

After Finding Herself, Hoping to Find Yet Another Home

By KARIHASKELL

Deborah Washington, 47, rattled off her previous addresses, in buildings all over Brooklyn.

"Bergen, Fulton — I've lived in a lot of places," she said recently, sitting on an L-shaped couch in the living room of her current apartment in Bedford-Stuyvesant.

"The one on Rochester Avenue, this was a really, really bad place; I mean really bad," she said, shaking her head. She shuddered as she recalled the giant rats she had to fight off nightly after coming home from working two retail jobs.

In winter, the apartment was cold, she said. "We froze," she said, describing the conditions endured by her and her daughters: Jillita Roché, 23; Samantha Roché, 17; and Sasha Padgette, 7. (Her oldest, Glenda Roché, 26, was already on her own.)

"And I still was paying \$950."

Matters grew even more complicated for Ms. Washington and her children in March, she said, when her husband left. It was her birthday.

She gathered her girls' belongings and moved in with her mother and father on Woodbine Street in Brooklyn. Little did she know how close her next apartment would be. An apartment in a two-family house was available on the same street for \$900 a month. Working for a shoe store full time, she was earning \$9 an hour. By staying with her parents and making wise use of her \$300 food stamp allotment, she was able to save enough money for rent. In July, she and her girls moved in.

"It's wonderful here," she said. A Brooklyn native, she wasn't fazed by the elevated train passing overhead. It's clean, the rooms are big, and everything works, including the heat. At the end of the block there are grocery stores and retail shops.

In a comfortable home and out of a troubled relationship, she is, for the moment, at peace. In the past, misfortune set her adrift from her dreams. Not today.

"Every time, I feel I am getting stressed out and my back is up against the wall, I know there is a place to go," she said referring to the Bedford-Stuyvesant Family Center.



Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

Deborah Washington, 47, in her apartment in Bushwick, Brooklyn. Her landlord recently told her that she would have to move again.

Previously recorded	\$4,233,322.29
Recorded Thursday	\$69,324.00
Total	\$4,302,646.29
Last year to date	\$4,463,517.92

The center is a beneficiary of the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service, one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund. Since January 2003, she has been attending one-on-one counseling and a group session every week. "When you hold those things in, then they overwhelm you, then you panic, and then you do things that you don't want to do," she said.

After her first marriage ended, at age 27, this was the case. She numbed her pain with alcohol, she said. Slowly, drinking spiraled her into depression, bad choices and bad habits. For a short time, she lived in a dilapidated room and she gave her children to her parents.

"It's like a thin line; one day you are normal, the next day you wake up and you become an addict," she said. "The worst part, I thought I was only hurting myself, but I was hurting my kids."

Help, she said, seemed so far away. Then one afternoon in 1993, she saw the sign for the center on Fulton Street.

Through the center, she received

professional guidance. Counseling taught her how to take control, build self-esteem and to begin to heal her family's wounds. "You can change, I never thought in my wildest dreams I could change," she said. "I just wish I had known sooner."

The center continues to keep her focused. "I keep her reminded of the goals she has made for herself," said Melissa Korsin, a social worker there.

In two months, Ms. Washington will have finished classes at Rochelle College to qualify for her G.E.D. "Then I want to work with handicapped children," she said.

Still, Ms. Washington and her family have challenges ahead. Once again, she has to worry about where she and her children will live.

In October, she said, her landlord informed her she had to move out by the end of the year. His son was moving back home.

"Rents are so high," she said, exasperated. "Every time I am trying to save to move, there's a bill that always has to be paid. Keeping food in the house isn't always easy."

"Sometimes," she continued, "I feel like I am choking."

She talked about her situation with Ms. Korsin. Through the Neediest Cases, Ms. Korsin was able to earmark money for a security deposit on Ms. Washington's next apart-

ment, along with \$860 to buy her daughters winter clothes.

Now, instead of getting a second job, Ms. Washington can continue her night classes. "I don't want to take a step back," she said. "I am trying to go forward."