

57, and Trying to Make Up For an Education Denied

By KARI HASKELL

Fennie May Williams, 57, changed her name to Najeeullah Maydun in the 1970's, when she converted to Islam.

You would think "that if you change your name then you become anew, but that is not true," she said recently at the offices of the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service, one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund.

"It didn't take away anything," she said. Her problems and her past had dogged her before the name change. And they were still with her.

Dressed in a long jean skirt and pink button-down shirt, with her hair wrapped in a purple scarf, Ms. Maydun was just finishing her day's classes at the Pride program at the bureau's center on Chapel Street. She travels there every weekday to improve her reading and writing and learn secretarial skills. "I know that I won't be able to make it unless I get the education that I really need," she said.

"What I really want is a job, a good paying job, to get off public assistance," she said. But at her age, without a high school education and in fragile health (she has diabetes, glaucoma and circulatory problems), it is not easy to make up for lost years.

Growing up in South Carolina in the 1950's, her options seemed limited from the start. Getting an education simply wasn't allowed, she said. The way she understood it as a child, her family was "given" from one farm to another; now, she said, she knows that they were sold from owner to owner as farm laborers.

At one 25-acre plantation, her family lived in a ragged two-bedroom home. The 13 children slept side by side on handmade mattresses: pine straw stuffed between pieces of cloth.

She worked from sunrise to sunset. She tended to tobacco plants, cleaned the plantation home, cooked for the owners, and picked cotton — 200 pounds a day, by her estimate. "Sometimes the cotton rows looked like they ran to the end of earth, and the sun would come down into your face," she said. She attributes her glaucoma to those long days toiling in the hot southern sun.

"The hardest part was that you didn't get paid," she said. "They would tell us we ate up all our earnings."

Some of the people her family worked for were kinder than others, but none let her do the one thing she wanted to do most — go to school. When the bus driver drove by blowing his horn, she would run to the edge of the road and wave, but she never clambered aboard.

Eventually her mother sent her to live with a cousin in Brooklyn.

"I thought the people were crazy,"

Previously recorded	\$3,688,825.16
Recorded Wednesday	\$184,967.45
Total	\$3,873,792.61
Last year to date	\$4,464,418.73

she said, remembering her first impressions of the city. "They didn't live the kind of life I knew, but one thing they had that I didn't have — they could read books and when they worked they got paid."

As a teenager, she worked in a factory sewing life jackets. She was paid by the piece, and made up to \$50 a week.

In 1977, she met her husband.

"We met when I became a Muslim," she said. Though she was raised a Baptist, Islam offered her a sense of community. "They were more the way I was brought up — the way they behaved and cared for each other." Later she had a son, Abdullah Faheem, now 22.

She and her husband have since separated. Their son studies digital media and lives in Coney Island with

Hoping her son will be everything she wanted to be.

his girlfriend's family. "He says he will be everything I wanted to be," she said.

Most of Ms. Maydun's family has died. She likes to keep to herself, she said, and rarely leaves the two-bedroom apartment that she has lived in for 20 years, except to go to her classes at the bureau.

Her education remains important to her, even though there are still obstacles. Last summer, her box spring broke. She had trouble sleeping, and her attention started to drift during her classes.

She tried to fix the box spring with some old-fashioned ingenuity and a hanger. "It didn't work and it made too much noise," she said.

On public assistance, she couldn't afford orthopedic shoes, much less a bed.

Eventually, and with some trepidation, she talked to Shenneha Porter, the job developer at the bureau. Ms. Porter was the first person outside her family in whom Ms. Maydun had confided.

"Her story had a great impact on me," Ms. Porter said. "I felt so much pity for her."

Ms. Porter drew \$705.83 from the Neediest Cases to buy a new mattress, box spring and frame for Ms. Maydun. "It's a lovely bed, it's the best bed I have ever had," Ms. Maydun said.

Now, she is more alert in class. And she is getting the education she dreamed of when she was watching that school bus pass by.



Angela Jimenez for The New York Times

Najeeullah Maydun grew up in South Carolina, picking cotton and tending tobacco. She says she was not allowed to go to school.



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