prison when she was 10, she was relieved to have another parent around. But that too became a nightmare.

Her father started molesting her, Ms. Madison said. "I was thinking that this was right," she said, "because I wanted his love."

When she became pregnant at 13, her mother did not believe her when Ms. Madison told her the identity of the father because Ms. Madison had had sex with some of her mother's boyfriends in



With help from the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service, Shawna Madison bought interview clothes and sheets for her bed at a shelter.

exchange for food.

Ms. Madison dropped out of school, moved in with a boyfriend, and lived what she thought was a normal life. By the time she was 26, she had had three more children, the youngest only 2.

When Ms. Madison discovered that her daughter was being molested, she reported her boyfriend to the authorities. At the court hearing, the daughter testified to the abuse, and afterward all the children went into the state foster-care system in Indiana and were eventually given up for adoption. Ms. Madison said she is legally barred from speaking to them.

Ms. Madison recalled running out of the courtroom, weeping, after her daughter's testimony. "I trusted this man," Ms. Madison said, "he was my protector, my mother, my father, my everything. How could he do that?"

Soon after, she met who she thought was a concerned stranger. He offered her crack cocaine. And, for the first time, she tried it, and she liked it. "I just totally forgot about everything," she recalled.

To get the drug, she began a life of prostitution that she now barely remembers. One day -- in 2002 she thinks -- Ms. Madison fell in with a truck driver who promised to take her to Chicago to visit friends.

During the ride, they smoked crack and wound up in the Bronx, in front of Yankee Stadium at 3 a.m. The truck driver gave her \$5 and a pack of Newport cigarettes. She was stranded in New York City.

What followed was a blur, until one

day, a man -- she forgot his name -- helped her by insisting that she snap out of her troubles in exchange for a place on his living-room sofa. Look at yourself in the mirror, the man demanded.

"I did look at myself in the mirror," Ms. Madison said, "and I saw my mother," who died of cirrhosis of the liver at 33. "I saw eyes that were yellowish, like my mother's. And my hair was missing pieces. And I said to myself, I don't want to die."

But one more nightmare remained. After a failed stint in a drug-treatment program, Ms. Madison returned to a life of prostitution. One night in 2004, in Brooklyn, she encountered a customer who gave her two black eyes and a bloody lip. Suddenly, he produced a razor blade from inside his mouth and threatened to cut her.

She ran naked into the street, where she was helped by a passer-by and later, the police. She spent a month, in a deep depression, in the psychiatric wing of Metropolitan Hospital Center.

She later found out from the police that a man matching the description of her customer had earlier killed a prostitute in the same area.

What followed was months of counseling and the dawning realization that, as she puts it, "I am not crazy."

With everything that she has lived through, she knows the best part of the day. The donation from the Neediest bought fitted sheets for her bed at the women's shelter. "It helps to have a peaceful night's sleep," Ms. Madison said. "I go to sleep at 8 o'clock."

