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Understanding the experience of family homelessness in the context of single mothers' lives.

Thomas H. Styron

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**FIVE COLLEGE
DEPOSITORY**

UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCE OF FAMILY HOMELESSNESS
IN THE CONTEXT OF SINGLE MOTHERS' LIVES

A Dissertation Presented

by

THOMAS H. STYRON

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 1997

Department of Psychology

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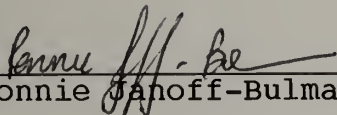
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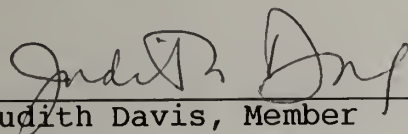
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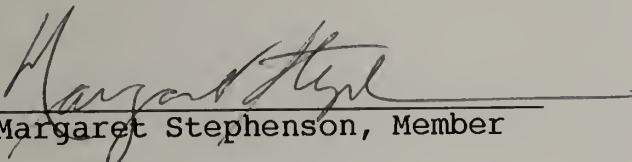
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ABSTRACT

UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCE OF FAMILY HOMELESSNESS
IN THE CONTEXT OF SINGLE MOTHERS' LIVES

MAY 1997

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Over the course of the last two decades, homelessness has become one of America's major social problems. On any given night, hundreds of thousands of people can be found living in temporary shelters, abandoned buildings and on the streets of our nation. Many are single mothers with dependent children.

A considerable amount of research in recent years has focused on the topic of family homelessness. Most studies have been conducted with families who were homeless at the time of the investigation. They have focused primarily upon the characteristics of homeless mothers and children and the conditions of shelter facilities. The goal of this research was to examine the experience of family homelessness from a somewhat broader perspective by interviewing formerly homeless mothers about their lives before and after leaving the shelter system. A qualitative approach was used in an effort to also convey a sense of individual women's lives.

In-depth interviews were conducted with twenty-four formerly homeless single mothers in New York City. Transcripts of these interviews were subsequently analyzed using an interpretive approach. Major themes that emerged from the women's life stories are elucidated. These themes include childhood neglect and abuse, poverty, troubled interpersonal relationships, and the experience of homelessness. The women's descriptions of their lives since leaving the shelter system, including issues of housing, education, employment and mental health, are also examined.

A majority of participants talked about their experience in the shelter system in positive terms. This finding is examined in the context of the women's life experiences and also the support services provided by the New York City shelter system.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the last two decades, homelessness has become one of our nation's major social problems. On any given night, hundreds of thousands of people can be found living in temporary shelters, abandoned buildings and on the streets of America. Many are single mothers with dependent children.

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This investigation was substantially informed by work I have done with the homeless and poor over the course of the last 14 years. I began this work in 1982 as a caseworker at the New York Coalition for the Homeless and subsequently was a director of this and several other organizations serving the homeless and poor, including the National Coalition for the Homeless, the Association to

Benefit Children (ABC) and H.E.L.P. Although I have worked with many hundreds of homeless families as an advocate and service provider over the years, this investigation was the first project I had undertaken with the homeless in my role as a graduate student in Clinical Psychology.

This introductory chapter has three sections. The first is a brief overview of homelessness in general, and some of the research on family homelessness in specific. The second is a discussion of the methodology used in this investigation. The third describes the organization of the chapters that follow.

Homelessness: An Overview

Homelessness has always been with us in the United States. Historically, the homeless have been a relatively homogeneous group of individuals: primarily older, Caucasian men often suffering from alcoholism and concentrated in urban Skid Row neighborhoods. In the mid-1970's, and for the first time since the Great Depression, the number and composition of the homeless population began to change. It grew exponentially -- with estimates of its size ranging from 350,000 to 2 million individuals -- and came to include a number of distinct subpopulations, including the deinstitutionalized mentally ill, single men and women, youth and families (Rossi, 1990, 1994).

It has been estimated that homeless families now comprise a third of the homeless population nationwide.

The rapid growth of this subpopulation during the last two decades can be illustrated by the case of New York City. In the 1970's, New York provided emergency housing to fewer than 1,000 families on any given night, usually on a very short-term basis. By 1985, however, this number had increased five-fold, to more than 5,200 families, and many were remaining homeless for a year or longer. As of May, 1996, approximately 6,000 families, including more than 11,000 children were in the New York City shelter system (G. Buchenholz, personal communication, May 13, 1996).

Prior to the mid-1970's, there was little mention of families in research on homelessness. Since then, there has been a multitude of books and articles in social science journals on the topic of family homelessness. Empirical studies based on actual direct study of homeless families, however, are relatively few in number, approximately 30 (Rossi, 1994).

The overwhelming majority of studies of family homelessness take a quantitative approach, focusing primarily on demographics and/or the characteristics of homeless families. Some exceptions, including Jonathan Kozol's Rachel And Her Children (1988), and unpublished dissertations by Steven Baumann (1990) and Sharon Liff (1991), have taken a more qualitative approach, attempting to capture the experiences of homeless families in their own words. Virtually all of the studies to date have

focused on families who were homeless at the time of investigation.

Research (Bassuk, 1990; Cuomo, 1992; Rossi, 1994) suggests that the typical homeless family is headed by a single mother in her late 20's, with two or three children, usually preschoolers. The ethnic background of families tends to mirror the make up of poor persons in a given location. In large cities, they are predominantly of African-American or Latino origin; in some suburbs and rural areas, they are more likely to be Caucasian. Most mothers have had some high school education, though many have limited work skills and have relied on public assistance for several years. In the year before becoming homeless, mothers have generally moved many times. In one study (Bassuk, Rubin, & Lauriat, 1986), 85% of the mothers had been doubled- or tripled-up with relatives or friends in overcrowded apartments prior to seeking emergency shelter; half had been homeless at some time in the past.

Most experts agree that at least four structural factors have led to an increase in family homelessness: scarcity of decent, affordable, low-income housing; insufficient income for people receiving public assistance or performing unskilled labor; inadequate social services and health care; and an increase in families headed by women.

Psychosocial variables have also been examined as possible antecedents and/or consequences of family

homelessness. A wide body of research (e.g., Bassuk & Rosenberg, 1988; Bassuk & Rubin, 1987; Bassuk & Weinreb, 1993; Burt & Cohen, 1989; Dail, 1990; Dornbusch, 1994; Goodman, 1991a, 1991b; Hausman & Hammen, 1993; Hodnicki & Horner, 1993; Masten, 1992; McChesney, 1986; Mills & Ota, 1989; Molnar, 1988; Rafferty & Shinn, 1993; Shinn, Knickman, & Weitzman, 1991; Stretch and Kreuger, 1993; Wood, Valdez, Hyashi, & Shen, 1990) suggests that family homelessness is associated with a substantial amount of current and/or past mental illness, substance abuse, childhood and adult victimization, inadequate social support and parenting difficulties. It is not clear from this research to what extent the experience of homelessness may have caused, exacerbated or resulted from these problems. The research suggests, however, that for many families the experience of homelessness is very stressful and has a particularly negative impact on children's well-being.

Defining Homelessness

For the purposes of this investigation the term "homelessness" refers to women's experiences in the family shelter system. This definition is consistent with that used in most quantitative and qualitative research on family homelessness and by the women themselves. This definition, however, may be considered problematic for at least two reasons. First, it is confusing to most people

who are unfamiliar with the issue of family homelessness. When most people think of the homeless, images of people sleeping on the street or other public spaces usually come to mind. While some families do in fact end up on the streets, for the most part -- due largely to child welfare laws -- they are able to access some kind of shelter if they have absolutely no other alternative. Consequently, their experiences are likely to be somewhat different from those of single men and women who do in fact live on the streets in very large numbers.

The second problem with the definition is that it is narrow and may inadvertently support the politically expedient notion that only those families who are seeking emergency shelter are homeless. The fact is that in New York City alone, hundreds of thousands of families are doubled- and tripled-up with other poor families or living in abandoned buildings and other hidden spaces. These families should be considered homeless as well.

It is also important to point out that in this investigation, participants' descriptions of "homelessness" refers exclusively to experiences in the *New York City* shelter system. This is an important distinction as different cities and/or states provide very different levels of care to homeless families in their jurisdiction.

The New York City Family Shelter System

Almost all homeless families in New York City must begin the process of securing emergency shelter by first going to one of the City's Emergency Assistance Units ("EAU's"). The exceptions include some families who become homeless due to fire or domestic violence; on occasion, they receive direct shelter placements. The decision to go to an EAU is one that most families make either on their own or with the help of a social worker who is familiar with their case and the shelter system.

The EAU's are 24-hour processing centers that are notoriously overcrowded and oppressive in their atmosphere. Homeless families, which frequently include newborns, regularly spend several nights in a row at these centers, with no alternative but to sleep on plastic chairs or the floor. For years, the New York State Supreme Court has demanded that the City improve their treatment of families at the EAU's; however, these orders have been largely ignored and the City is routinely held in contempt. Advocates for the homeless maintain that the EAU's are purposely designed and operated in a forbidding manner in order to discourage families from seeking emergency shelter. Such an approach may save the City money in the short-term.

From the EAU's, families are referred to emergency shelters. Prior to the mid-80's, homeless families in New York City were sheltered almost exclusively in "welfare

hotels" or "barracks-style" shelters. These facilities provided inhospitable and frequently inhumane living accommodations. Welfare hotels were invariably dangerous, extremely overcrowded and run-down buildings where family members slept four or five to a single room without any cooking facilities and few support services. Barracks-style shelters were primarily open gymnasiums where dozens of families slept side-by-side without partitions for months on end, all sharing one or two public bathrooms.

As a result of legal and other advocacy efforts, over the last decade many of the hotels and all of the barracks-style shelters have been slowly replaced by a series of more than 70 "Tier II" shelters. While there are still some welfare hotels in use in New York City, more than 80 percent of homeless families in New York City are currently sheltered in Tier II's. All of the women who participated in this investigation had spent a majority of their time in such facilities.

Tier II shelters represent a significant improvement over the welfare hotels and barracks-style shelters of the past. By and large, they are clean, safe facilities that offer families their own apartments with cooking facilities. Some are located in affluent areas of the City, such as the Upper West Side, while others are located in poorer communities such as East Harlem and the South Bronx. They are funded and regulated by the City and State but operated primarily by not-for-profit organizations

which provide a wide variety of on-site support services to families, such as support groups, childcare and access to education or job training programs.

One of the most important services provided to families in Tier II shelters, as well as those in welfare hotels, is housing assistance. All family shelter facilities have full-time housing specialists who help families secure permanent housing. This is usually accomplished for each family within a six- to twelve-month period after entering the shelter system. This remarkable rate of success -- given that the City has hundreds of thousands of poor families on decades-long waiting lists for subsidized housing -- is largely due to the fact that the City gives homeless families priority for available subsidized housing programs. While families in the shelter system must take some initiative for finding permanent housing, the process is greatly facilitated by the housing specialists and their unique access to affordable housing.

In my experience, most mothers who become homeless know from word-of-mouth in their communities that their best and perhaps only chance of securing affordable permanent housing is through the shelter system. In spite of this knowledge, most women in need of housing wait until they have exhausted all other alternatives before they apply for emergency shelter. This was certainly the case for virtually all of the women interviewed for this study.

Methodology

A Qualitative Approach

This investigation began with a careful review of the existing literature on family homelessness. A considerable amount of useful statistical information about the demographics and characteristics of homeless mothers with dependent children is available; however, this information often fails to convey a sense of who these women are. I believed that more information about homeless mothers' life experiences, in their own words, would be a useful addition to the literature.

I also found that virtually all of the existing literature focuses on women who were homeless at the time of investigation. I believed it would be of significant value to talk to women who had moved on from the family shelter system. Their stories, I hoped, would convey how they were doing since leaving the shelter system, and their feelings about the impact of homelessness on their lives.

Given certain time limitations, I felt that the best way to try and illuminate the conditions and context in which formerly homeless women live their lives was through the use of loosely-structured, in-depth interviews. A wide body of research (e.g., Addison, 1989; Campbell, 1985; Corbin & Straus, 1990; Cortazzi, 1993; Gergen, 1989; Mishler, 1986; Packer & Addison, 1989; Polkinghorne, 1990; Reissman, 1993; Sarbin, 1986; Steele, 1989; Weiss, 1994) has suggested that a qualitative analysis of life

narratives is a particularly effective means for developing an understanding of how individuals see and make sense of their world.

Prior to conducting the in-depth interviews, I organized two focus groups, each of which included six formerly homeless women and myself. The purpose of these groups was to provide a forum in which I could describe to formerly homeless women what I was hoping to accomplish with my research and to obtain their feedback and ideas. Each group met for two hours in the basement of a family shelter in East Harlem, New York. Information that the women shared with me helped to shape the nature and scope of the individual interviews I subsequently conducted.

The Recruitment Process

Participants were recruited through the Association to Benefit Children (ABC), a not-for-profit social service agency based in New York City, which provides temporary shelter and other support services to homeless families. (I had worked for this organization several years earlier and continue to serve as chairperson of its board of directors.)

The director of one of ABC's facilities, All Children's House, agreed to recruit women on my behalf. All Children's House is a community center that provides support services to a wide range of poor families in East

Harlem, including many who have experienced an episode of homelessness.

The director of All Children's House was asked to contact single mothers who had dependent children and who had experienced an episode of family homelessness in the recent past. Single mothers were chosen because they are most representative of the general population of homeless families.

Prospective participants were informed by the director of All Children's House that I was a graduate student who was writing a paper about different women's life experiences. Neither the selection criteria (i.e., an experience of homelessness) nor my official association with ABC were mentioned. Prospective participants were also told that the interview would require a two-hour time commitment on their part, and that they would be compensated twenty dollars for their participation. In addition, they were informed that childcare and reimbursement of transportation expenses would be provided.

The choice of potential participants for this study was ultimately left up to the discretion of the director of All Children's House. However, before the recruitment process even began, the director of All Children's House and I both knew from experience that finding 24 women who met the study's criteria and were willing and able to participate would not be an easy feat; the sample was thus based on availability as opposed to being randomly chosen.

Indeed, early on in the process an initial list of prospects was exhausted and the director of All Children's House needed to call staff at other ABC facilities for additional referrals.

The final sample consisted of 24 single women, ranging in age from 19 to 52, with the average age being 31. Seventeen of the women were predominantly of African-American descent, five of the women were predominantly of Latino descent, and two of the women were predominantly of Caribbean-American descent. The average number of children per woman was three, with a range of one to seven. Brief demographic information for each of the 24 participants is provided in the Appendix.

The Interviews

Twenty of the interviews took place in a private, comfortably furnished meeting room at All Children's House, which is located in a church annex on East 121st Street in Manhattan. Three of the interviews took place in a private, comfortably furnished meeting room at Rosie and Harry's Place, a transitional housing program sponsored by ABC on East 124th Street in Manhattan. One of the interviews took place at the participant's apartment in East Harlem as she was not feeling up to going out on the day that we were scheduled to meet. Each interview lasted approximately two hours.

At the outset of each interview, I introduced myself, offered each woman something to eat and drink and obtained signatures on an informed consent form, which included permission to audiotape the interview. Throughout the interview process, I tried to create as much space as possible for each woman to talk about her life in whatever way and with whatever focus she chose. The interviews were therefore very loosely structured.

I began the interview with the following statement: "What I'd like you to do is to tell me about your life. Start wherever you like and as we go along I'll ask some questions." Depending on the flow and content of the interview, I sometimes asked for more information about a particular event that was being described or probed for more general information in one or more of the following broad areas: childhood, including their relationships with parents; adulthood, including intimate relationships and relationships with their children; the experience of homelessness, including precipitating events; and their lives since leaving the shelter.

Interpreting the Data

Upon completion of all of the interviews, I had the audiotapes professionally transcribed. I then began the most time-consuming phase of this investigation, the analysis of the 24 interview transcripts. They totaled approximately 2,000 double-spaced pages of text.

My analysis of these transcripts was interpretive in nature. It was informed by my understanding of family homelessness based on existing research and my own work experience, and additionally by my training in Clinical Psychology and the interactions I had with each of the women during the interviews. In my interpretive analysis of the transcripts, I followed a five-stage model elucidated by G. D. McCracken (1988) in his book, The Long Interview.

According to this model, the first stage of analysis treats each useful comment in the interview transcript on its own terms, ignoring its relationship to other aspects of the text. The treatment of each useful comment creates an observation. The second stage takes these observations and develops them, first, by themselves, second, according to the evidence in the transcript, and, third, according to the review of the literature on the topic being studied. The third stage examines the interconnection of the second-level observations within each interview. The focus of attention at this point is shifted away from the transcript and toward the observations themselves. Reference to the transcript is made when necessary to check ideas as they emerge from the process of observation comparison. The fourth stage takes the observations generated at the previous levels and for all of the interview transcripts and subjects them to collective scrutiny. The object of this analysis is the determination of patterns of

intertheme consistency and contradiction. The fifth stage takes these patterns and themes, as they appear in the various interviews that make up the project, and subjects them to a final process of comparison in order to develop a final set of theses.

Organization of Chapters II through V

As previously noted, a primary goal of this investigation was to convey a sense of formerly homeless mothers' lives. I wanted to do this, at least in part, in their own words. Not only are their words more compelling and true to their experience than anything I could devise, but they also allow the reader to make his or her own interpretations about what they say. Chapter II, therefore, consists of six of the women's narratives.

One of the most difficult tasks I faced in writing this dissertation was selecting these six stories. All of the women's' stories were, without exception, extraordinarily rich and profoundly moving. I regret that it was not feasible to include all of them. I chose the six narratives based on my feeling that they were most representative of the total body of interviews in terms of both similarities (e.g., the women's histories of poverty and abuse) and differences (e.g., the women's ages and outlooks on life).

One of the more challenging tasks I faced in writing this dissertation was editing and reorganizing each of the

six narratives. The kind of interview I conducted did not generally elicit the women's life stories in a chronological order. Most women weaved their stories back and forth from the present to the past and back again, often touching on the same topic at many different times. I felt it was important, however, to present each woman's story in a somewhat chronological order, so as to make it both as readable as possible and to allow for easier comparison of different periods of development within and between the narratives.

In Chapter III, I explore common themes in the women's life stories prior to becoming homeless. My goal was to provide descriptive information about important events in the women's pasts. Major themes which emerged from the women's stories included relationships with parents and adult partners and their experiences of poverty and abuse.

In Chapter IV, I provide descriptive information about the women's experiences of homelessness and then explore common themes in the women's stories relating to their lives since leaving the shelter system. These themes include poverty, interpersonal relationships, mental health, education and employment and hopes for the future. In both chapters III and IV, excerpts chosen to highlight certain themes were selected from the 18 "other" stories that were not included in Chapter II.

Chapter V is a discussion of my interpretation of the women's experiences of homelessness within the context of

their lives. In this chapter, I also discuss my experience in conducting this research, some of its limitations and topics that would be worthwhile to pursue in future investigations.

CHAPTER II
SIX NARRATIVES

Lisa

Lisa is a 24-year-old of African-American descent. She has three children, ages three, two and ten months.

Okay. My name is Lisa C. I'm on P.A. [public assistance] plus I work as a matron on a school bus. Um, I'm not settled just yet. I'm living with my mom, me and my three children, in one room, but we making it. And I wish it could be better.

I have three sisters and four brothers. And it was hard, because my mother had to take care of us by herself. And then, you know, like everyone, at some time in their life have to take a fall. And that's what my mother did. But before that fall, we had a happy life, you know, as far as me growing up from a little girl into a teenager. I had a good life until I turned into a teenager, 'cause so much has happened.

My mother was the mother, the father, the backbone of the family, and when she dropped, all of us did, too. My mother was on drugs. We didn't get along 'cause so many things had happen that she let happen. I was raped.

It happened twice. We was living in Brooklyn. I had just turned 13. One night, we was all, all seven of us, we was in my brothers' room. We was all playing, just playing. And we all were asleep in my brothers' room. And all I felt was somebody humping back and forth and touching my breasts and grabbing my behind. I woke up, and we was arguing and fighting and fighting. This is a grown man. He was, at that time, I think he was like either 27, 28. And my mother was all the way in the front. And I woke up and I was telling my sister and I was crying.

I was scared to tell my mother, because then she had a gun in the house, and I'm petrified of guns, so I didn't want to say nothing. I was just too scared 'cause then she was beating us. We was getting beatings with extension cords, bats, whatever came to my mother's hand, she was grabbing it. So I was just too scared to say anything to her.

Weeks went by, and I was still leery, you know. I didn't want to tell her because I thought I might get a beating. And I was walking past her door one day, and I heard my sister telling her what happened. So, I decided, well, maybe I should tell her, too, right then. But when I was telling her, she was just telling me to get away from her. 'I'm a liar.' That's all she kept saying, that I was a liar. And then, you know, I called my father, and can you believe she hid this guy? I didn't want my father to really hurt him, but then, yes, I, I really wanted him to be gone. And my mother hid him.

I would always go to my father. He was always the first one that I went to. But, um, he just didn't want to be no father. He didn't want me around. I would like force myself on him. I felt, you know, he was my father. When I came to him, he should listen. If I had a problem, you know, he would help me solve it. But he didn't want to do that. He was so busy, you know, raising somebody else's children and he just forgot about us.

The second time. I was 17 at the time. And this was only a 15-year-old guy, which, he looked like he was 20-something. This was a drug dealer. This is when my mother let anybody up in the house. So while she was outside or she was somewhere in the area, he was chasing me through her house. She didn't pay her light bill, so all of our lights was out. And I'm the only one upstairs because I don't like to, you know, go outside a lot. And I was petrified because I couldn't see and I'm asking, 'Who is it? Who is it?' So, um, I stayed in the back where I was at. And I hear the footsteps coming and he just jumped on me. I'm screaming, screaming for somebody to just come and open the door, because our door was always open.

Can you believe, after he got me down on the floor and he put his knees on my arms, he was telling me he deserved it, that he really felt he deserved me? And this is a 15-year-old. I was just so scared and I was screaming. And my mother, can you believe she came in the room as I was screaming, and I'm telling her, 'Ma, ma, could you get him off of me? Can you get him off of me?' And she tells me, 'No, just shut up because that's the kind of man you need.' That's what she told me. And he just kept on, he gave her five dollars of crack. And she just left. She left me right there.

After that, I wouldn't come outside because I was so, I just felt so dirty on the inside. I stayed in the house for like two months without coming outside,

until my friend had come and got me. I locked myself in. I was always in the back room with the door slammed shut so that nobody couldn't come in. I would go sit on the fire escape to get my fresh air, and I was in the back of the building so nobody see me. Sometimes if nobody in the house with me, I'd get in the closet because it seemed that's when something always happened to me, when I'm by myself, or my mother somewhere in the area.

Can you believe, she used to let him the rapist just come up there and everything, so I had to see his face every day? And then I called these guards 'cause I wanted him dead. I was so screwed up in my mind. I really wanted somebody to kill this guy. But then my mother sat there just telling them I was lying, that it didn't happen, and he was standing right in my face. I even asked her today, and she still denied it. But she don't know what it can do to someone's mental mentality. (Cries.) I wanted to shoot her at that time. I was so mad. I just, I thought my mother was the devil. Sometime I still think that.

My mother, 'til today, to me, she don't know what self esteem is. She don't know what self respect is, or for someone to even, you know, respect her. I never had no man disrespect me, you know, as far as, 'You whore. You bitch or slut.' I never had that in my life because I never was that type of child. I was always, and I was always doing my schoolwork. But then once it happened the first time, I just felt that it was all right, because nobody talked to me and tell me, 'Lisa that's not right. You don't let no man just do what he want to you.' I didn't know what to do. I be watching so many movies about rape. Rape cases, what could you do? I never knew what to do because when it happened to me, all I used to do is hide and cry and just stay there, because I didn't know you had to call the cops or go to a hospital or get in touch with somebody that can help you. I never knew that.

School was good for me. I was always good as far as school goes. They even used to call me a nerd. The only thing, I was in Special Ed, and that was because I'm left handed, so I wrote everything to the left side. So they put me in Special Ed, which I only really needed only a couple of months. And I wound up in there until high school. And I kept asking my mother to go to these meetings so I can get out of Special Ed. I wasn't handicapped and I felt ashamed. I didn't want to be there. I didn't need to be there. But she wouldn't go. My mother wouldn't get up and go to this meeting. I was only 15, and at 15, I couldn't

sign anything. So, being that she wouldn't go, I just dropped out in 11th grade.

And I used to just roam the streets. Every day I would sit on the train and ride the train back and forth to the last stop. Then that got boring. I just started not doing anything, just being lazy.

And once I got out of school, I just, like six months after that, I signed up for Job Corps in Buffalo, New York. Because you get bored just not doing nothing. My mother was on drugs, so I just wanted to get away. I left her at the age of 16 and thought that I could go into Job Corps and make it, but I couldn't make it in Job Corps. I worked there, but before I went, my mother was cursing me out, telling me how stupid I am, and if I'm not going to make it here, I'm not going to make it anywhere. I couldn't even call her without her cursing me. And I came back. It was my birthday, so I wanted to see her. I missed her. I came back and she didn't want to pay for me to go back to Job Corps. And she was still on the drugs, nothing changed.

She was already losing her apartment before I even went to Job Corps because something had went down with the landlord. The ceiling had fell on my head from the bathroom. She never even took pictures. She didn't take me to no hospital. My head was just hurting.

And, um, after that, we were going into shelters and hotels. Shelters, hotels. We was back and forth all the time. But I always managed to stay with her. I was always moving out of her house, coming back. I used to move in with her sisters. At one time, I was living at her sister, Alice's house. And I moved away from there and moved with another one of my mother's sisters, which is Anne. And I lived there for some months, and I felt okay. But then, I didn't feel okay, so I just went right back to my mother. I always leave her and then wind up coming back. That's where I show she didn't teach me independence 'cause I think I would have been out a long time ago. And I'm still with her.

When she was using drugs, I learned a lot about crack, cocaine and marijuana. And she did all of those. She even did dope. So, you know the kind of mentality she got. Her brain is all fried up. Damn. When she was on that crack, I would just, I'd do anything. There was times I had to take my brothers, my little baby brothers, and take them and hide, feed

them and make sure that they have stuff, because she didn't want to take her P.A. check and buy no food.

They took my brother and sisters from her, this was after I got raped and she blamed me. Do you know how many times I told that lady, 'Let me put them in school'? 'cause I was getting ready to turn 18. I put them in school. I made sure that they had clothes. Then I would talk to drug dealers. I would get money to put food in my mother's house for my brothers to show her that I wasn't like her. I was a better person. I would take care of my brothers and sisters. I even had a boyfriend as a drug dealer. And I would get whatever I wanted. I would even get stuff for my brothers to make us look decent.

It even got to the point where I had to go out there and sell crack. One time I did it, but I didn't know what I was doing, and I got arrested. This is when we was in and out of the shelter. I told the police my mother was in a hotel and they came and looked. And they could tell my brothers wasn't eating and they gave me back all the money that I had made from selling that crack. So I kept feeding my brothers and my sisters. I took my brothers out to eat. We went shopping and bought clothes. You know, just every day stuff that regular people do. The smile that was on their face, you couldn't take it off, 'cause I made sure we had a good time, something that we hadn't did in so long. They were so happy. After that, I never in my life touched crack again, never.

At 17, I got my first job working as a counselor in a computer center with these kids. They was good children. I still have the bracelets that they bought me. It was good. My mind was occupied. I was working from 17 to 21. And then I got pregnant with Cassandra, which is my first daughter.

But then my mother was living with some, you know, drug addict, so I couldn't really stay with her then because I was pregnant. So I would just, you know, go back and forth to my aunt's. And when I had my first daughter is when I started at the shelter.

The first time I went is when they put me in this hotel in Queens, Elmhurst. And I mean I had just woke up, and this security guard is sitting up in my room and came to touch me. And I'm screaming, and, you know, that was the first time I went into one, when I had this man violate me. And then, they kicked me out. I wanted to sue them because they didn't have no right to throw me out. They just threw me out because

I reported something, and my mother wouldn't even back me up with that. So, you know, once, every time somebody just keep throwing you to the back burner as if you don't mean nothing, and I mean this is your mother, you start to really not care about nothing.

So I went back to my sister's. Then she didn't want me there, so I went, I was going to the E.A.U. every day. I got tired. You get so tired from being in there. They treat people like dirt. You know, like as if they wasn't no human being. To them you're like lower than a curb. You don't have no bed to sleep on. You have these chairs that you have to sit up, and the cribs that they had in there, big, grown-up people were sleeping in the cribs. So I was really frustrated. I couldn't put up with that for so long. I just wanted to be settled, that's it.

They placed me in this one-parent, one-child shelter. You couldn't have no men come and visit you there. You had a curfew. You know, but it was nice. It's good because you meet a lot of different mothers in your age range. But then, it wasn't all that good because them girls in there was just out to get you or to get what you had. I would associate probably with three to four girls, but that was it. I'm the scary type. (Laughs.) I don't like to be around people that I, you know, get strange feelings from. So I was always by myself, because I didn't want to, um, get to know these strange people. I was just so nervous. I was always thinking somebody wanted to get me or they might do something to me, so I just stayed away. I was always doing what I had to do as far as coming to see my counselor every week. I was trying to do everything to get an apartment. But then I wasn't getting nowhere.

I was there for six months. I liked it until they told me to give up my daughter to have my son, and I didn't want to do that. That's what I didn't understand, I was pregnant when I went in there. Then, I didn't even know how to talk to somebody or even to tell someone how I felt. If I thought that they was treating me wrong or I felt they was treating me differently than they treated the other clients, I never spoke on it. Maybe that's why I didn't get nowhere. They was telling me that I need my name on my birth certificate, but they wouldn't tell me how to go about doing it. They told me my mother or my father had to do it. So, just because I didn't have a name on a birth certificate, I couldn't get no apartment. I think that's ridiculous. So I just got fed up. I just left. I couldn't put up with anything more after that.

Right after I left the shelter, I went to my grandmother, my mother's mother. My grandmother had made an agreement that she would help me take care of my daughter while I'm having my son. And she did that. That room she gave me was like an apartment. It was so huge. She even helped me, she even, you know, helped me buy me a full-size bed. When I came home, I never seen a room so pretty like that because she fixed it up. I even had a present there, you know, for my son. My daughter, she was sleeping with my grandmother and my grandfather. So I had the bed by myself. I never had a room like that. (Laughs.)

It was like I was at my mother's house 'cause she made me feel so much like she was my mother. Somebody that was telling me, 'Lisa this is not right. Lisa you have to do it like this. Lisa it's supposed to be done like this.' That's how I started learning, and that was at the age of 22. Learning practically everything about being an adult, taking care of babies, because I really didn't know, because my mother never put me on the spot like that. So, I didn't know how to change a baby. I didn't know how to make a bottle, or wash them, you know, wash their hair. Everything was so hard for me until I moved with my grandmother, and she, you know, showed me a lot of things.

And then, you know, my mom had got her apartment out of the shelter system. And as soon as I heard she got the apartment, I went running. And it seemed like when I left my grandmother, I be making the wrong choices.

That was what, two years ago. I moved in like a day after her. It's ten people living up in a two bedroom. Me and my kids, we sleep all in one twin-size bed. Me and all three of them. My mother have her own room. And my brother sleeps there, and I have another little brother that's there now. So it's like ten people in the house, seven grown-ups and three kids.

And then I've been working. It's just \$150 a week, but it's something. You know, I could just start saving little by little. And sometimes I be feeling like quitting the job and get back on P.A., but I never wanted to be on P.A. I really never wanted that. That's why now, I'm trying to think clearly and keep the job. I really might have to work extra, extra hard to get where I want to get, and I'm willing to do that for my children. I have to 'cause

I don't want them to be like me, how I was. And I think I'm doing a good job."

I asked Lisa about her relationships with her children's fathers.

Well, with the men, it's like everyone I get with, it's like a revenge thing that I just try to get back at them. Every man, boyfriend or young man that I've been with, there was always abuse. Physical abuse. They would do it to me, and I would allow it, because I never had nobody to sit down and say, 'Well, Lisa, it's not right to let a man violate you,' or 'Whenever you say 'no,' it's 'no.' He's not supposed to put his hands on you.' That was never told to me. All I was told is everything I say is a lie. (Cries.)

It's how I grew up, just wanting to take that out on men. It just seems like all the men that I get with are, I'm looking for a father figure. That's what I'm looking for and they want to beat me or they want to bruise me up. So my mentality is a little messed up because, um, my mother and him. But I don't, um, I don't blame it on men that didn't do it to me.

I faced it. I faced it twice. And now I need counseling because I have two girls. And I, I wouldn't want to end up in jail killing some man that, you know, touched my daughter I felt was in a wrong way. And it's hard for you to have had something like that happen to you because sometimes I just blink everything out, but that's only if my children is not around when I can have some time and think.

I can be in my room and I can just block everything out. It will just be black. I'm thinking. I don't see nothing. All I can see is me hurting men. When I'm thinking, I'm thinking of everything negative, you know, the men that I have dealt with, even my daughter's father that I'm with now. Anytime, you know, he want to do something, first thing come to Lisa's mind is she just going to hurt him bad. I just want to hurt him, you know, 'cause of what happened to me, but I can't because it wasn't him that did it to me.

I don't want to, because I love men, you know, in general. You know, so I try to think straight, but then again, I don't be thinking straight, because sometimes I can be the goodest person to be around,

and then sometimes, you know, people just don't want to be around me 'cause that attitude come up.

That's why I say I need the counseling. And it's good when you know you have a problem and you want to settle that problem. I'm not going out there like no maniac (laughs) killing no one, because I have kids to take care of. That's all I'm thinking of. You know, something that my mother didn't think about. I know seven children is hard to raise, but I have three, and I'm 24. And I still feel if you can lay up and have that many children, you got to take care of them. It's your responsibility. You bring them here; you raise them. You take care of them. You don't put that on someone else.

Like two months ago, I had a fight with my brother. And all I was looking at is he was one of those men that hurted me. Me and him was fighting up at my mother's house. I almost got to a knife. Then my mother threw me and my kids out. She didn't say nothing to him. So it's still like I feel I'm the black sheep of the family. But my mother, I takes good care of her. I love her and I love them all, (cries) all seven of the kids, and she always kicked me in my back. When birthdays come around, I give her parties. When Christmas come around, I make sure she got whatever she wanted. When Valentine's come around, say her boyfriend forgot, I get her something. I make sure that I'm there. That's why I'm still with her, 'cause she my mother.

All I just think about is she's my mother. She is my mom. She had me, I didn't have her. So, I never disrespected her. 'Honor thy mother and father' no matter what they do, you know. All the things happened to me, I never even once raised my hand to my mother. All I say is, God, you know, he'll deal with her, because what can I really do? There's nothing I can really do to her, but be her daughter and that's it, and get some counseling and get on. I just hope I don't ever explode. I try to keep myself cool, but there's only so much a person can handle. And I'm trying, but it seems like the more you try, the more you get knocked down.

And my father I still call him, because he still is my father. I calls him. He talks to my children. And I might see him probably three times out of a year. You know, we go visit, take presents. He just didn't want to be a father. I feel, you know, to each his own. I had my children and their father not around, and maybe he just couldn't handle it, but I still say, you can lay up in the bed and make the

babies, you can take care of the babies. You know what's going to happen when you lay there and you don't have any protection, you know what's going to happen. But I don't look at him like that. I just have so much respect, you know, for my elders. You know, he's my father, regardless of, you know, how he failed, he's still my father. You can't deny that.

I asked Lisa about her children.

All my brothers and sisters had their children before I did. I was the last one, and I'm the oldest of everyone. So, it was kind of good, because I had my nieces and nephews also to help me with my children. So it was, it was hard, but then it wasn't really hard, 'cause I still have help all around me. And with this program [All Children's House], if it wasn't for them getting my children in school, I don't know where I would be right now.

I used to smoke marijuana. I never tried nothing else. I'm the scary type. When I smoked a joint, that was to block out everything. I didn't want to hear nothing. I just wanted to be in space, you know. Just block everything out. Until I had my daughter. It opened my eyes that this is a human being, too. I remember what I went through with my mother and them drugs. And I say every day I would never put my daughters or myself through that, 'cause I know what I went through. I had to run and chase my mother all over just to get us dinner. I don't want my children to grow up like that.

I got pregnant two months after I had my first daughter, and my mother, she helped me with my son. I was having these babies 'cause I needed somebody to love that I knew would love me back. It's not easy raising a child, but I had to learn that the hard way. And now they, they have a happy mother. I taught my daughters, you don't let no man touch you in the wrong places. I never let nobody, nobody take care of the kids but my mom, and that's it. They're happy. We have fun. They're going to be two years-old and three years-old. I have a relationship with them that I didn't have with my mother. We're not a dysfunctional family.

And I notice when you have a family like that, if you don't break that cycle, you gonna do it, your children are going to do it, and their children are going to do it. And that's what I'm trying to do here, break the cycle. Because I don't want to be like my mother, and I don't want my son to grow up to be like none of his uncles, neither my father or his

father. I just want him to be a good grown man, you know, when he gets older. Someone that went to school and finish and make something out of himself. And that's what I'm doing right now. I'm showing them independence, going to school, working. Whenever I go out, my children always know where I'm at all the time. It's something, you know, that I didn't have. With my mother, I was always put to the last. And I try not to do that with my daughter.

The two-year-old and the three-year-old are in the toddler program in school, and that's how I got my job of being a matron on a school bus. I was there every day working, doing anything that I could do, just to keep my mind occupied. And I filled out so many applications for apartments, but you got to be making like a certain amount of money. So I'm still trying. I even fill out applications for jobs every now and then. They already took me off of P.A., so I'm really feeling good about myself, with the money that I make from the job. I don't sit up in the house looking at TV all day. I'm doing something constructive. I feel good, every day, I get up and I have to leave the house. I try not to let nothing or no one bring me down. I try to keep a good high spirit, for me and the kids.

But I still need counseling because it still messes with me. A lot of people think I don't have no problems because I put up a shade in front of it. Only if they knew. Every night, I lay in bed. I cry every night. And I have flashbacks and I hear voices. Any little thing can tick me off. I get so nervous and paranoid. I sit in the corner and turn on all the lights in the house so I can see everything, and I be looking back and forth. Paranoid. I think it's everything that happened to me in my whole life. Sometimes I don't know what to do. I be hearing a lot of voices. And my mother, her voice is over top of everybody's.

Frances

Frances is a 30-year-old of African-American descent. She has one child, a daughter who is seven.

They told me my mother was a hot little thing. You know, she got raped and I was the result. They was telling me she was trying to get an abortion and all that. But I still came out.

And, um, I was severely abused as a child. My mother, she burnt me, she blind me, she did everything. I mean I was severely abused, tortured, burns, internal injuries, everything, everything.

I never had a relationship with my mother. The only relationship I had was the abuse, like, you know, she would beat me and I would scream. That's a hurting thing to not know who to turn to or whether you should.

I remember I used to, I would try to tell my cousin, like, 'Look what my mother did to me.' And when I would tell him, he would go back and tell my mother, and then I would get a beating for telling him. One time, I remember I hid under the bed for like two days, and I would hear my mother asking for me from out the window, 'You seen my baby?' acting like she loved me and stuff. 'You seen her?' They'd be like, 'No, we ain't seen her,' and all this. And I would be under the bed all hungry, and I had to come out 'cause I was hungry. I used to be so hungry that I used to eat roaches off the floor. And then when I came out I got my bottom whipped for hiding from under the bed that long.

My mother prided my oldest sister the most, but she mentally abused her and broke her hip, too. She dropped her or threw her on the floor, and my sister is walking around with a pin in her hip and stuff. And another sister, she burnt out her vocal chords by feeding her hot grits.

I used to fight a lot, really to defend myself because, you know, kids used to tease me because I used to have like burns and stuff. I guess like if you were one of them kids that they tease, they feel they can beat you up, but I was never the type that you beat up. I used to beat up everybody

The abuse went on for a long time. I mean the lady downstairs, she'd call the cops, the cops would

come. My mother would be like, 'Get in the closet and you better not say nothing.' And I'd be in the closet saying, 'Damn, I wish they would look in here.' Until one day, the lady was like, 'Look. I'm telling you, something is going on. I'm not leaving.' And she had to actually risk her life. The lady was like, 'I can't take it no more. I don't care. Somehow she's doing it to somebody.' And I remember when the police opened up the closet door and saw me sitting in there, I was so happy. I was like, 'Oh, thank you.' I was five.

I remember back in the days, like when the ambulances were station wagons, remember? And I was wrapped up in one of those brown blankets, and my mother was running after the ambulance truck. And she was like, 'My baby, my baby.' They was like, 'Please! If this was your baby, you wouldn't be doing...' and the man was like, 'You going to be all right. You going to be all right now.' And I was, 'thank you.'

And then I remember when I went to the hospital, I mean, I was going from one table to another. Lights, click, 'look here and turn this way.' I was like, 'I don't care what I got to go through.' I think I was in an incubator, too. Not an incubator, but one of those big plastic tents, you know. I stayed in the hospital for like a year. I needed a lot of medical attention. I was in the hospital for a long time 'til I thought that, um, this was my home. I didn't even want to leave. They was trying to take me outside. I was like, 'No,' 'cause I had got so accustomed to it, and they were so nice to me.

Frances was placed with a foster family after she was released from the hospital and about a year later was placed with an aunt and uncle. Frances says that her aunt and uncle were both abusive and that at 12, she ran away. From the ages of 13 to 22 Frances was placed in a series of group homes. About this period of her life, Frances remembers:

I liked the group homes. That was better, 'cause you could be yourself and they didn't have nobody breathing down your back, stalking you, telling you, 'You can't go here or here.' Those was the fun times of my life when I was in the group home. I met so

many people. You know, girls, and then it was a little family thing. And I was always a leader, so, you know, we would all sit around and talk about our experience, our dates and all that. It was fun.

I was back and forth there, too, because I was bad. They kicked me out of there. They kicked me out of the group home, (laughs) 'cause I beat up one of the counselors. When they threw me out, I had to go to Covenant House [a shelter for runaway teens]. And when I went there, I didn't like it because it was like anybody that was coming in there was drug addicts, prostitutes.

Then at a group home that I was in Brooklyn, I met this lady. She took me into her house. I call her my sister and my mother. She took me in and she accepted me for what I was and she worked it with me. She was never the type that would be like, 'Don't do this,' and 'Don't you know better?' scream on me. She'd be like, 'You don't do it like this,' or 'You don't do it like that.' And she took her time and she changed me. That's why eventually I had to leave her, too. 'Cause, you know, even though she was good to me, I still had ways that she couldn't deal with, like my stubbornness and I used to hang out for days and didn't call her. And she was like, 'Look, I can't watch you go down like this You have to go.' And I was on the move again.

When I was 21, I was working. I was a construction worker, so I was just getting money, money. And, um, I think one of my girlfriends introduced me to it 'cause her man was a drug dealer. She was like, 'Come with me. I want to show you something.' So I went. She taught me how to smoke it and everything, and when I blew the smoke out of my head, I felt so beautiful. I was saying, 'Oh, I'm the Queen Sheeba! I'm going to go out there and do this and that.'

And then, at first, it didn't hit me, like some people, they smoke crack and they be like, that's it, they're a slave to it as soon as they smoke it. I wasn't like one of them crackheads you see on the street, all dirty, 'cause I still kept myself neat and clean. It's just that when I got money, I spent it all. Then I was on public assistance, so I would be like 'I'm going to stop smoking.' But in two weeks, when I didn't have no money and I stopped smoking, as soon as my check came, I was back at it again. And how I knew I was really hooked on it is like (laughs), on my check day, I was looking for a check-cashing

place to be open at 7:30 in the morning in the snow. I was like (laughs), 'I know I'm strung out now.'

When I was getting high, that's a dark life. It's like a vampire's life, get high all night, sleep all day, and then the people you socialize with, they steal, they conniving. I couldn't deal with that no more. And I was like, 'Either I'm going to kill somebody or I'm going to kill me.' It's only a five-minute thing where you feel good for a while. When it comes down, reality sets in, and that's why people be ready to commit suicide, because of all the money they've spent or what they did to get it. You know what I'm saying? Robbing and stealing. I know females that, they'd be on the staircase, having oral sex with somebody so they could get more money.

And then I was pregnant, but I didn't know because being that I didn't grow up with parents and stuff, I didn't know the symptoms. I was getting fat. And I tried to admit myself in a rehab center, and it was like, 'We can't take you because,' my skin was glowing and I was all fat and healthy looking. They was like, 'You don't look like you're...' I was like, 'Well, how should I look? Like a bag lady or something?' And I tried and they wouldn't take me and I stopped and then I had spent up all my money and I didn't have nothing.

And then I was going to have an abortion, because I was like, 'How am I going to take care of this child?' You know, I was all worried and stuff. So when I went to make the appointment for the abortion, they told me I was too young, no, too late for the regular, you know, the suction or whatever, and too early for the saline solution. So what they was trying to tell me was wait until the baby grow and then they'll kill it. And I had already felt her moving up inside of me. I was like, 'No, I can't do it.' I just decided to have her. And I think I started getting more responsible. I stopped using drugs and never went back. If I did, I would still be getting high today. I was like bringing another life into this world, and I didn't want her to go through what I went through, and, you know, that's when I became responsible.

Frances aged-out of the foster care/group home system at 22, around the same time of her pregnancy. Shortly thereafter, she entered the City's shelter system. In the

late '80s, the City was operating a series of "barracks-style" shelters for homeless families, where dozens of families lived in one open gymnasium-like space without partitions. Frances described her experience in these shelters as follows:

It was so nasty. I mean rats like when the lights went off, it was party time. (Laughs) They'd be dancing. If you look ten beds down, you could see somebody, you know, having sex and they were getting cracked up in the bathroom. I was like, 'I got to get out of here.' And it was just nasty. You know what I'm saying? I would literally have to threaten my daughter, if I saw her in the bathroom without me, I would have to, I would scold her because the bathrooms were so nasty. I mean like people would, I guess from standing up and not wanting to sit on the toilet, there would be species [sic] all over the toilet and vomit and blood and pampers.

It's terrible. You know what I'm saying, because everybody had access to me when I was in that barrack shelter. I mean anybody could have crawled up into bed with me or stabbed me up while I was sleeping. Even though they had security guards, they was sleeping half the time, too. And it was very unsafe and unsanitary. The food was terrible. I think I had diarrhea. I ate in every restaurant around, like in Chinese restaurant, Spanish restaurant, pizza, you know, everywhere, hero, everywhere, because I couldn't eat there. A couple of times I forgot to lock my locker. I always was the type that liked to buy nice things, even for my daughter. And then they would steal and that made me evil. I did not want to be there. And I let them know, the only reason why I'm here is to get a place. I would leave early in the morning and come back at night. I never was staying there to socialize or nothing, you know, 'cause I didn't like it.

I kept coming and going in and out of the shelter system. I would be staying with somebody, paying them rent for staying in their house, but it wasn't mine, so I still was homeless. Today or tomorrow, if they felt like throwing me out, I was homeless. So I was always homeless You know. Sometimes I be saying if I had a mother, I would be further than I am today. You know what I'm saying? That's because it has been times where I literally did not know where I was going to lay my head. 'Damn, where am I going to go?' I

would call my friend, 'Look, I'm in a little trouble. I need a place to stay, you know. And I'll pay you,' and so and so and so. It would work for a little while, but after a while, you know, they'd be like, 'Look, I can't take it, you know,' or they would have a husband or something, something.

And it seemed like every time I went back into the system, they sent me to that nasty place. I mean the resources was good. Like they had activities and day care centers, but when you homeless and you got problems, you don't think about all that. When you are in a situation like that, you don't want to deal with nobody. You just want to get up out of there. You know what I'm saying? I met some nice people, but it still was terrible. I would never go through being homeless again. I would never want to be in that position again because you can't prosper.

In 1990, after two years in and out of the shelter system, Frances secured a one-bedroom apartment in the Bronx, which she currently occupies. She described it as follows:

If you walk into my house, you can tell that I like nice things. You know what I'm saying? Like I spend time taking care of my house 'cause, you know, I would lay away, put some money down and get this and that. I have nice furniture, everything. 'Cause even though I never had a home of my own, the group homes and the foster homes that I have been in, they have been very nice. I was at Staten Island, Long Island and Queens. You know, nice places. So I got accustomed to that. I like nice things, and I always like met people that would buy me extravagant things like nice shoes and nice earrings, you know, stuff like that. So it just carried on through.

The building is nice, the apartment is nice, but the people, they're so nasty. They put their garbage on the floor, you know, in a hallway, when we don't have garbage service. All they got to do is take the garbage downstairs and put it in front of the building, but they'd rather lay it by the elevator and let the super take it down, and that's not his job. And sometimes he get mad and don't take it down there. It'd be sitting there for days at a time. And I be saying when my company come, they see this, they be like, 'Girl, you live in a nasty building.'

And then we got this young crew that hangs out in the hallways. They smoke their weed and write names all over the place. (Laughs.) You know, I mean, my rent is being paid on time, so I shouldn't have to take this anymore. So when my daughter gets, after this year, I'm moving. I'd rather move back to Harlem. I love Harlem. All my friends live in Harlem. Everybody and their mother, even my daughter's family, her father's people live in Harlem.

I asked Frances about her relationships

It's, it's been problems. I used to have this mentality that all a man could do was give me money and sex, but I'm not going to even abuse myself like that. You know what I'm saying? Going through what I went through as a child, it affects my relationships. Being that I was abused as a child, I used to have a lot of scars and stuff and a lot of guys used to tease me as a child.

I have a nice personality. I know what it takes to get a man and to keep one, but it's just, it's just like, let me see, I can't get intimate because like, all my scars. I just don't want, you know, I don't like for somebody to stare at me and like, 'What happened here?' maybe 'cause of growing up. I don't want to be like, 'Look, she did this and that here, she stabbed me up in the neck.' Before I used to wait for a person to ask me, 'What happened this?' or 'Why is that?' Now I just come out and tell 'em now, so either you accept it or you don't. Bye. You understand? Or I explain to them why my attitude is the way it is today because of what I went through.

And then I have a low tolerance, you know. I guess that comes from growing up the way I did. You know, I don't tolerate too much, not even from my child or from my friend. You understand what I'm saying? Like I'll let you know where I'm coming from and tell you my likes and dislikes, and if you do what I don't like, then that means you disrespecting me. Maybe not intentionally, but I don't have time to keep telling you the same thing over and over again. So I'd rather be by myself. You know. But it's, it's no problem attracting the men, it's just keeping 'em. And then I get bored fast 'cause I've always, you know, I've been a lot places and seen a lot of things, so not much impresses me. (Laughs.)

Like now, the situation that I've been, like I was dealing with this young boy. All right, he's younger than me. And, um, I just got tired of him 'cause he, I'm not going to prosper with him. He's a

thief. Plain and simple. And, you know, I be trying to help him get his life together, but, like I said, I don't have time to train and teach nobody. But I care about him. I like him a lot but I can't deal with him, and I know in my heart I have to leave him along. I just go on vacations and stuff. I mean, I go to Brooklyn or I might go to Queens or I might go stay with friends, so when he comes to my door I won't be there. You know what I'm saying? Because I can't deal with nobody. He's not doing nothing. He'd rather stay home, smoke his weed, or when he wants some money, he'll sell some drugs. Either he'll get killed, go to jail, or he might bring that negative into my door.

And then I totally dominated him. (Laughs.) I made him do what I wanted him to do. 'Go do this or do this,' and after a while, that gets boring, too. And then, so he started rebelling, so, I was like, 'I don't need you anymore.' (Laughs.) It ain't funny. But he was like a child to me. Like, um, responsibilities, he's lacking. His morals, he's lacking 'cause he'll like, if somebody gets shot on TV, it's a joke to him. And I mean I'm like everybody has a value of life. I would tell him like, 'The man that just got shot on TV, what about his kids and wife at home? That they're going to be fatherless.' So it was just only one aspect that he was, that we could deal on, and that was just sex, and that I could do without. So, I had to kick him to the curb.

My best friend that I have is my neighbor. Her name is Gloria. Mentally she's on my level. Like everything I say, she can relate to, even if she has never experienced, she can understand what I'm talking. She's like my soul-mate. Like if I don't have food, she'll go buy it, and vice versa. You know what I'm saying? If I need my hair done or she needs her done or whatever, we're there for each other. Like we talk about our experience with men or, you know, if I have a problem.

We just met this winter and we hit it off like that. The first time we started talking, I think I was coming in or, um, she was going out or something, and we just stood in the hallway and we just talked for like about three hours, about every, any and every thing, hanging out, men, clothes, this and that. And, you know, from then on, we've been good friends. We had our ups and downs because her views are different from mine. Like, her view is 'a good man is hard to find, friends come a dime a dozen.' But mine is 'a good friend is hard to find, but a good man can come a dime a dozen.' You understand what I'm saying?

So, that's where we, um, you know, hit head, buck heads, because I'm like, like a couple times, I would knock on her door. She would have her company and she would act like she wasn't there. I was like, 'Look, now if I do the same thing to you, you would be upset. You can't expect me to hang around and be waiting at your doorstep, and then when you ring my bell.' You know, if I knew it was her, I would get off the toilet and run to the door and answer the door, but if it's, she got company, she won't answer her door or she'll just call me. And I was like, 'Look, I'm giving more than you are.' I was like, 'If you can't be the friend that I am to you, then I don't want to be your friend, okay, because I'm not going to be the one that's givin' the most. Okay?'

I asked Frances if she had any contact with her mother.

No, she got killed. She hemorrhaged to death. She got beaten to death and she hemorrhaged to death. She got beat 'cause I'm saying the man that she lived with, he used to abuse her. The same way she did to me, somebody did to her.

I went to see her before she died, when I got out of the group home. I think I was about 20 years-old. Her oldest sister was trying to reunite us. So I spoke to her on the phone one day, and I just went to see her. She was living in Philadelphia. And when I went to see my mother, her eyes were mint green, because the man she was staying with had threw lye in her eyes. She told me she tried to run away but she couldn't because she couldn't see.

And when I saw her, I was like, 'Holy shit!' Even though what my mother had did to me, I felt sorry for her. She was like, 'I couldn't go nowhere. They was keeping me hostage,' and all this and all that.

And my mother thought that I had came to get revenge on her, and I had told her, 'I couldn't do any more that what was already done to you. You had already got paid back.' She had separated herself from her family. And my mother had like nine brothers and three sisters, 'cause there was 13 of 'em, and she isolated herself from the family. So when all this was going on, nobody was there to help her 'cause they didn't know what was going on until it was too late.

I felt sorry for her. 'cause while I was there all types of people used to be rummaging through my mother's house. The outside looked like you know when a building is burnt down, and you see burnt, dirty furniture and all these strange looking people are sitting around waiting. And I'm like, 'Who are these people?' You know, they were all alcoholics. And I, I didn't even sit down. I just grabbed a broom and I started sweeping, 'cause I was like, it was giving me the willies and stuff. I was like, 'Oh, my God.'

And, um, one day when I was sleeping, and I woke up and a man was standing in the doorway. I was like, 'What are you doing here?' You know, this big man. I was, I was all scared and stuff. I was like, 'You got to go. You've got to get up out of here,' 'cause I was like, suppose I would have been sleeping a little longer, he'd have been creeping in the bed with me. And I told my mother, I said, 'While I'm here, you cannot have no company.' And while I was there, somebody had broke our window, so I had to put a dresser up to it.

So, I mean it was terrible. There was food in her refrigerator that was all molded and brown and food on the stove that had turned into wood. I was like, 'Oh, my God. This is how she's living.' She didn't even know how much her SSI check was. She was like, 'Do me a favor. Tell me how much my check was' And I was like, I figure it was like \$400 and some change. 'Cause the man, her husband, not husband, her boyfriend was cashing her checks and giving her what he wanted.

And she had told me that she had got raped up in her house and she didn't know who did it. She said, 'I know who did it when I hear his voice.' I was like, 'What do you mean? They still coming up in here?' She was like, 'Yeah.'

And the day that I had left, I had a fight with her boyfriend's sister 'cause he said that, um, I was trying to come onto him. Now here's this big, ugly alcoholic. Man, I was like, 'Look. I don't even want you to look at my toes, less I'm trying to turn you on.' I was fighting for my life in there. And they had stole my one, my ticket to go back to, um, go back to New York, 'cause I was ready to go. And I couldn't go, and I had to wait for my mother to get her check. And that was like the worst experience of my life. The day I left her, she was like, 'When are you coming back?' I was like, 'Probably next week,' but in my head, I knew I wasn't coming back.

And my mother was young when she died. Her hair was white. You hear what I'm saying? And then she had mint-green eyes from the lye. It had burnt out her pupils. And she was all frail and skinny.

I asked Frances about her relationship with her daughter.

She's me now. Like when she talk to you, she'll be like, 'Girl, let me tell you.' She'll, just like how I open up to you, she'll do the same thing, tell you all her business, everything. You know, she's just open, and she, she's me. She don't play. She will beat you up in a minute, and she's smart academically. But I guess from like, okay, dealing with her in the way that I used to deal with her, it has affected her because being that I was never shown love, I don't know how to show it to her, but I want to.

Like sometimes, when I would get mad, I would say stuff. I be like, 'Girl, sometimes you make me just feel like busting your head open.' 'Cause it would be so easy for me to just punch her. And my friends was like, 'Well, um, why you saying this to her?' And I be like, 'Well, I got to say something. If I don't, I'll just kill her.' Cheryl [a childhood friend] was the one that told me to stop talking to my daughter in that manner, like saying 'I want to see your brains explode,' (laughs) 'cause I'll be so mad that I would just be like, 'I feel like punching your guts out.' She helped me come a long way. Like the advice that she give me, if it was somebody else, I wouldn't even take it. You know what I'm saying? I'd be like, 'Please, look where you at. You ain't doing nothing.' But when she gives it to me, I have to sit down and think, you know, because usually she's right.

You know, like the way I used to dress, I'd think like if I wore tight stuff and skirts up to my back, I would like find me a man and stuff. And she was like, 'You're a mother. You can't be dressing like that. You don't think your daughter see?' And I stopped dressing in that manner. But that was always me anyway. I like to dress sluttish, even though if a man looks at me in that manner, when he approaches me, I have to let him know, 'Look. This is not how I am. This is just the way I dress, and I'm comfortable like that.' But then I did it for my daughter, and she brought that to my attention.

But my daughter, she's going to be all right 'cause she got me in her corner. I'm a good provider for her. I always keep food 'cause, like I said, I'm a good provider. And I know what it's like not to have, and I don't never want my daughter to never be like, 'Oh, mommy, I'm hungry. What we gonna eat?' You know what I'm saying. So I always keep food. She has everything, clothes, toys, I put her in all the activities. She's in karate, after-school program. She's going to Fresh Air Fund.

So, you know, I'm good in that aspect, but like, like sometimes when she hugs me like too long, I'm like, 'Come on now, get off of me.' You know. You know I don't mean to do it, but it be annoying, you know. But I know that I have to, you know, then I'll be like, 'Come here. Come here. Give mommy a hug and stuff,' even though it's pretending. And I think she knows I be pretending, but the only time that I'm kind to her is like when she hurt herself. I be like, 'I love you.' You know. I tell her this but I guess she thinks it's not sincere, you know, because I don't know how to give it to her because it was never shown to me.

But I can't be feeling sorry for myself because it will transfer to her, and I want her to have a happy life. She didn't do nothing to deserve what I'm going through even though it's going to happen anyway. That's why I'm going to work with it just like my, um, Adolescent Psychology teacher told me, 'the memories is what sticks out.' You know what I'm saying. So I don't want that to happen, for her to have bad memories of growing up. You know, 'cause at first, I used to go berserk. I used to smack my daughter up side the head. Pow! Soon as she made it back, 'Come here.' You know, Pow! Just smack her. And then I saw the look on her face. It was like, 'Mommy, you going to kill me?' And I thought about how I used to look like that, and I was like, uh uh, you can't do that.

And then like her father's not in her life. And it doesn't bother me, because I never had a father. You know what I'm saying? So I gotta work with that with her, too. You know what I'm saying? 'Cause her father, I met him when I was getting high. I got caught out there. He's still getting high and I don't want to have nothing to do with him. But a child needs a father. But, like I said, I don't know what it's like to miss a father. You know, so, I can't empathize with her, you know what I'm saying? I don't know what she's missing. I kind of see it, but it, it doesn't bother me.

The school my daughter goes to is very good. They have all types of activities. So I think that helps her a lot, too. And then I'm close with the, um, the psychiatrist. Like I said, my daughter, if you hit her, she will break you up. And they was like, 'This is coming from home.' I was like, 'It's not coming from the home because it's nobody but me and her living there.' I don't have men running in and out, and she don't go outside because I don't let her play in front of the building. I don't let her play in the hallway unsupervised. I don't really let her go nowhere unless I know the parents real good. So it's like where's this anger coming from? So I sat down and I spoke to the counselor and I'll work with her, and the teachers, too. I'll go up there every day and, 'How she's doing?' I get a daily report and, you see, they know I'm a caring parent.

I asked Frances if she had ever been in counseling.

Like when I was about 16 or 17 years old. I used to lie to the therapist. I, at that time, I thought they was nosy, asking all of my business. And then I thought they would go back and tell my aunt, and I had a lot of animosity against her because of the way she was treating me. She didn't know how to deal with her, with an emotionally disturbed child. But, um, I need counseling. I mean it's painful. If I wanted to drown myself in sorrow, there's enough, but I won't do it. You know what I'm saying? I was tortured. I went through a lot, but like the psychologist told me, I think I blocked a lot of it out, because, you know, it was painful. But, I don't feel sorry for myself. I used to, but it doesn't do nothing but hold you back, you know. I think I need counseling for me and my daughter, 'cause as intelligent as I am, I should have been somewhere already. But I can't because my past keeps getting in my way.

Growing up, I was always talented and smart, but, um, my directions got a little swayed because I was a high school drop-out. I went back to get my GED and I passed it. So I signed up for college. At first, I went to college because they was trying to make me work for my check. And I was like, 'ugh.' In the beginning, I wasn't serious. But as I saw progress and classes started getting more and more interesting, I started putting my best foot forward, I made it on the dean's list.

I'm staying because I'm going for my B.A. And the classes that I'm taking, you know, I'm going to have to put more into it. I like the Literature

because we have to write. Like if you read a story, you have to write just a section of it. Okay. And, um, I took Addictive Behavior, like if you want to counsel people on drugs. And like, (laughs) in that class, it was like four of us that all used to get high, and we used to sit down and talk about our experience and stuff. We was open with the whole class, you know. They would have certain articles on different drugs and we'd be like, 'It's not like that. This is what happened.' We used to tell them how we used to go cop it, where we bought it from and how, what we have to go through to get it. You know what I'm saying?

So, I passed that one, and I took up Adolescent Psychology. You know, and I liked that one. What other? Topics in Humanities and Techniques of Counseling. I got an A+ on that from a strict Rabbi. Everybody was like, 'What?' because when I was there, I would, I would ask. And he would be like, 'Stop being so enthused.' You know. He told me when he left, he said, what did he say? 'Your enthusiasm is...' Something he said. And I was like, 'Is that a compliment or what?' He said, 'You'll find out.' And when I got my scores, he gave me an A+! And he was one of the toughest, professors in the school. And what other class I took? I took Theories in Counseling. Like the different theories that psychology, psychologists use.

But it's, it's tough like financially because I like to dress nice and I want my daughter to dress nice, and I like to have a nice house. There's a lot of times I have to go without. But like I said, since I been going to college, doors have been opening up. Like I love this program [All Children's House] right here. I wish it was out when I needed it because this is a good program, and I feel like I'm going to benefit from it. You know what I'm saying. Even if I don't get a job from this, the experience that I've learned from here will benefit me. You know what I'm saying? And I tell 'em, 'I don't know how to do this stuff.' Like, answer the phone, I didn't know how to do that until I came here.

I mean I have skills in like, like what did I used to do? (Laughs.) Nothing really. Macy's and Macy's. Where else did I work? I did a couple of other things, McDonald's. But what I'm saying, the experience that I learn here is going to take me along because I go on home visits. You know. I help staff plan some activities. You know what I'm saying? And I thank God for that, too, because it's going to benefit me. And it made me feel good when my social

worker told me, he was like, 'Go sign up for it, you know, as long as you're going to school, you could work here.' He was like, 'Go sign up for your, um, financial aid because we want you here this summer.' And I was like, 'All right!' And I went and did all that stuff.

I'm very glad I did it. And, you know, I was telling people, I was like, 'I'm going to college,' and they was like, 'Oh, you still going?' I was like, 'Yep.' And then when I said, 'I'm graduating,' they was like, 'What?' I was like, 'Yeah, what are you talking about 'what?'' Like they didn't think I was going to stick to it and stuff.

That's why like in my classes when I go to school, I pass all my grades and stuff. And I have a lot of insight on a lot of things, like being an abused child, a runaway, a drug abuser. You know what I'm saying? A single parent. I have a lot of insight on abused children. You know, like, the first person that you depend on is the one that's hurting you, so you're confused. You don't know whether to run, or if you run, where you going? You run from the person that gave you life and who's helping you and feeding you and, you know, it's just confusing. So, I guess I been through that for something. I'm destined to do something or be something. I'm here for a reason. You know what I'm saying? So, I don't know what it is, but it will come to me.

I'm the type of person that any way I'm going, I leave a good impression. I got my schooling. And everywhere, even the people that got me this job, they be like, 'Girl, you are something.' All my teachers, I get good recommendations, I get good grades. And that's just the type of person I am. I'm outgoing. But I used to didn't be like that. I used to be all mean, looking at people, rolling my eyes, and think they're talking about me, and be like, 'What did you say?' I'd be fighting and something. Now I say, look, with the help of a couple of people, I learned you can't fight. Ignore them. You got too much going on for you to let this and that. I'm just like 'Be yourself.'

I'm happy, but it's no surprise, because anything I put my mind to, I can do it. I don't mean to brag or nothing. But I'm saying I'm a good friend, I'm a good mother. I'll be a good wife to somebody one day, but that's not in the picture right now. I had a hard life, but that's why I have so much insight. I mean I could look at a person and tell how they are, just by the things they say. It's a gift that I have. [To the

interviewer] I don't care how quiet you are. You know. I could tell about you too, but I ain't going to get into that. (Laughs.)

I just want to be successful in my career. I want to become a social worker for adolescents. You know, 'cause I feel the trouble, they're in trouble. They are troubled. They are lost. When I was younger, I wanted to be a civil rights leader. You know. 'Cause the ones we got now, they ain't nothing. But I want to help the adolescents, so I can give back what was given to me. That's what I plan to do if I ever get successful is to run my own group home, you know, for young girls.

Maria

Maria is a 29-year-old of Latino descent. She has five children: boys, ages six and one, and girls, ages ten, seven and three.

We were three kids. There was my older sister, me and my younger brother. And my mother left. She came here to New York. She left us with my grandmother in our country. In Ecuador, South America. So I was two years old, my sister was five and my brother was a year. So to my grandmother, it was like her first time, I think, raising kids. She didn't raise my mother. She lived her single life. She never took that responsibility of being a mother

And so my mother, well, I say 'mother,' but I mean my grandmother. It was, I think it was hard for her. She was very angry at my mother. And of me, being that I look like my mother a lot, I think that was hard. My grandmother has a very strong character. Her temper is just, very violent. My grandmother just kept, you know, hitting me. She would choke me, you know, she would like try to strangle me. And she would scratch me.

In my country, there is the skin of the cow, the cow skin? They would put it to dry and it gets very, very hard. And you get hit with that, your skin hurts. You get cut. You start bleeding. That's how my grandmother hit me, with that. She would pull my hair and scratch me. The neighbors had to come and stop her when she used to hit me. They used to tell her, 'One day you're going to kill her.'

She would only hit me. She wouldn't hit my older sister. Me and my older sister would do things, you know, break something or write on the wall. But I was the only one that would get hit because my grandmother said that she loved my sister too much to hit her. And my brother was too young to get hit, so like I was in the middle. So I would just get hit for the three of us.

It got to the point that she would hit me and I wouldn't cry no more. She would hit me, and she would hit me more because I wouldn't cry. 'Cry! Oh, you're not going to cry?' She would keep hitting me and hitting me until I would cry. Then I would cry and I would cry for hours. Then she would hit me for me to

stop crying. I said, 'Why? I don't understand. Why these things are happening to me?'

I have always been, I don't know if it was because I was getting abused, I have always been the strongest. And of the three, of my sister and my brother, I have a very strong character. I don't like people to bother me. I don't bother no one, so like don't bother me. Since I was a kid, I think it was because I was, you know, abused. I never had that childhood of playing. You know, I was more like a little older person.

If I would play, I would play alone. And with the kids at school, never. The girls all used to be scared of me and the boys, I used to just beat them up. If they were, 'Oh, you look pretty,' I would just punch them. I was more like a tom-boy. I would just punch them. And I won't just be like in the lunchroom, I would just be in the corner. Nobody would look at me. Nobody would even ask me anything. They weren't even there.

And I would always try not to look pretty. I didn't like the short skirts. I didn't like none of that because, um, when I was a kid, um, I don't know, I have always had a big butt. So the men would just, you know, I don't know, they just want sex. I always tried not to look, you know, more feminine. I always tried to hide myself. Since I was a little kid, since I was seven years old, my grandmother would call me, she would tell me that when I grow up, I was going to be a whore, that I would take my sister's boyfriend away from her. And I was only seven years old. And I didn't even know what she was talking about. And, you know, I don't know why she did that.

When I tried to commit suicide my first time, it was when I was seven. It was with this poison that they have for the flies. In my country, it was like a powder. It looked like Kool-Aid. I took a little bit of water and dissolved it. It's a powder. And I took it. I was drinking it. Then like ten minutes after that, I started getting dizzy. I wouldn't tell my grandmother. I didn't tell her. I would just stay sitting down waiting for me to die. And I'm like, 'Oh, finally, it's going to end for me, you know, finally it's going to stop.'

At school, it was hard for me to retain things. When I used to get home, I used to get so nervous just to think that my grandmother would hit me. I would just cry before she hit me, because I knew, I said, 'If I don't know my tables, she's going to hit me. If

I don't know my ABC's,' and I was like six years old. And I was like, 'She's going to hit me. I know she's going to beat me up.' And she would sit down every day and, 'Tell me the tables.' And I would be so nervous. I used to be so nervous, and I could just forget things. I knew them, but just to know that if I would make one mistake, she would hit me. I used to forget everything. And she used to hit me. She used to hit me. I think the last time she hit me was when I was 15. So probably that's why I didn't have, I didn't enjoy my childhood that much.

I came here when I was 16 years old. Then, when I got here, I met my mother. And I stayed at her house for 11 months. Then, another nightmare started. It was like I couldn't believe it. I don't think I have, I've never been happy. And I don't know, I say someday I think God, he has to have something for me, because my life has been, it's more like a movie, a novel. I could write my life and I think I would make a bestseller, because I don't know when it's going to be enough, when it's, I'm going to say, "Okay, this is enough. From now on, Maria E. is going to be happy."

When I got here, I stayed 11 months with my mother and my stepfather. He tried to have sex with me. And I told him, 'No.' And he threw me out, because I wouldn't sleep with him. I told my mother. My mother said that I was lying. And of him being her husband for 14 years and me being a daughter that she didn't raise, she goes, 'You have to go.' She goes, 'I can't leave my husband for so many years for a daughter that I just met.' That's what she told me. She goes, 'You have to go.'

You know, I was so scared because I didn't know English. I didn't speak English. I used to say just, 'Yes, yes, okay,' and that's it. And it was very hard, you know. And I didn't finish school. And one day, when summer and the vacation from school started, my stepfather told me, 'Okay, I want you working. You get into a factory.' And I said, 'I don't speak English. How can I get a job?' He goes, 'Well, you get into a factory and you work and you got to pay me \$75.00 a week for your mother if you want to live here.' He goes, 'If you don't get a job by,' I even remember, 'September 21st,' it was a Tuesday, he goes, 'If you don't get a job by that time, you are getting out of here.'

I went, I did look. I went to the factories, over there, downtown. And then when the date came, he said, 'Well, where's the job?' And I said, 'I couldn't find it. I didn't, they didn't have no

jobs.' And he says, 'Well, you have to go. Pack all your stuff.' I packed my stuff. They live on 19th Street and 9th Avenue in a project, and they just put me downstairs. It was raining that day.

I was 17, and they just put me downstairs. I turned 17 in August, August 12th, and it was September 21st that that happened. And they just put me downstairs. I was crying. I was crying like a little baby, 'cause I was so scared. I was like, 'What am I going to do? What is going to become of me?' I say, 'I don't speak English. I don't know. I don't have no family. I don't know nobody. I don't have no friends.' You know, I used to go from school to the house, from the house to church and then from church to the house. I'm like, 'I don't have no, I don't know friends, girlfriends. Even girlfriends I don't have.'

One of the sisters from church said, 'I have a friend on Wall Street and she's 35 and she has a condo.' She asked her friend if I could go there and her friend said, 'Fine.' They had a car so they took me over there. I was crying. I was very scared. And when I got there, she was very nice. The lady was very nice. And the only thing that I didn't like, it was that, you know, her being a woman already, she used to hang out and go to nightclubs and drink. I didn't drink. I didn't hang out, so I wasn't used to that.

And it was her apartment. She would say, 'Get dressed, let's go.' And I couldn't say 'No.' It was her house. I wasn't paying anything. I was just going to school. So I used to go. I couldn't take it, coming home at six o'clock in the morning, then take a shower and go back to school. I couldn't, I couldn't take it. And drinking, I threw up, you know, I didn't know how to drink. I'm like, 'You know, this is all new to me.' And she would spend a lot of days in nightclubs here and there. She would introduce me to men. 'Oh, look at that guy. He has a lot of money.' I was only 17. And even her brother would go and try to give me money and tell me I could make a lot of money. He would take me out to dinner to an expensive restaurant and all that.

And so one day I told her. I said, 'I can't take it no more. You know. I'm not doing good at school.' And there, I tried to commit suicide again. I took 37 pills. I couldn't take anymore. I just, every day I would pray to God, 'Please God, take me. Just take me. I can't take it no more. I hate myself.' So one day I told her, I said, 'I can't, I'm not going to go

with you no more.' And she told me, 'Well, you have to go.'

So I just told her, I said, 'I'm going back to church.' So I told this to another, um, sister from church, and she was very nice. She told me, 'Don't worry,' She introduced me to a nice couple. They were a very nice couple. They had two kids and one bedroom extra. They told me, 'As long as you go to school, it's fine with us.' But I felt uncomfortable being there, even though I helped with the cleaning and the cooking, you know, I felt bad, you know, of them not being my family and doing so much for me. So one day, I just called this number that I saw in the yellow pages and I put myself on [sic] foster care.

I went over there, even though I was a minor. They told me that I needed to have my mother sign some papers because I was a minor, and being that it was her that brought me to this country, she was responsible of me. And she didn't want to sign the papers because they needed a reason why she threw me out. She said that if, if I said the reason that it was because my stepfather wanted to have sex with me, she would go to jail, he would go to jail. So she was very scared. So I told her, I said, 'Lie. You don't want to put the truth on the papers, make things up. Tell them that I wouldn't listen, that I used to go and hang out too late, you know, that I didn't do anything, that I was very stubborn.' So she did. She went and told them I would get there very late, that I wouldn't do the things, the chores that I was supposed to do.

Well, the point is that I got into foster care. And she signed the papers and everything. Then that's how I ended up in the Bronx. They put me on foster parents in a private house, and that night I cried, because I was so scared of the Bronx. They used to tell me the Bronx was the worst part of New York. It's no good. So when they told me, 'Oh, we're going to take you to the Bronx,' I was crying. I'm like, 'Oh, no. I don't want to go over there.'

But I had a nice foster parent. She was very nice, and he was too. They were cool with me. They opened their arms like I was part of the family. They treated me like I was part of the family. You know, she did more than my real mother did. When I was sick, she used to feed me. She would take care of me when I needed something. If I wanted something, she would go shopping with me and, 'Oh, do you like that?' She would just buy me, you know, buy it for me. She treated me good. And I could talk to her about

anything, anything. I tell her, 'Oh, look, what do you think about this?' She would tell me, 'No, this is no good. Don't do this,' or 'I think you should wait.' You know. I could talk to her. Even now, I keep in touch with her. I was there until I had my first child.

When I was there, I used to date this guy. He was 24 and he went and asked for my hand to my foster parents when I was 17. And I was like, 'No.' I said, 'I can't marry. I'm too young.' And, to me, loving was like just a word. I never fell in love, put it that way. I never fell for nobody. It was just go and come. 'Oh, I like you. Now I don't like you. Okay.' So this man, because to me, he was a man already, he wanted to get married. I didn't want to. I said, 'No,' so he broke up with me. And then I think a month after that, that's when I met my daughter's father.

I was going through a lot. I used to hang out a lot. I was drinking a lot. I used to go drunk to school. I don't know, I had a lot of problems. And since I was 16, um, I have had a vision disorder. And I think it's because of stress. And at school, everybody thought everything was fine with me, except the counselor. She knew. I used to cut myself. I used to cut myself a lot. With the tool to open the boxes. That would make me feel better. I don't know why. I wouldn't feel no pain at all, at all. So having so much things, a lot of problems, when I met my daughter's father, I put everything on him. You know, he was very nice to me. He was 18. He was wonderful.

And, you know, we dated and next thing you know, I was pregnant. And I didn't even know I was pregnant. My foster mother told me 'cause I used to get, I got nauseous. And she tell me, 'I think you're pregnant.' And I'm like, 'I don't know. I don't think so.' And, yes, I was, I was pregnant.

Then they put me in this residence for pregnant girls. I left there because they wanted to take my baby, until I got an apartment. So I told them, 'No, I couldn't.' I couldn't let them do that, you know, take my baby just like that. So I just left. I just ran away from there. One day, I took everything and I just left. I was five months pregnant and I left with my daughter's father.

He had a room in a basement. That's when he started the hitting, when I was pregnant. He was hitting me and he was hitting my belly. It would hurt

me. And then that's when I decided to go to my foster parents again.

I told them, I said, 'Look. He's doing this and that to me,' and I was very scared. And she told me, 'Oh, you know, you're carrying a baby, a child. You can't be doing that.' So I just left him and I went over there. He didn't like the idea, but I didn't care. So my foster mother was responsible for the two of us. It was fine. I used to go, get up in the morning. I used to go to school. She would take care of the baby. Everything was fine because my daughter's father wasn't there with me.

And then he used to go over there and try to hit me over there. My foster mother wouldn't let him in. 'This is my house. You don't touch her here. You touch her and I call the police.' So I stayed there. Then after I had the baby, he wanted to be there with the baby, so he talked to her and everything. He rented out the basement. He worked. My sister finally got him a job at the supermarket. So he would work and he would buy for the baby the diapers and the milk and things like that, until we found an apartment and moved out.

That's when he started hitting me again. It was worse. He really started the kicking and the punching. Every day I have black and blues. Every day with the glasses. I would never go and see my family, because every time I go, every time they would see me, I used to always have bruises. It's easy to say to somebody, 'Oh, why don't you just go ahead and leave.' You know, it's easy. It's even easy for me to say, 'Yes, that's what I'm going to do.' But when it comes the time to do it, it's hard. It's very hard.

My brother would go over there and see me all beat up. He didn't like it. My sister would go over there. She didn't like it. And so one day, I decided, I said, 'I'm not going to pay no more rent. I'm not going to do nothing. I'm going to work.' I took the baby and I left. My baby was ten months. I asked my mother if she could keep the baby until I settled down. She has a little apartment. So she say, 'Fine.' Being her first grandchild, she agreed. And my stepfather, he was happy. She was beautiful. Very chubby.

My sister had a room in Manhattan. And I went over there. I lived with my sister and my grandmother and my brother. It was just a room. No kitchen, no nothing. I got myself my first job at 96th Street and Broadway as a sales person. That was my first job and

I was so happy. Every time I got paid, I would go shopping for my baby.

Then after that, my sister and my grandmother moved to Queens and I went back with my daughter's father because it was just no room for us, you know. So I went back again with him, and he used to live in his friend's house. And his friend agreed for me to live there, but it was very uncomfortable. He would hit me again there every day. His friend would tell him, 'Don't do that. Don't hit her, not in my house. You know, if you want to do that, do it when I'm not here.' My daughter would see that every day.

My daughter's father would work. I wouldn't work 'cause he was very jealous. 'Oh, every time you work, you think you're better than me and you start fixing yourself.' He didn't like it. And so one day, I couldn't take it no more and I just left. It was two o'clock in the morning. It was wintertime. I just called my sister and I told her I'm on my way over there.

Here's what happened. I got over there. I was all beat up. The lady there was renting another room, \$40 a week. And I agreed. I said I would take the room for me and my baby. It was in Queens, in Jackson Heights. It was nice. I went and I looked for a job. I got a job, I think the same day that I went out. I was very happy again. I got myself a job, and I would pay my grandmother \$30 a week for her baby-sitting, and I would buy the food and everything she need, diapers, anything. Everything she needed. Every time I used to get paid, I used to buy her clothes, sneakers, and the weekend I would go out with her. I was very happy. I think I should have stayed back there.

But then my sister was getting married. She was leaving the room, and my daughter's father kept on calling me and calling me and calling me. 'Please come back. Please come back. Please come back.' And I don't know why. I went back, I went again with him. And he got himself an apartment and I went. I said, 'Okay, let's try it again.' Oh, it was hell. He would throw me out every day, tell me, 'This is my apartment. I pay the bills. I work. This is my house.' And I have to put up with that. Then I got myself another job in a department store and I would pay for the baby-sitter, I would pay for everything that the baby needed. He would work but he only paid bills for the house. He wouldn't support me and my daughter.

Back then I didn't know anything about shelters. I didn't, so I said, 'I'm going to have to live with it for the rest of my life.' So then I got pregnant. I was a month-and-a-half pregnant with my second child. He broke my nose with a cordless phone, very heavy. He smacked me like two or three times with it. He broke my nose. When the police came, they saw me all bleeding, and he kept on hitting me in the street. They were saying 'Oh, you like to be a macho man? You like to hit women?' And they hit him. And in a way, I was so happy, and I say, 'Well, probably getting beat up once in his life, you know, is good for him.' And they took me to the hospital and everything.

And his family, his mother came, 'You got to drop the charges. He's my son.' They got me to drop the charges. I went, dropped the charges. The Judge told me, 'Why?' And I told him the reason. I said, 'He is the one who works. I'm not working. I'm pregnant. You know, with my second child.' And he said, 'Okay.' He told him, he goes, 'You should try to work things out. Okay, for this time, but next time, if you come,' he goes, 'no matter if she drops the charges, you going to do time.'

But he kept on hitting me. And when my second daughter was nine months, he left with somebody else. And the day that he left, that was the day I hit him. That day, I said, 'This is over. I don't care about you no more, so I might as well hit you.' (Laughs.) He was hitting me anyway. So I, I scratched him, I choked him, I pulled him, I kicked him. I said, 'I can't take it no more.' I was still in love with him. It shook me up. It took me two years to get over him. Even when I was with my next child's father, I used to cry to him about my ex. (Laughs.) It took me a long time. But then after that, I was just sorry for him. He got into drugs.

My daughters' father left in July of '88, and in September of '88, I got involved with this guy. We started as friends, because, like I say, I used to cry to him about the other one. We used to be friends. He lived next door. He used to be a singer. He sings free-style. He had a good voice. And then, you know, we kept talking to each other and everything. I don't know, it just happened one night, and I came out pregnant of him. I didn't want to have the child. I wasn't in love with him. It just happened. I was like 22. He was pretty young. He was 16. He was a kid. I was like, 'People is going to think that I'm crazy!' You know, I would never take him serious. Like I said, we was drinking and it just happened. I came out pregnant.

So, he left for Puerto Rico and I was still with my pregnancy. I couldn't tell my brother, 'Oh, give me some money, I want to have an abortion.' It's just not something I would tell my brother. And my daughters' father was around. He had money. But I couldn't tell him, 'Oh, give me money to have an abortion from another man.' It's just not right. So I couldn't, I couldn't go through it. And I just forgot about this pregnancy. I made believe that it wasn't there at all, because I was getting very stressed.

And when I did get the money, I went to the clinic to get an abortion, and they told me that I couldn't because I was already six months and a half pregnant. I couldn't believe it. It happened so fast, you know. And my belly wasn't, it wasn't showing. Nobody knew I was pregnant. And I stopped going to my family's. I didn't call nobody. I was just at the house. And next thing you know, I have my baby. I delivered my son in the house.

I didn't have a phone. I never went to pre-natal care 'cause I don't like doctors. I hate people be touching me, and I don't like that. I just wanted to forget about it. And that night, I started having contractions and everything. It was 2:30, a quarter to three in the morning, and, you know, I just started walking back and forth, back and forth. And next thing you know, I just felt like I had to go to the bathroom so bad, you know, like I need to go the bathroom. And on my way to the bathroom, I just felt like pushing, and when I pushed, his head came out.

Oh, my God! I was so scared. I couldn't believe it. I was like, 'Oh, my God.' I couldn't believe it. I touch him, and I said, 'Oh, my God. The baby's head is there.' And I'm like, 'I'm going to go to jail!' I couldn't, I didn't even know if I should sit down or I should lay down. And I say, 'Probably his neck is going to break. I'm going to go to jail,' thinking that I did this on purpose. And what is going to happen to my daughters? I didn't know what to do.

My oldest daughter she was like four-and-a-half, she got up and she was like, 'Oh, my God, look at that!' And I was waiting for the water, the water bag to break. It was a dry labor. The water never came. (Laughs.) It never broke. It just, I pushed and his head came out. I just looked at my kids and I'm like, 'Oh, my God. What's going to happen? What I'm going to do?' And, and I just felt like pushing, and it was just coming, the contractions. And I just, I just

leaned on the back of my sofa, and I went a little bit down. I was standing up. I went down a little bit, and my daughter brought a lot of shopping bags. And she goes, 'Mommy, if the baby falls, he won't get hurt.' So she put a lot of them in there. And I'm like, 'Oh, my God. I don't know what to do.' I couldn't even walk.

And my youngest daughter, she was a year-and-a-half, was, 'I want to look at the baby's head mommy.' And I'm like, 'Oh, my God. I don't know what to do.' And my other daughter, she kept on calling, saying, 'Mommy, we got to call the doctor. Call the doctor.' And I'm like, 'I don't have a phone. I don't know what to do.' And then I just felt like pushing again, and I pushed and he came out!

And when he came out, I didn't even know if I should pick him up or what. I'm like, and then the baby started crying. And I just kept looking at the floor, and I'm like, 'Oh, my God. You know, what I should do, just leave the baby?' The baby kept crying and I picked him up. And then I wasn't even curious if it was a boy or girl. I just, I was wondering, you know, what should I do?

I remember this video when I was pregnant with my second daughter that I saw in the Lamaze classes. I saw what they do when they have the baby, so I just, that just came, flashed into my mind (laughs), and I picked the baby, and I told my daughter, I said, 'Go get a robe, a bathrobe that's clean.' I said, 'Go get it.' She went to get it, and I put the baby there. I wrapped him up. I cleaned him. I cleaned his, um, they take something out of his, the throat. And I felt, I put my fingers, try to take it out, and then I blew into his mouth, and something came out through his nose. And I said, 'I guess I'm doing fine.'

Whenever the baby started crying, once I hold him to my arms, he stopped crying. And then I wrapped him up, and then, um, the umbilical cord. And I said, 'Well, now what I'm going to do with umbilical cord?' I know they put these things to tie it up, you know, so the baby don't bleed, and then they cut it. I don't have no scissors. I don't have nothing to tie up. I said, 'I don't know what I'm going to do.'

So what I did was, I told my daughter, I said, 'Do you see that?' It was a steak knife. I said, 'Go get that knife.' And my daughter tells me, 'Mommy, don't kill the baby, please!' (Laughs.) I'm like 'I'm not going to kill the baby, I just can't walk around with the baby in my hands,' you know, because

he was attached to me. And I'm like, 'Just go get it, please.' And she's like, 'Okay.'

She went to get the steak knife. Then I measure a part of his umbilical chord, and measure, and I cut it and I made a knot with it, because I think that it was bleeding. So I made a knot and everything was fine. He stopped the bleeding. And then, I started getting contractions again, and it was the afterbirth. I remember, it comes out like ten minutes, ten, 15 minutes after. There was a lot of blood. After I cut the umbilical cord, there was no stopping that bleeding. There was a lot of blood. And I felt like I was going to faint. I leaned myself on the wall, and I started pushing. And then I pushed and the afterbirth came out. And then my daughter helped me. She brought my bag. She goes, 'Put it inside the bag so that you can take it to the doctor.' (Laughs.) Then that's what I did.

My daughters' father knew I was pregnant and would come around and make sure I was okay. He would leave me food. He would pass around every time at 2:30 in the morning. That night he didn't come until 4:30, 4:15. And by the time I had cleaned the girls, I had took a shower. I was dressed up. And when he came, he seen all that blood. It was at 4:15. And when he seen all that blood, he said, 'Oh, my God. You're crazy. You killed the baby!' I said, 'The baby's fine.' I said, 'Everything is fine. Just please take the kids, the girls to your mother's house.' And he called the ambulance on me. So that's what he did. He went, he took the girls.

The ambulance came, I think, around five o'clock, 5:30. When they went upstairs, they was like, 'Okay. Where is your sister? Where is the lady that had the baby.' And I'm like, 'I am.' And they were 'But, where is it?' I said, 'I am.' And I was with the baby in my arms. He goes, 'Well, where is the lady?' They were looking for me. And I said, 'I am. I am the lady.' I said, 'I live here alone. Here's the baby.' So they looked at me. They looked at me and said, 'Oh, my God! Sit down!' I was bleeding like crazy. My pants. I would put towels and I wouldn't stop bleeding. And they told me, they said, he goes, 'You're bleeding too much.' He goes, 'You have to go to the hospital.' They looked at the baby. They checked the baby. The baby was fine. The man was, 'The baby is fine.'

And the police came and they took the baby and the department tried to get me down, see, they wouldn't let me walk down the stairs. He goes, 'You're

bleeding too much and we're responsible for you.' I would have that problem, because I bleed too much. They always, after I have the babies, they always give me an injection to stop the bleeding. So they took me down. They took me to the hospital and the doctor checked me. Everything was fine. They checked the afterbirth. He goes, 'Everything is fine.' The paramedic, he goes, 'Why don't you get yourself a job in a hospital?' (Laughs.) He goes, 'You did a good job. Congratulations. You're a very strong woman.' He goes, 'How did you?' I said, 'I don't know. It just happened. You know, it just happened.' It was amazing. I had my third child, a son.

Then my son's father came, he saw me when the baby was like three weeks-old. He saw me walking down the street with a baby in my arms, and he came running, and I said, 'Oh, my God. I don't believe this.' And he told me, he goes, 'Is that my baby? That's my son?' And I said, 'No, this is my baby. It's my son.' He goes, 'I told you. I told you you was going to have a boy. I told you that I was going to give you a boy.' I said, 'It's my baby.' And he goes, he goes, 'We'll see when that baby grows who's the father.' I said, 'I know who's the father.'

He was too young and he just, knowing that I was pregnant, he just left. You know, I didn't want nothing to do with him. Then when the baby was a month-and-a-half, um, the baby got very sick. He had the beginning of meningitis. And I thought the baby, the baby was going to die. And I put in the papers, 'unknown father.' I don't want him in the picture at all when the baby was born.

Then when the baby was eight months, his father and me went back. We decided, okay, let's stay. We stayed in my sister's house. Everything was fine for three months. That's when he started hitting. He had never hit me until like three months after we went back, that's when it started. He hit me the first time because we were hanging out with our friends in the house and by then, I was very skinny, so I had, I put a dress, a tight dress, and his friends told me in front of him, 'Oh, you look good. You look nice.' He got very mad. He went outside and he just took me outside the hall and he just smacked me. He was into heavy metal. He had these rings and one of them had like wings, and when he went to hit me, he cut himself, his face. And seeing that he cut himself, he hit me again. So that was the first time.

We lived there like six months, because right in January, in January of 1990 I think it was, he left.

He started hanging out with friends, ones that sell drugs and they introduced him to this lady. She was, well, he was already, what, 18. She was 50 years old. And then the hitting that I wore [sic] was when he got involved with the other, with the lady.

He was selling drugs. He started using drugs. He would drink every day. He would come. He would force himself on me, all the time, every time, sexually. He will hit me first and then he will force himself on me. My daughters' father would do the same thing. After they hit me, they would want to have sex. I don't know why. I didn't find that fun. I didn't enjoy. And he would do it. He is the father of my three last children.

The first time when I went to the shelter, um, the reason why I went in was because he beat me up real badly. I went to the hospital. I was pregnant again. I almost lost my child. He shot me with a .38 revolver. And, thank God, he didn't kill me. He was shooting at me, but he didn't get me. I guess it was because he was drunk, you know. But that night, he really was determined to kill me. He goes, 'If you going to leave me, I have to kill you. If you not mine, you can't be nobody else's.' And he gave me a fracture behind my ear, my right ear. He broke my head like five times. My face looked like 'Rocky IV.' That's how I looked, like a monster. I looked myself in the mirror and I was, 'This is not me.' I couldn't open my eyes. They were black. They weren't purple, they were black. My eyes were red like blood. I looked like a monster. My lips were so swollen, I couldn't even talk. My back was full of bruises, my leg, because he kicked me, he punched me.

He did everything to me that night. He sexually abused me. I remember he ripped through my clothes. That's all I remember. I passed out, because I was so tired. You know, I was bleeding. I kept on bleeding. My clothes, they were full of blood. The next day, he looked at me, and I was bleeding and he was going to hit me because he said, 'Oh, if you lose my child, I'm going to kill you.' He told me, 'Let's go to the hospital and if they ask what happened to you, you tell them that you got mugged, somebody jumped you.' I said, 'No. If you man enough to hit me, then you should be a man to admit it.' So he said, 'So, you're not going.'

So that day, that was Sunday he hit me. Monday, Tuesday, my friend came, because I wouldn't send my daughter to school because I had to take her to take the bus, but I couldn't go like that. You know, I

felt embarrassed to go downstairs. And my friend came over and she looked at me, and it was very dark. I couldn't turn on the light. And she would try to look at my face, but I would just turn until I couldn't hide it no more. And she said, 'Oh, let me see.' She turned on the light and when she see me, she started crying. She goes, 'How can, you know, you let him do this to you?' And I told her, I said, 'I'm leaving. I don't know if I lost the baby or not.' And she told me, 'Here. Ten dollars. I take care of the kids and you go to the hospital.' That was when, that was the last time I was in that apartment.

The doctors wouldn't let me go back to the house, so I decided to just leave. And a week after that, I went to the shelter. And it was rough, you know, having your own apartment and having kids and to just decide, 'Oh, I'm not going back home.' I have to leave everything that is mine, you know, and go somewhere to people that you don't know. You don't know what you're going to go through. You don't know what to expect especially when you have kids, you know. You can't think about yourself anymore, you have to think about your kids first.

I would cry every day, especially when I was pregnant. I was three months pregnant. You know, I would cry and think sometimes, I would think, 'Should I go back? You know, I'm putting my kids through all this because of me.' But I kept on there. You know, they wouldn't have a good life if I would decide to go back. Just because it's their father, he doesn't have no right to abuse them.

Then after three months they moved me to another shelter. It wasn't for battered woman. It was just a regular, family shelter, so anybody could go over there and see you. And I was there for like six months. I had my baby there.

I kept in touch with his mother, the baby's grandmother, because she was the only person that I had support. Me and my family, we don't have that much support, so you know, she was very close to me and I was very close to her. So, you know, I would go and visit her. Then he would find out and would be waiting for me there. He kept on hitting me, you know, he wouldn't change.

One day he hit me, and I went to my social worker and I told them. I said, 'I want to go. I want to leave New York. I want to leave the state. I don't want him to find me.' So she helped me. She made calls here and there. She gave me a list of options.

And she goes, 'Which one do you want?' I said, 'Which is the one that is the farther from New York?' It was Plattsburgh. She goes, 'It's more like a town.' And I said, 'Well, that's where I want to go.' She goes, 'Are you sure? You don't know no one.' I said, 'Yes, that's where I want to go.' And the next day I was out. I left for Plattsburgh.

She took me to the Greyhound bus and we left. I just took my kids, two bags and just what they needed for the moment and then I just took off. I got there like at 2:30 in the morning. They were waiting for me there. I was placed in a private housing apartment. It was for battered women. And they helped me. And my son, he needs therapy, physical therapy. And he takes speech therapy and all that, because of being abused by his father. He's mentally disturbed and he's physically disabled also. He has a genetic problem. So I took him to the doctor and the doctor told me that it was better for me to move to a better, to a city. They didn't have the services there. He goes, 'Either you go to Albany or go to Mt. Vernon.' So like two days, three days after that, I left to Albany. (Laughs.)

They took me to the, the name was the Equinox Agency. They were very nice. It was also a private house for battered women. They helped me a lot. I had problems with the residents there, because I'm very forward to people. You know, if I want to know something or if I want something, I just ask in front of anybody, because I don't think I should hide, you know, what I feel or what I want of people. So they would get mad at me because the residents complain that the people, the counselors, the staff would treat me better than the other people. But, you know, I really didn't mind, you know. I said, 'That's your opinion. You don't know me.' But I got, I stood over there a year. I stood in this agency. I got an apartment in a brand new house. It was a beautiful house in Albany. It was just a whole house just for me and my four kids, in like '92 or '93.

I was in the house only like for two or three months when I came back to the City for four months. The kids had vacation and I hadn't seen my family for over a year. I didn't have nowhere to stay, so I went to the grandfather, my kids' grandfather. Their father found out that I was there. He hit me again, and I was like, 'I'm going crazy. I want, I just want to go back home.'

Then when I went back there, to Albany, everything was gone. The lady next door, she was in

the same program where I was in the same shelter, she stole everything. She took everything that I had bought, everything. So in Albany, I find out that I don't have no place to go and that I'm pregnant again. You know, I was like, 'Why me?' Then I decided, I said, 'I can't start all over here again.' You know, it was, it took a year.

I came back to the City and went back to the system again. I was in Rosie and Harry's for six months, six months. That's when I had my last child.

It was three years in shelters, running here and there. It was very frustrating. I would cry every day, every day. The only thing is just you get very frustrated of people having control of you, because they give you chores in some of the shelters, and the other ones they give you a certain time you have to be there. You know, you feel like a little kid, like a child. You have to depend on other people. They have a certain time you have to be here. You can't go out and spend a weekend out, you can't do that. So it's very, that's very frustrating. And there's things that you have to do to accomplish other things. You know, you have to go to meetings and, like I say, I'm not a sociable person. I'm not a friendly, you say, 'Hi,' to me, I say, 'Hi,' to you. If I don't know you and I get into a room, you don't look at me, I don't look at you.

So when I be in the groups, I wouldn't talk. I wouldn't say a word. But I learned. The only thing good about, I think, that I learned, it was that I have more confidence of myself, of talking, speaking my mind. Even at school, I wouldn't. The teacher would say, 'Do you know this?' And I would know. I wouldn't say anything. But being here and there with different people, and you have to really be strong to go through this. You have to be strong, because if you're very weak, you just, I don't think you can make it.

By the time I got Rosie and Harry's, it wasn't that frustrating for me. I would sit down with staff, 'This is what I want and this is what I need and this is what I'm going to tell you about me. It's not what you want to know.' Now, I feel more free of saying what I've been through. I feel like I have more confidence of how I feel about myself. I think I have learned a lot from all these years.

But my son, he's hyperactive. He's the one in therapy. He's a very smart boy but he has to do the same thing every day. You know, if he used to you

seeing him every Friday, he has to see you every Friday. If they change it to somebody else, it just don't go, it's very really frustrated with him. So of him being in shelter to shelter, it was like, 'ahh.' He couldn't take it.

And my daughter, she's very nervous. She has a learning disability. And, like I say, it's not easy, you know, because I have been here and there just to get the services that she needs. So it was very hard for her having moved here to the shelter. Once you move to another shelter, then you have to move the school, you know, to move the kid to another school. So, for her, that was very frustrating. So, it's not that easy for the kids. It's not. I, I seen, I could see it, and I used to tell her. I feel that I'm making my kids, my kids go through all this, and I feel so guilty. You know, of making them go through all this just because of me. And they would say, 'No, it's not because of you.' You just got to do things. Sometimes you just have to sacrifice things. Even the doctor says, he goes, 'Don't think it's because of you that your daughter has a learning disability. It's not you. It's just sometimes kids...'

It was, it was very hard. My kids will get very, you know, very upset, stressed out being, you know, well, 'This is not our house. This is not ours.' You know, 'When is it that we going to say, well, 'this is our house.' And they would dream just to have that house. Just stay there and never move out. My son's like, 'When we going to have that? When we going to have our Christmas tree? When we going to have a dog like every family?' To them, it's just like a dream to them. It's just a house with a nice tree and the dog. You know, that's my kids.

In March of 1994, I moved out of Rosie and Harry's. It was then I got my apartment. Thank God. And I've been living there for a year and two months now. Thank God. It's big and it's beautiful, three bedrooms. A big living room, a dining room. The kitchen is big, two bathrooms. I'm happy, even though the lady, the landlord, she discriminates me because I was homeless. She got me from the shelter and she treats me like I don't have no rights because I was homeless. And I told her, I said, 'You would treat me better if I would be black,' because she's black. She used to go into my apartment. I don't know if she still does, but I really had to curse her out for her to stop abusing my privacy. I say why she does that, because she thinks that because I was homeless, I don't have nobody, she could do it and step all over me and my kids. I didn't graduate and I don't have no

diploma from nobody, but I was raised with good manners. That's the way I was raised.

My son's father, he's in jail now, for robbery and assault. He said that he's coming out and that he's going to kill me if I don't go back to him. I don't have time to sit around and, you know, really get stressed out just thinking, 'Oh, my God. He's going to come out and kill me.' Like I said, I don't have time for that. I have a lot of things to do to take care of five kids. So I say, 'If he comes, I got to call the police.' The only thing, yes, that worries me is that by the time I call the police, what he going to do to me? He could kill even his mother if he wants to. He's a very violent guy.

It's really hard for a single parent, especially for a woman with kids without support from their family. I don't have no support from my family. It's very frustrating. And about me being a single parent, being a woman and having five children, it has been hard. At school where my daughter goes, they, they criticize me. He goes, 'You come over here with 90 kids and try to register them.' 'Excuse me, but it doesn't matter how many kids I have. That's none of your business.' You know, I came here to register my kids, that's it.

Even when I go out, the people, they go like this. They count the kids. They actually count when I go to the movies, they count the kids. 'One, two, three, four, five.' And they go like this. They give me these looks. And I'm like, 'What?' You know. I just keep going. I don't pay attention to nobody. If I would, probably I would be more unhappy, and I would have like more problems if I really sit down and say, 'Oh, my God, they're looking at me like this. They want to say this to me.' I wouldn't go out nowhere with my kids.

I love my kids. It's just that sometimes, you know, it's hard to be a single parent. I don't want to hit my kids. And it's hard because that's the way I was raised. There have been times that I really want to, a lot of times, but I just hold myself. I pull my hairs. I go to my room. I yell, I curse, I throw things, I lock myself in my bedroom. And I'll be yelling myself out. And I don't hit them because I don't want them to feel, I don't want them to go what I went through, of that hatred that I have for my grandmother.

And I don't know, if older women feel the way I feel toward men. I hate them. In a way, I do hate

them. It's just that the two men that have been in my life, they just, you know, they just come, use me and they just walk away, and go with someone else. Then they want to come back to me. And I don't, I don't think that's fair.

And then why they want to come just to hit me? I been 11 years being abused, you know, from men, 11 years, getting hit every day. You know, have a black and blue for every day. Every day, I would go outside to the store and they said, 'Oh, Maria with the glasses.' They would, they would know already. All of them say, 'Well, I know what happened.' I don't know if it's because these men see that I'm big. They think I'm strong or something, and they would just punch me like they're hitting a man. You know, he goes, 'You big, you can take it.' And I, I can't. I don't, I bruise very easily, very easily. And that's all they, that's all they do.

And, you know, that was the problem with me. I let it happen once. And I think that was my mistake. And probably it was because I've been abused since I was a child. I didn't have a father or mother, and to me, my grandmother, she was my life. No matter how angry I was with her, I loved her. While she kept on hitting me, I hated her. You know, I really wanted her to die. The same thing with my husbands, you know. I loved them, but at that time, I really wanted to kill them. I wanted them to die. You know, it's hard sometimes. You know. I don't tell this to people because they think this woman is crazy.

And to me, I hate to cry. I really do hate it. Since I was a kid, I hate to cry. That's why I don't want to go into counseling. It gets me, I think crying is for a very weak person. I have cried more now than I ever thought when I was a kid, and I don't, I don't think that's good. But I really, I get very stressed out with the kids and, like I say, I don't have a life. I want to go to school and I really want to work. I'm getting tired of the public assistance. I want to do something for me. I want to show something to my kids, and I want to do good about myself.

I want to go to someone to go to counseling, but I'm scared, I'm scared of what might come out. And especially now, there's things coming to my mind. I think I was sexually abused when I was a little girl. By I don't know who. And that's why I'm scared, finding out who and just to know why. I get flashbacks of me being sexually abused. That's why I'm not sure. And I, I been, I have all those

flashbacks since I was like 12. I don't know who did it and I'm scared. That's why I'm scared, of finding out who did it.

I used to hear voices. I couldn't go to sleep. I used to, I used to even feel the bed used to move. And I used to feel people leaning on me and their breath, breathing on me. You probably think I'm crazy. Seventeen, until I was 25. I used to call my foster mother, 'Mom, I can't go to sleep. This is happening to me.' I used to be in a corner until, until daylight. I couldn't go back to the bed. And I even felt sometimes that I used to, that somebody used to have sex with me while I used to be sleeping. Crazy, right? No, you don't think so. I still feel like that.

Sometimes I think I'm more scared of finding out what that is inside of me because I'm, I don't know how I'm going to take it. It's just sometimes it's just weird to think that somebody is concerned about the way I feel. It's very hard for me to open up to somebody and think of that person as concerned with what's going on with me. You know, nobody has been.

Ayesha

Ayesha is a 21-year-old of African-American descent.

She has one child, a son who is five years old.

Well, way back when I was born, I was from Brooklyn. And, um, I remember as a child I was spoiled. (Laughs.) I was the only child at first, so I was getting everything. My mother was going to school. So my grandmother used to watch me. She practically raised me instead of my mother. And I still is close to my grandmother. My mother, we was kind of close when I was younger, but not now. I have a sister that's 11 and a brother that's 14. We all have different fathers.

I think I was like six when we moved to Carroll Street. And at Carroll Street, I started playing with kids from different races and stuff. It was like Jewish. I remember playing with Jewish kids. Those were my friends on that block. I used to hang with them all the time. (Laughs.) I used to go out a lot with my mother like to the park, to see Santa Claus, Easter Bunny, things like that I have pictures of. I remember all of that. I used to get a lot of stuff for Christmas. (Laughs.) Everything was right and I loved it there. I remember the memories of life. I didn't want to leave.

Then my mother moved in with my brother's father. And I stayed with my grandmother. Then my grandmother had to move 'cause they had to tear the building down. They were going to remove the building, so we had to leave. It was an emergency situation. I was upset, but we had to go.

We moved to this Crown Heights Apartments where my mother and grandmother are now. I was getting used to it. I was like eight or nine. My mother placed me in a new school. And everything was going fine until I got like 11 or 12. That's when my stepfather came. Everything changed. That's when there was chaos. When he came, that's it. That said it all. Half my childhood had been destroyed.

He just came from prison. And he came to my mother's door 'cause they knew each other. It's a very small one-bedroom apartment. So then she took him back to the bedroom, and had music on, I remember, and they was talking. After that, he started coming around more often, coming over visiting, and sitting down chit-chatting with her. Then I remember him

moving his things in. We didn't know nothing. They got married. That was a new shocker. They didn't tell us anything until later. She pushed to get married. She didn't want to be an old maid.

When I was 12, that's when I got attacked by him. One night, I was in the kitchen, it was dark in the kitchen and he grabbed me, and that's when he attacked me. Then my mother, she came in there and cut the light on. She didn't do nothing. All she did was cry. I remember that. And she thought that I had feelings for him. It wasn't like that. So I didn't say anything. So I was like, 'Could you all just be quiet and leave it alone?' 'cause my sister and brother and my grandmother were sleeping. I didn't want to wake them up to start anymore. So I was just like, 'Just leave it alone. Let me go out front and go to bed.' She was supposed to put him out, but she didn't do nothing.

So the next day, she kept saying I want him and I just got sick of it. I ran away. I think like three times I ran away. The first time, I was staying on the roof of a friend's apartment building. I made a noise. I was snoring probably. And the security guard, he came up there and he saw me. He was like, 'Oh, my goodness! What happened? What's wrong? Why are you here?' And I told him what happened. So he was like, 'You can come to my house and you can wash up and stuff.' He did seem nice, so I went with him and washed up back there. I went to his house that morning 'cause he got off from work. He gave me something to eat, and we was talking. I said, 'I have to go.' So he said, 'All right. Where are you going and what are you going to do?' So I was like, 'I don't know. I'll probably go back to my mother.' He was nice. Nothing happened.

Then, I was like moving here and there on the street and to my sister's relatives. Then I went back home. I tried to work it out with them again. But it would be me and him in the house. He would send my grandmother to the store and I would be sleeping and, um, nobody would be home. I'd be laying in the bed, and, and she would go out to the store, and he would lay on the bed. He would be just laying there. And then he would touch me or something, and I would get up, and then we would start arguing. And then, um, I didn't want to cause any more problems. My mother didn't do anything so why should I be yelling and screaming? It's repeatedly times he would send my grandmother to the store.

I ran away again. I had to stay in the street. I was dirty for days. I had to go to the bathroom, I had to use on the streets. I was hungry. And then I would try to find where my aunt was. I used to get a bus and try to follow where my aunt lived, 'cause I didn't know too much of traveling, so young I was out there. I was like 14.

I came back home, trying to calm things down, but it was too much fighting. I left again and I got pregnant. I stayed with the baby's father. He had his own room. I was staying with him 'cause he worked as a truck driver. So I didn't really have no problem of eating or clothing or stuff. I stayed there for a long time. Then, um, after that, I didn't want to be bothered with him no more 'cause I was getting upset. It's like whatever happened to me, I don't know what it is. A lot of anger and stuff. He got upset and me and him broke up. He went back to another girlfriend who was pregnant at the same time I was pregnant.

Then my aunt, she was like, 'Why don't you go home and work it out? Try.' My stepfather had cut out. He had to leave town. So my mother picked me up and my sister came and they got me and brought me back.

I went to the pregnant teen school and stayed there until I had the baby. Then I transferred to Thomas Jefferson High. I didn't stay there too long 'cause that's a bad school. So then after Thomas Jefferson, it was Lincoln High School, then Wingate High. Then I went to Sheep's Head Bay, then I went to Pacific High School. At Pacific, I got A's and B's for a while. Then I just started dropping. It just started dropping and dropping. I went to like seven different high schools, try to make it, and it's like something keep interfering. It kept affecting me, like off and on, so I kept dropping out of school. I'm hurt I did not finish. I just didn't care no more. I guess I was getting back at my mother for what happened, so probably that's part of what's going on, what's been happening all along.

In November of '93, I really needed to move 'cause I wanted my son to have his own room and space, 'cause it was very cluttered up, crowded. There was five of us in the one-bedroom apartment. It was me, my mother, my grandmother, my sister and my brother. I couldn't have no company in the house. I didn't have nowhere to put my own things or personal stuff. Oh, God. I didn't know what to do.

That's when Miss Hercules [her real name] came in. I had a worker, a social worker named Miss Hercules from Urban Strategy, so I was talking with her. She used to come visit and talk to me. And she suggested that I go to the shelter. At first, I was like, 'I don't want to go to no shelter. How long do you have to stay in there?' She was like, 'You don't stay there too long. It's up to you to make the move and get up and look for an apartment.' So I was really thinking very hard about it. And then another guy friend of mine said, 'I think you should do that, to get your own. You're old enough to make your decisions now.' I was 19.

Miss Hercules, she hooked me up with the West End Inter-Generational Residence over there on the West Side of Manhattan. And the same day I was accepted. I was so happy. I moved in on November 2nd. I went directly, directly there. Thank God I didn't have to go to the EAU 'cause that's bad.

I liked the shelter a lot. It felt different. I felt comfortable, and I felt that people there cared, and they were nice. They were very nice and respectful and things. I got the phone. I brought the food. They supplied me with a lot of free stuff to start me off. I didn't have to worry too much about utensils or a garbage pail, or a mop. So I thought I had to worry, but I didn't. (Laughs.) They was like, 'Don't worry.' All the stuff was there. So I cleaned up and dusted off a little bit.

My son loved it. You know, he was like, 'How did you get it? You don't have money.' He know I didn't have no money. (Laughs.) He was like, 'How did you move here?' And I had to speak and explain to him why we had to come there. That affected him also 'cause he was close to my grandmother. He was very close to her. So I had to keep explaining to him 'cause he had to understand. He was moving from one place to another. That was very hard. I didn't know what to say, so I'm asking people like, 'How could I say this to him? How could I say that?'

The shelter was very strict. They had like a visiting room downstairs and visitors could come like only for two hours. You can have phone calls, but you can't call out. Phone calls is only up to like ten o'clock. On the weekend, it's probably 11:00 at night, something like that. You cook your own food in your room, and make sure you clean up behind yourself. Children can't play in the hallway. You can't make a lot of noise. Turn your music down a certain time. If you have an emergency, you call down, you know,

call the ambulance right away, so they have some good services. A doctor and nurse used to come like on Mondays and they would take care of you and give you prescription, to go to the pharmacy. If your child is sick, you got to stay with him, make sure he goes to the hospital, bring doctors' notes and let them see it. So it's a very strict place.

They used to come counsel me like twice-a-week because I told my worker, Miss Flood, what happened to me. I told them everything that happened, and they got me on the record. They had women's groups there, arts and crafts, birthday parties like once-a-month. Each month, like the end of the month, everybody's birthday who was born in January, at one time they have a birthday party. They had Christmas parties, Halloween parties, everything. Thanksgiving, they had a beautiful dinner. Stars from the stories on television, they came. We saw them in person. They give out toys and stuff to the children, clothing, they gave out. All kind of meetings and picnics, cookouts on the roof. Um, they have GED there also in the building and they have day care. (Laughs.) They were very nice. Um, the teachers was very nice. My son got along with them. Boy, there was a lot happening at that place. It was fantastic.

I met a lot of new people there, a lot of new people. All the people who lived there were very nice, too. Some come from a rough, very rough background. Um, they got kicked out or something very horrible in the streets. It is just horrible stuff. The father beat them up or take their money. You be seeing all kinds of different things going on. And it was sad. A lot of friends in there I keep in touch with now.

So I stayed there for going on two years. You're only supposed to be there nine months. (Laughs.) But why I stayed there so long because I wanted a place that's very nice and convenient, very clean, in one of these new buildings if I could find it. We used to have once-a-month meetings with Sister Jane. That's the housing specialist. She used to help us fill out applications and things like that. The first time, they sent me for renovated buildings. So you have to bring your son with you, any child with you, for, um, I guess, for interviewing with the people to see if you accepted or not. So I didn't bring him with me, so they didn't accept me. So I went to other buildings. I did not like them. The one in Brooklyn, they had no walls up. It wasn't really nothing so good to move in. I don't know why they showed me that.

So then I went to another appointment. Sister Jane was like, 'This one, I'm going with you.' (Laughs.) So I brung my son, and she came, and that's when I got accepted there. She gave in a good word for me, that's why. (Laughs.) So I got accepted there. Two bedrooms. It's renovated. It's nice; it's clean; it's a quiet area. I love it over there. They gave me the keys on my birthday. Twenty-one. I couldn't have done it without them 'cause I don't have no money, no job. Getting my own apartment I can keep to myself. There's the happiest thing that happened to me.

So I got my new apartment. I'm trying to furnish it piece by piece. It's hard 'cause it's expensive for things. Everything is so expensive now, I can't afford it. 'Cause I can't take my whole check because I need car fare in case of emergency or something.

Oh, boy. I do not like welfare, but I'm using it just to get on my two feet. I want to get off. There's not enough money for me and my son. And the things I want (laughs) are very expensive. I want a house and a car. Um, money in the bank, at least save it in the bank. I want our insurance paid up. Um, I want to be independent on my own, 'cause they be all in your business. I do not like welfare. I hate it, but right now, I really need it to get on my two feet, just something to help me. Thank God for my mother (laughs) and my grandmother and my friends for helping me. So that's the only way I could make it by.

And, um, I learned my lesson. I'm not getting pregnant no more. I had one; that's it. Until I am married. Yeah, until I am married, and I find the right one, then I'll have more kids. Thank God I had no more 'cause I cannot afford it. I just say to God, 'I learned my lesson.' I've learned my lesson to make sure, um, if I'm with someone they help me out, not just to use me for whatever. So I make sure like when you come to my house, bring something like a bag or, I don't care what it is, bring something to help me out. You know, I'm not asking you to do it, but it would be nice, 'cause you be coming to eat at my house or something, bring something.

Now I'm in a relationship. He's older than me, like 27. And his mother loves me dearly. His family likes me a lot. And they helped me out recently. I'd been with him like three years. That's the longest one I've been with. I'm trying to just stick with one person and see how it works from there. He has seizures. He's on SSI. With that, I wasn't going to

be with him, but then, if I had seizures, I wouldn't want nobody to treat me like, 'Go away.' That's what he feels that I'm going to do to him, like leave him, because he has that and feels bad. But it's not his fault. My mother, they don't want me with him. They really want me with someone else that's got a real good job, that's working, have money, this and that. I was like, 'That's true, but I don't want to just be with a person just for their money.' So, right now, that's my friend I'm with now. We have arguments, spats now and then. That's normal.

Right now, I won't be home 'cause I'm busy looking for a job and schooling, so I'm always out. I don't stay home. (Laughs.) I do not stay home. Right now, any job will do, cashiering, salesperson, working in an office. I have a lot of experience working in an office. It's very hard looking for a job. I need a resumé. I need help with that. I really want to get off welfare. I'm trying to fight for that. I hope to get into a college in September. I will go to college and finish 'cause I want to be a nurse, and I know computers, so that's what I like -- computers and nursing, 'cause I love helping people.

So I'm just trying to keep myself on track, to get into a school and to look for a job, too. But then every time I do something, I don't know what it is. It's always something stopping me, something just jumps and affects it. It's like your mind, you know. It's a lot of flashbacks. Or sometimes I hear something and then I don't hear it. Attacking or arguing, fighting. Everything, it just comes and goes. You know, I'll hear a voice or something. I just hear voices. It goes and comes. I was like, 'I know I'm not sick, you know, but I still heard something.'

I went through a lot. You know, it affects you when you was a child. You would never forget what happens. So I think that's what's affecting me now. Probably that's what's affecting me from succeeding, doing what I'm supposed to do. I went through hell. But I tried to get over it. I used to cry and all that. I tried to stop it. I did try to kill myself, committed suicide like two or three times. My sister's aunt takes pills for her bad nerves. I took all the pills and I just lay there, and I threw up. I was like 14. Everything just came down on me. Everything just came down.

And then I tried to cut my wrists. Somebody caught me doing that. Next time, I took pills again. It just got me very sick. I would go to the hospital.

They would pump it out. Nothing didn't work so, I was like I thought about jumping out a window some, but then my sister cousin was there helping me get through it, like talk to me, sit down, have people there talking. Then my grandmother was there for a couple of days and my brother. They talked so that made me talk. After I was pregnant, I didn't do it. I stopped everything. I just stopped.

Once I did get me to see a psychiatrist. That's the only time. They expensive. I was like, 'Oh, boy. I can't go there.' I went through a lot of women's groups at the place where I used to live. That also helped a lot 'cause they'll have visitors come for different things like for stress, stress-testing. They used to do a stress test. They tell you what to do when you're very depressed. They had people from flowers come for decorations. They had all kinds of things. They had refreshments. They take you on trips. They were very helpful. You know, they took us out to eat, to talk about different problems and things. So that's, I had a lot of help there. So a lot of people love me and have taught me.

So now I'm just trying to get myself back on track from all what happened to me. I'm looking for school. And I want to find a job and get off welfare. And my son, he's getting older and older, and I want to have stuff for him. He's my main concern now. I want him to keep up and progress. I can't be thinking back.

Cora

Cora is a 33-year-old of African-American descent. She has four children: boys, ages 17 and 12, and girls, ages 15 and seven.

Okay. My life. Huh. You could probably write a book on my life. It's been hectic from day one as far as I can remember. It seems like it's been going downhill ever since.

My childhood was okay for a while. You know, I enjoyed school. I got good grades, you know, going out. My parents both worked for the city, for the Parks Department. My mother gave up her job because she was having problems with my little brother. She just quit 'cause she had to take care of her children. She got other jobs after that, working in the school, you know, serving the lunch to the children, working in a grocery store in the block, you know. She was the register girl. She was on public assistance in between times.

My father and my mother separated when I was kind of young. I think I was about 12 years-old when they actually separated. And it was really painful for me, to watch them at a young age just fight each other and want to hurt each other. It was so traumatizing to me, watching my mother and my father get drunk on weekends and fight one another, trying to kill one another. I would be so nervous, you know, because I was afraid of what may have happened and what was going on. The only thing that was on my mind that I could think about was just run for help, you know, try to get somebody to stop them from trying to hurt one another.

I was always the first one ready to run out the door, no matter how I was dressed or whatever. All I knew was I had to get help because they were trying to hurt each other and I didn't want to see that. And my great-grandmother would come over from Queens in the middle of the night, take me and my mother and my sisters and brothers, take us out to Queens or stop the fight or bring us back the next morning. You know, some nights, after the fight, my father would come out there with us. You know, we would all come back over the next morning. I couldn't make any sense of it.

And, um, when I was about five years old, we used to live over this little candy store, and the lady, my mother knew her. We all knew her. Her name was Glinda. And she had this brother. I don't know if he just came out of prison or what. And we would all go in the store and buy candy after school. And I went in there with a nickel one day, and he, he, that was the first time he molested me. And he says, 'Don't tell anybody. If you don't tell anybody, I'll give you this icy.' And, um, I was frightened. And I went in there again, and every time I would see him, I would get so scared, so nervous. And I went in with groups too, you know, in the hopes that he wouldn't do anything to me. But it didn't matter. He managed to call me behind the counter, and I'd be so afraid. And I would be so afraid, I wouldn't even go and tell my mother. And to this day, she still doesn't know.

Then we had this big old fire and we had to move. The store got burnt down. So I think, I guess it stopped after that, because we had to move and I didn't see him anymore. And then it was like after that, then my brothers started picking it up. You know, they would start feeling on me and touching on me and things like that, which I didn't know any better.

As I think about it as I get older, you know, I knew that it was wrong. You know, and then this went on 'til I was about 16 years-old. My brother, he would come in my room in the middle of the night. Every summer we went to my grandmother's house up in Queens, and my grandmother would put us in her bedroom, and the boys would be in the room that the girls used to sleep in, and he would come in in the middle of the night and he would stick his finger all up in me and all kind of stuff like that. And I'd be so afraid. I would just lay there. You know, because I can't scream out. I just can't say anything. And I just have to lay there until he finishes, and then I just start crying.

And then my other brother kind of like got into the act, because when we moved up into the Bronx after the fire, um, we would, the rooms were like, I don't know, their room was all the way down the hall, but my mother was all the way on the end, and they would come in the middle of the night. And he would come in and rub, you know, feel on me and try to kiss me on my mouth and all of that stuff. And I knew it was him because his teeth. He had buck teeth, and he used to slobber a lot. You know, so I knew it was him. But still I, I wouldn't tell anybody.

It went on for a long time, until I was about 16 years old. I couldn't take it anymore. So one morning, they were going to sell papers on Sunday morning. And, um, he came in, and everybody was asleep and he start sticking his fingers up in me, and I got angry. And I was like, 'Stop. Get off of me! I'm telling Ma.' He was like, 'Okay. Don't tell. Just come block the door.' And it was like ever since then, he hasn't done it anymore. But I remember a lot of times when he used to, um, he would, um, be over at my grandmother's house, and we'd go in the yard and play basketball, and he'd always make it a point to be rub up against me and pat me on my behind and things like that.

I was so traumatized by the whole ordeal, you know, I turned to drugs. I started out with marijuana, smoking cigarettes and everything when I was 12 years old. It made me feel good. It made me relax and just forget about my problems, because I didn't know what else to do. Then I turned to a lot of different men for comfort or whatever, I don't know. And, um, I'm trying to get my life back together now, but it's not easy. (Cries.)

You know, my father and I were close. After my parents separated, I would play hookie from school and go see my father. He would come to the house and try to bring money for us. My mother wouldn't take it, you know, and she wouldn't open the door and let us see him or nothing like that 'cause she was going out with this other guy.

And I was 15 when my father died, from cirrhoses of the liver. And that took a lot out of me 'cause it was like when he died I was all alone. I remember because I was pregnant with my son, my oldest son. And me and my sister had planned to go around there that Father's Day to let him know that he was going to be a grandfather for the first time. And what made it more painful for me was when he died, they said, he was asking for me. It was really painful to me when he died. I still miss him to this day, you know, even though it's been over 17 years, 18 years. I still miss him very much. You know, I think I had a closer relationship with my father than all the rest of them, 'cause I was the only one like him. I was the tallest one out of all seven children, and I looked like him. Everybody else was short and looked like my mother.

I left home for a while because my mother wasn't any help to me. I couldn't tell her what was going on. She got into a relationship with my youngest sister and brother's father. When she got involved

with that other guy, it was like she didn't have no time for us. My mother used to drop us off with another lady, my cousin's mother, who raised me. She would drop us off on Friday night and we don't see her 'til Monday after school. And during the week, after school we would go to her house to get the snack and the dinner, then my mother would take us home, so to speak.

Me and my mother fought because the guy that she was involved with, you know, he would just lay around, do nothing, wait for my mother to feed him and buy things for him. You know, when my father died, she got this big lump sum of money from Social Security, and it was like she took it all and spent it all on him.

I went and stayed with my sister for a little while. I went to get my funds from my mother because I needed to buy Pampers and milk for my baby. And she wouldn't give it to me. So I was so upset, you know, very angry. And I found myself taking it out on my son, because I was upset that she wouldn't give me the money that I needed to take care of him, and he was just crying, crying, crying. And I just started pushing him away from me, pushing him away from me.

Then I thought about what I was doing, and I went back to my sister's house and I asked her if she could buy some stuff for my son. She was working at the time, and she helped me out. After a while, I think I went back to my mother's, and then later on down the line somewhere again, I left. I had to go back to my mother's house three times. The problems just got worse.

A friend that I was involved with, he helped me find an apartment to get me out of my mother's house. The apartment building was a rat-infested dump, but I needed something. You know, because I couldn't stay with my sister and I couldn't stay with my mother 'cause we weren't getting along. And I allowed my brother to move in with me, with his family. That was crazy. His girlfriend and his baby moved in with me. I had like this big living room, which I turned into a bedroom for my children. I had to leave that apartment because it was like my brother took over. You know, he brought in his family. He said that he would help me pay the bills, which he never did. Then he started bringing in his animals, his dogs and his birds. You know, and I just up and gave him the apartment.

Then I went back to my mother's again. I was into the drugs. My children started living with their grandmother. I told her, I said, 'Well, you keep the kids here with you. I'll give you money, you know, for food and the foodstamps and the whole nine yards.' But I never would. Every once in a while, I would give it to her. I was just laying up there doing nothing, using drugs, going crazy, out of my mind.

I started on the reefer, the marijuana when I was 12 years old. And it was like I smoked that until I couldn't smoke it anymore. I just started getting these headaches, so I left it alone. So I went to the alcohol and the beer. And then, um, then in '84, between '84 and '85, then I was introduced to crack cocaine, 'cause my sister, my baby sister that died, she was already into it. And, um, it was, they just roll it up into bamboo paper with tobacco or with reefer and smoked it like that. And that's how I started smoking it, but I didn't like it with the reefer, so I'd use the tobacco. And I would just smoke and smoke and smoke.

The rest of my family was into it. We were all living in my mother's house again. We all would get high together. The children would be in the back room. We all would sit and get high. I was into it very heavily, to the point where I almost died. I had to go to the hospital once, because my potassium was so low. I was pregnant at the time, but I was still smoking very heavily. I just smoked and smoked and smoked 'til, I mean my head was about to bust open, but it wouldn't stop me from smoking. Maybe, subconsciously, I was probably trying to kill myself. You know, because for somebody to be in that much pain, and I mean I'm throwing up my insides. After I'd finish throwing up, I'm lighting up a joint again.

If I was getting \$150 from public assistance, that whole \$150 was going into the crack cocaine for me to smoke, and then so were the foodstamps. Living in my mother's house, I was under the impression, my mother is buying food. Everybody can eat. But it wasn't like that. And one day I just looked into the mirror, and I was like, 'What are you doing?' And, um, my brother came one day, and I was laying down watching the stories. And he says, 'I saw your son outside.' I said, 'What's my son doing outside at two o'clock in the morning?' And that was the last straw. I was like, 'This is not working. I have to do something.' I got up the next morning, I went to the welfare center and I told them I had nowhere to go. Me and my children were homeless.

I stayed there 'til closing time. And, next thing I know, they gave me these checks and told me I had a room at the Brooklyn Arms Hotel. I went back to my mother's house that evening, and I threw the checks on the table to show my mother like, you know, 'I'm out of here.'

I went down to the hotel. And I took my sister. My youngest sister, me and her were really close, too, because no matter where I went or who I got involved with, she was always the one that I would take with me. So in case anybody needed to get in touch with me that didn't know how to travel, all they had to do was go to her and she would bring that person to me. And I really miss my little sister so much.

When I first went to the Brooklyn Arms, it was scary, because, like I said, it was Brooklyn. But I knew it was something that I had to do. We went there and we lived like normal people. I felt a little relieved because me and my children were together, finally back together for one thing. I had all four children there. We had one room with two big beds in it. And it was a relief because I didn't have to worry about my son being at his grandmother's house with nobody watching him. We were all back together, and that's what I needed.

We would watch TV. We'd eat. We'd just have fun, you know. And I really enjoyed the experience because it was like nobody would come and visit us out there because nobody knew nothing about Brooklyn. They didn't like Brooklyn. If they came, they stayed for a hot minute. It was like we was in our own little world, just us. It was satisfying because that's all I had, and that was all I really wanted, just me and my children to be together. We met a few neighbors, and that was okay. The guards were nice, and once-a-week we would come over to Manhattan, to visit my mother, then go back. Sometimes we would stay the weekend, go back Monday morning so the kids could get into school.

When I was in Brooklyn Arms, I was still using drugs. Every weekend I would go to my mother's. We would go over there and get high together. But, um, I never did it out there, you know, because I knew people were watching me, so to speak, and I wasn't going to let anything come between me and my children. Anybody could have dropped in at any time, and I would not want them to catch me using drugs with my children in the hotel room. You know what I'm saying?

We stayed there for a couple of months, and then they were closing it down, and they put us in the Tier II, Rosie and Harry's. That's when the drug addiction stopped completely. I knew I had to do it for me, 'cause like I said, I looked in a mirror one day and I didn't like what I saw. And I knew I was killing myself.

Everybody at Rosie and Harry's was so nice. They try to teach you to be positive. You had to go to workshops and everything. The first big thing I had to do was admit that I had a problem and work with that and deal with it. And I did that. It stopped the drugs and helped me to work with my children a little more closely.

When I was living at Rosie and Harry's, I used to have a lot of anxiety attacks, for no reason at all. The last one I remember I had, I was living in Rosie and Harry's, back in '89. I was going food shopping. And I had one right there in the supermarket. I mean I just, they had to call the ambulance and I mean it was awful. I didn't even know what it was then. This was before I even knew about anxiety attacks. And I just got so numb, and I got to shaking. I couldn't walk and I couldn't breathe. Boy, it was really scary.

After Rosie and Harry's, they got us the apartment where we are now. We were in the shelter system for about eight months. And, um, when I moved up in the Bronx, I was afraid to go outside. It lasted for a long time, because I would go out and pick up my P.A. and go do my shopping and get back in, but I always had somebody with me. But for me to just go out on my own, I just couldn't do it. And I just prayed to God and ask him to watch over my children, and get them to school and back home safely. And then, one day I just tried it. You know, I said, 'I'm tired of staying home.' So I went and signed up for a program. And little by little, I was still afraid, but I knew if I wanted to get my life in order, I had to do this.

I remember when I was even little, I used to always be afraid to go out, too, because when all the rest of the kids would go out, you know, I was always in the house. My mother said, 'Why don't you go outside?' I would go to school and come home. You know. One day I was walking from school and I walked across this highway, and this man was in his car jerking hisself off. And I got so frightened, you know, that I just kept walking straight and I kept going and I didn't stop until I got in my house. And

I was like, you know, it was like, 'It's okay now. You're inside. Nobody's going to hurt you.'

And it could have, I don't know, it could have had something to do with the fact that I was molested all of those years. I hated men for a long time, for a long time. And I called myself getting my revenge off of men when I was having the one-night stands, you know, because they would be interested, but after that, you know, it was like I didn't want to be bothered with them anymore. I was more or less hurting myself than hurting them.

Things have really got worse over the past few years. My children's father was killed. He was murdered. He was standing outside his mother's door talking to a friend of his, and some guys came down from the roof to rob them. And, um, they didn't have anything, and they shot the friend first. They, you know, told them to take everything out of their pockets. As they was going to their pockets, his pocket to take out what they asked for, they just shot him. So when their father saw that, he tried to run into his mother's house, but they caught him anyway with the bullet. A little girl was coming out. So in order to keep the little girl from getting shot, he pushed her back in, and that's how he caught the bullet. The friend died on the scene and the he died when he got to the hospital.

We had separated, but we was still close. We was good friends. We were together for ten years. The first few years him and I were together, we had my oldest son. Then he went to jail for five years for robbery, which was really stupid. The only thing they got was five dollars and a watch, and it was four of them. So they did all this time for five dollars apiece and a watch that they couldn't even, you know, divide.

During the time he was in there, I got involved with somebody else, and I got pregnant. I was so afraid how he would feel of the fact that he was in jail and that I had a baby by somebody else that I was willing to give up my child for adoption. And then the day after she was born, I was getting ready to leave and something told me, 'I'm not going nowhere without my child.' I don't care how he think he would accept it or reject it. And when he came home, two years later, he just accepted her just like his own. And he just welcomed her and treated her, raised her, until he died, you might as well say, as his own child, because she never really knew her father.

Him and I got back together, and then we had the other two children. And it wasn't 'til after the baby was born was when he started getting heavy into the drugs, and then that's when we kind of shied away from one another. I was using drugs myself. He started smoking that pipe and started stealing, and that was something that I couldn't have around them. You know. I think that's the only thing that probably broke us up. Everything else was okay.

My oldest son, I know he's going through these problems because he hasn't grieved yet since his father died. It's been six years now. They were really close. I mean I don't think they could have asked for a better father. I mean he would do all the fatherly things, give them piggy-back rides, take them to the park, you know, read to them and provide for them. He did it all. You know, and even when we separated, he still had the opportunity to do that, you know, because those were his children, despite of whatever happened between us.

When my mother called me about 11 o'clock that night and told me that he died, I called the kids in and I told them. And my son was like, he had no reaction, you know, no response. At the funeral, he just sat there. He didn't cry or anything. And, at the last view, I tried to get him up to go and look at his father's face, but he refused to do it. When I did take him into therapy, I was able to sit in with him, and the therapist asked him some questions. He asked him, was he angry at his father or the people? He said he was angry at the people who killed him. You know, and I think he had that right to be angry, but I just feel that he should have let it out instead of keeping it all bottled up, and by him doing that, it's leading to the problems that he's going through now. Hell.

This problem with my son that I'm having, I don't know. I had a feeling about, you know, a couple of years ago that he was doing some kind of drug. I confronted him about it. He said he was just using marijuana, but I'm not too sure about that. Now he says he's not using anything, but I can't be sure, 'cause once he leaves, I don't know what he's doing. He'll be 18 in November. I recently found out he's been playing hookie from school, so it's like he's been out of school for a year and, you know, it's hard. He's a very poor student. He's still in the ninth grade. That's stressful. Seventeen years old and in ninth grade, you know. I'm trying to do the best that I can, but it's not easy.

My other son, he's fighting with his speech impairment. He wouldn't talk for years because even my brothers, they used to tease him for his speech impairment. You know, and, so they thought he was, you know, ignorant, but, um, he's coming out of that now with the therapy.

And this past year, I've also experienced a lot of problems with my daughter. She was allegedly molested by her father. All of this has been going on for two years, but I'm just finding out about it. She had a nervous breakdown behind it. She was hospitalized three times. She's been suicidal. And, um, it's been hectic trying to deal with her and then with the rest of the children, too. It like pushed me over the edge. Even after she came out of the hospital, I mean, excuse the expression, but my daughter was a real bitch. She really was, and I knew she was hurting. She called herself punishing me.

She called herself punishing me because of what happened to her. And I tried, I always tried to leave it open to my children that they could talk to me about anything, no matter what. You know, but they just refused to talk to me. You know, so I, I would go in there and I would tell her stories about me. I'd tell her about my molestation to let her know that I can relate to her, you know, because I've been there. And she will sit there. She wouldn't say anything. I went in there and I talked to her one day for 45 minutes and I didn't get one word out of that girl.

She says, she was angry with me for a long time because I was never there for her when she was a kid, but I have tried to explain all of that to her. She don't know how difficult it was for me. I was a baby myself when I had her. Nobody taught me how to be a mother. Nobody even taught me how to be a human being when I was growing up, you know. Nobody taught me how to do this, how to be a mother, how to raise children, how to change babies. And I learned all of that because I had to do it when I was little. We had to take care of the ones smaller than us. I had to change my little brother's or sister's. You know, so that's how I know about feeding the baby, I watch people. Everything I've learned, I had to learn from watching people. I had to do it on my own. That's the only way I know how to do things.

And the whole thing with my daughter being molested brought back a lot of memories for me. And it was really painful because I had nobody to talk to. I couldn't even go to my mother and tell her that her

own sons was doing this to me. For a while last year, with all the pressures from my daughter, the stress, and I mean I was really stressed, I started drinking a little wine and a little champagne and a little liquor. And I was like, 'This is how I started this pattern before,' and I didn't want to go back that route. So then I just quit that again. I got to the point, it was like, 'I can't do this anymore. If I don't get a life for myself, I'm going to literally go crazy.' I was losing control.

One time, this was last year, I had a whole bunch of my daughter's medication that they were giving her for the depression, and I was just, like I said, I was at the urge, and I didn't know what to do with it anymore. I couldn't take it. And I was just getting ready to take a whole handful of her, what she was taking at the time, Prozac, Zoloft, and some other medication. And I was just going to take them all. My baby was at school. Nobody was home. I had the perfect opportunity, you know.

And then the phone rang, and it was like the lady that live in my building. She was like, 'Well, are you going to pick up your baby from school?' And right then and there, you know, 'cause I had the Bible in my hand. I was all set. They were in the mouth, and the phone rang. And that kind of snapped me back, you know, to reality. It's like, 'You have a baby. You have other children. You can't do this. What will happen to them?' I know, God forbid, if anything ever happened to me, I do not want my mother to raise them.

It's really difficult to try to do so much by myself. And I'm having problems with my boyfriend, too. I had an affair with a cousin of mine, and he found out about it. I told him about it, and things have never been the same between us since then. We were talking marriage a couple years ago and that didn't work and, because, me personally, I don't feel that he will ever trust me. I've caused him a lot of pain. He said that he forgives me, but I don't believe it. And with me, soon as I get upset about something, then I run off and jump into bed with somebody else. That doesn't help the situation. It's just, it's hard.

And when I went through all of this with my daughter, it brought back all of these memories, you know. When I thought that I was over all of it, I really wasn't. I just blocked it out for a while. I had just tried to get on with my life and forget about it. And I, I see my brothers, you know, and I just, I

just be afraid for them to come around me, even when we did have a little family gathering.

And I, and I know it might be wrong, but my brother has four girls of his own. You know, and I want to tell his wife, you know, 'Be careful. That might be a father, you know, but this is what he did to me.' And I, I can't do it. I cannot do it. But, like I said, I'm still afraid when he comes around. You know, and I find it hard to look him in his face.

I know the meaning of the word 'family' and I know how family is supposed to act, but I know that the family that I have is not, I wouldn't consider them a family. Family is supposed to pull together and be there for one another. But it's like, my family is like every man for themselves, you know. You got your problems; that's your business. Don't tell me about it. That's how they do it.

All the family gatherings, I'm always giving them, you know, and it's always me. I can't force them to call me, and I'm not going to keep calling them, because it's always me who's trying to bring everybody together. I have to draw the line somewhere. I can't keep doing it if they're not trying to help me do it. And I'm not going to do it anymore. And it bothers me, you know. And it was so much easier when I was using the drugs 'cause I didn't have to worry about it. You know, and that's why I was so consistent with it.

I asked Cora if she had ever been in therapy.

I was in therapy for about three years. And I found it really helpful to me. I had the whole family enrolled, because it all started with my youngest son. I know he had a problem with his speech, and the teachers thought that he had some kind of mental problem, so he was evaluated and everything. They placed him in Special Ed and they accepted him into that program, and they was like, 'In order for us to help him,' you know, in order for me to help him, I had to see a therapist, which I had no problems with because I would do anything in the world for my children.

But my therapist recently got a new job. He just left me cold. I really miss my therapist, boy. They've been trying to get me back in, but I'm just, you know, I don't want to get into a whole new relationship with another one, and then they just up and go somewhere. You know, and I really miss talking to him.

I just haven't got up the nerves yet to call him up and tell him that I want another therapy, 'cause I don't want to go through the whole evaluation thing all over again, telling the whole life story all over again. 'Cause each time you have to keep going over this and over this and, and it really, you know, I know it's helpful to talk about it, but it really, it's painful on me. That's probably why I had some few tears here because to try to just dredging it up, dredging it up, no matter how good it does me, it's painful. It's hard to deal with. It's hard to deal with.

I asked Cora about her hopes for the future.

Um, first thing, I want to do, I just want to pack up and start out on my own. Go to Virginia, find a nice little place for us to start out fresh. The apartment we have is nice. It's three bedrooms. We have a terrace, a living room, a kitchen, a bathroom and a half. The apartment is nice, but I feel that they're discriminating against me because I'm on public assistance. The whole building is run by Puerto Ricans. Everybody, I feel like everybody's apartment is getting worked on except mine. Everybody on my floor got new closets except me. Why was I the only one? You know. And I put my slip in like everybody else. Everybody was getting new sinks. I put in my slip. Why can't I get new sinks? You know, I'm not getting the proper treatment I'm supposed to be getting, being that I'm on public assistance, and I don't think that is fair.

I want to go to college and to work as a dietitian. I really do. But I think the drugs have messed up my mind to the point where I have a problem with comprehension. Um, this story that I've told you today is probably the only thing that I can actually really remember. And then not only the drugs, but it's a combination of the drugs and only focusing on the television for all those years without picking up a book and, you know, that's why it's so, probably so difficult for me now. I feel like I have to just start all over from kindergarten. I pray a lot and I ask God to help me get my memory back so that I can, you know, do the things that I'm supposed to do.

Right now, I have a little bit of talents. I know how to sew very well and make clothes for my daughter. You know, I braid hair, do the extensions, I do the geri-curls. I do a lot of things. I like to cook. I've worked as a counselor in summer youth programs. I've been there for two years. Then I

worked at McDonald's up on 181st Street. I was a home health aide. I took the training for that. I was a certified home health aide. I worked for about four months. And after my last patient died, they didn't have no more work for me, so I attempted to go back to school again, for GED preparation. And that's when all of this stuff started emerging about my daughter.

Even though I had the problems with my daughter, I still was able to complete the program. My teacher understood. I explained to her. And I still got my certificate for completion. I was going to quit, but one girl, it was the first class trip, and I heard her talking on the bus, talking to the teachers. She was like, 'I don't know what they're afraid of? There's nothing to be afraid of. You just go in there and do the best you can.' And I heard her say this, you know, and it just like did something to me, 'cause I was ready to quit. I wasn't going back after that day, 'cause I was so afraid. Then, when we got done, we were going to the museum, and the teacher started taking pictures. She said, 'Get in the picture.' You know. And it was like, 'Uh oh. I can't back out now because she have a picture of me. They might know where to find me if they come looking for me.' I mean this was going on in my head. So if the teacher wouldn't have took that picture of me and that girl wouldn't have said what she said, then I wouldn't have completed this program, you know, so.

And for my children, I hope for all of them to go to college and make something of their life and not make the same mistakes that I did. And this is what I try to instill in them now. That's why I fight so hard with them, because I don't want them to wind up on drugs and, and going through what I had to go through.

You know, and what now is bothering me, I'm trying to establish a relationship with my children, because I never had the chance to do that. I try to have special time that I spend with all of them, go to McDonald's or something and eat. And I try to do that with each one of them at individual times, you know, to just try to bring some closeness. And it's more difficult now because they are older, and they're rebelling. And I know I can't change what happened before, you know. I can only try to make things better and move on. I just try to be there for them and hope that, in spite of my neglect, that they still go on and become a better person, better than, you know, I am or I was.

Rosalita

Rosalita is a 21-year-old and of Latino descent. She has two boys, ages six and four.

I grew up on the Lower East Side and I lived with friends. My mother and father broke up when I was born. When I was born, my father wanted to have me, and my mother didn't, because she had four children from a previous marriage. So she had me and she gave me to dad and he raised me until I was 12. Then I ran away and lived with friends until I was 14, and then I got pregnant.

The relationship with my father was good. I'm his only child. He was, he was abusive, like physically, but for some reason, I loved him more than anything else in the world. Even though he hit me, it was always okay, as long as he was affectionate. My mother was not there, so I would rather have negative attention than none at all.

My mother was a drug addict, and, um, she left me, you know. I wasn't important to her because of this white powder, you know. When I was a child, I hated my mother for a long time. Even now, I, I kind of love her sometimes, but I feel a lot of anger towards her. I always wondered why didn't she want to have anything to do with me.

My father, he worked at different places, a doll factory, a hat factory. He used to take me there sometimes. I slept in one room with my father. My grandmother and grandfather slept in one room, and my two cousins slept in one room. My grandfather was an invalid. He had no legs. He stayed in the room all day and complained.

And my grandparents are crazy. When he used to go to work, he used to leave me with my grandmother. And I had long hair, down to here. It was never cut. And she used to use this little metal comb to comb my hair. And I think she used to do it on purpose, you know. I would never use an iron, metal comb. And she wouldn't comb softly. She'd go from the top of my head and just rip down, you know, like just to be mean. And she did just little things like that. I couldn't play with toys. I never had a birthday party. They didn't believe in that, not because they were religious. They were no specific religion. They just thought it was a waste of money, you know.

I had two older cousins. They were allowed to do things. I wasn't because they were boys. I couldn't play in the park, but they could. I couldn't even look out of them at the window pane. One time she saw me looking me out the window, and she pulled me by my hair, 'Why are you looking out the window, being fresh?' So it would be in the daytime. It would be 2:00 in the afternoon and I would have to sit in my room on a chair, couldn't sit on the bed because the bed was fixed, couldn't watch TV, and, you know, the windows had to be closed and the shades had to be closed.

My father was raised in an old-fashioned home and when he was young, he was poor. He lived in Puerto Rico. He didn't wear things. He didn't have shoes. And they lived in that kind of atmosphere. And they came here and assumed that things were still supposed to be that way. So when I was a kid, he always put my cousin, my older cousin's clothes on me, and he wasn't, um, you know, the type to buy me dresses and pierce my ears or what. I wasn't girlish. You know, I was very much a tomboy. I thought it was normal until I started getting older and saw everybody else wasn't living that way.

At nine or ten, my father brought home this lady one day, and he said, 'We're married. This is your stepmother.' You can't just walk in and say, 'Oh, this is your stepmother.' And I was very mean to her. She was never mean to me, you know. She was just there. I was very mean to her. I didn't accept her. In that Spanish old-fashioned way of life, the children are to be seen and not heard. And I always told him that's not my mother. You know, my mother is the bum in the street, but that's not my mother. You know. You can't just bring her in here. So I was pretty mean to her, and that made me fight even more 'cause I was getting older, I was getting more verbal.

Then we moved out, and it was a one-bedroom apartment, so my stepmother slept in one big bed with my father and he bought me like a little cot. It drove me crazy. It drove me crazy. This was his new wife. He was in love with her. He bought her gifts, you know. They kissed, they hugged. It drove me insane. She had children who she left in Santa Domingo 'cause she came here to get citizenship, and, um, he would send money over there, too, or send them gifts because they're poor over there. And it would drive me crazy because I wasn't allowed to have toys and there was no reason.

And in school, I behaved very badly. I was a horrible child at school. I was. I was always fighting with other kids and, um, mean to teachers and things like that. For a long time, when my father used to come, I used to say I deserved to be hit because I was being bad in school. But now that I have my own kids, I realize that the reason I was behaving bad was because of what was happening. My father would burn me with irons. He was the kind of person that would draw blood. He threw me down the stairs and I had calluses on my fingers because my father used to make me kneel on the floor with rice. He used to take bricks, put them on the stove to heat and put them on my hands. And I would have to be kneeling and my hands in the air, and it would burn. So all this was rough.

Personally, I feel that the system failed me. I had no immunization shots. Whose fault is that? It's my mother's fault, but it's also the system's fault. Didn't they see this when I went into the hospital? In school, when a child is cursing, screaming, hitting other kids, you would know this child has a problem. When a child comes in black and blue. I'm a nice kid. The system allowed it. I went to school this way. I went to school, you know, with bruises, with bite marks, you know, little patches of my hair missing from my head, and they never did anything. I was burned on my arm here and here. I never remember a teacher sitting me down and saying, 'What happened to you there?'

You know, so, um, when I was 12, I broke something in the house by accident, and I knew he was going to come home, and I knew I was going to get it. He used to have a whip that he had on top of the bed, hanging on a nail on the wall. He never hit me with it, but he always threatened me. So I broke something and I knew that this was going to be the time when he was going to use that. So I left, I left before he got home.

I started living with my sister. I had one sister and two brothers who were older than me. They were from the previous marriage. I would see them like once a year or something. My sister was about 18. And she was going through a rough life, too, because my mother left them also. She left them with different people. My sister was working. She paid the lady more money so that I could stay with her. And I gave her hell. I was, now that I think about it, I feel bad because she was really trying to do good for me. At the time, it was like, I finally got a little freedom, because I was always locked away,

and I just didn't know how to deal with it. I would go out, I wouldn't come home, you know, um, fighting, doing bad things at school, whatever. I couldn't take it.

During my first year in high school, I as living with my sister and my father came to see me. And I could see him downstairs. The principal says, 'Your father's here to see you.' I threw myself on the floor and I grabbed onto the desk and he had to drag me. That would tell you there is something happening there. There's a reason why this girl does not want to see her father. The principal told me, 'You don't have to go down to see him. He is never, not allowed to come in the building.' He wasn't anymore 'cause I lived with my sister. He could not come to school. But that doesn't change the fact that something happened. Find out why is she acting that way. Does this man need to be in jail? You know. Does this girl need counseling? They never said that.

When I behaved bad in school, they wouldn't call my sister. They called my boyfriend. The teacher would tell him, 'José come and get her.' He would come to the school then, which now, I think about it, and well, that is so crazy. How is the principal going to call the boyfriend of a 13-year-old to come get her instead of calling the parents? They allowed these things to happen. When I was 13, I got a garbage can and put it on fire with some books at school. They caught on fire. I never came back.

When I was 13, I also met a boy I thought I was in love with. Think this person was God and be like really in love with him and he's going to be there forever. So, my sister gave me an ultimatum. You know, she was very strong with school and what she wanted, and I chose to be with him. And, um, that's my son's father. And, um, I lived with him and his mother and father, and I took them like, as if they were my family. They were good. They were nice to me. He was good to me, but we were young. I was 13, he was 16. At 13, I was probably more mature than he was. You know, he used to always date other girls and it drove me crazy because I wanted to be a housewife, even though at 13. It's crazy but, you know, I did.

And, um, when I was pregnant for my son, I guess he started experimenting with drugs. I said, 'I don't want to have anything to do with it.' He was a real good person, it's just that drugs took over. Then when I had my son, it was like all that love I had for him went away. Like he didn't even exist then. He hadn't changed, I did. I was growing up. And, um,

the day my son was born, I looked at him through the mirror in the nursery hospital, about 3:00 in the morning, I walked to the nursery and I looked at him. And I started crying. And the nurse asked me, 'Are you okay?' And I said, 'Yeah, I'm okay.' You know. And I was crying because I was happy to finally have somebody who was mine and was not going to leave and who was not going to be bad to me. And I promised him that I was going to make his life much better than mine. And I have been trying to do that.

Before I had my son. Before I had him, I was always taking drugs or whatever. I wanted to kill myself, but I didn't know how. I would think about jumping into the river, but I thought that it was too dirty. It's so stupid, but it's the truth, I wanted to wait. If I would have had sleeping pills on hand, I probably would have done it. Every day, as a matter of fact, for a time I would be thinking about it. Then during my pregnancy, my son started kicking me in my stomach and I said, 'I can't do that anymore 'cause who's going to take care of him?' There were certain times when, even after he was born, when I didn't have places to stay, there were many times where I said, 'This is it. That's it. I'm going to do it.' And I'd think of him and I'd go, 'Who am I going to lose him to? Nobody's going to take care of him.' But I thought about that a lot.

My mother passed away when I was 15. I was six months pregnant. She was shooting up for the first time, and I guess she didn't know how to do it. So they found her on the floor. She was in a coma for a couple of months and she died from that. But I think she had AIDS at the same time. I'm not sure. The doctor never told me. I never asked. She was young, forty-five. I think it was not good that she's dead, but I think she's better than the way she was. My mother had a good big family. She was like the black sheep, you know, out on the street peddling money, when it wasn't necessary. She was an educated person, unlike my father who was raised with poor people. My mother wasn't. She was educated, beautiful.

There was a funeral. And I told my sister, 'I'm going to meet you there at 9:00 a.m.' And I went there but my sister wasn't in the room. They opened the casket and I started talking to my mother and looked at her head. And one minute I was talking to her, and then I started crying. The next minute I was hitting her hand. And I said, 'How can you do this to me?' I was six months pregnant. The next thing I know, my sister wakes me up. I'm laying on the floor next to the casket. She told me that I passed out.

She said that my lips were like white, you know, blue. I guess I, you know, passed out or whatever, which I do often. I faint a lot. When I'm pregnant, when I'm hot and frustrated, I do. And, um, you know, I, I don't know why. I wish that she was alive just so that I could tell her, 'I'm sorry,' because she did a lot of mean things, you know, by abandoning me, but I did a lot of mean things, too.

When I lived on the first floor with my son's father, they used to have a drug stop, young guys getting it. My mother would go there high and they would wake me up and call me. 'Your mother's over there.' Run down, slippers and a nightgown, you know, 14, just in the nightgown, go and grab her by the hair, 'cause that's where I used to grab, grab her hair and drag her out of there. I was trying to save her, but I didn't do it in a nice way. I was, you know, I was mean with her. I was just mad at her, but she embarrassed me. It's hard being 13, 14, and your mother, she'd walk by me and wouldn't see me. We would bump into each other. She'd go, 'Oh, I'm sorry,' like you were walking next to a stranger and you bump them. And I would have to shake her and go, 'Hey, it's me.' She'd be like, 'Oh, hi.'

You know, all my friends would be watching in the car. And it would disgust me. It would drive me crazy, you know. It would drive me crazy. She would know that she was not normal, that she got this sickness, because that is a sickness. She was awful. I blame myself for that, but then I can't blame myself because she didn't teach me, you know. She never helped me. How am I going to help her? She never hit me, never. I wish she did 'cause it would have been some kind of reaction. You know, she was always going to a party. 'Yeah, I gotta go.' And it's like my father couldn't help me. This is my mother. This is me. We look the same, you know.

At my mother's funeral, my uncle, her brother, I told him that I was pregnant. And he comes and tells me, he said that I was nothing and that how dare I even get pregnant, that I'm just like my mother. My mother's casket is laying right next to me. And it really hurt me that he said that because at the time, it made me feel like I was nothing. But now I look at it and I go, 'I am something.' He's nothing because I was a kid and you should have been taking care of me. If I hadn't been on the street, you know, I wouldn't have been pregnant. How many 13-year-olds are living in the street and keep going to school and doing it right there? No, there is no such thing. You know. So, not that I'm blaming them, you know, but had it

been my niece or one of my nephews, and I have a big house or whatever, and I knew that my sister was on drugs, it would be my job to take care of them, which they didn't.

I was always considered homeless because I was from house to house. I didn't have a job. I received public assistance and, you know, paid money here and there for different people to stay in their room, in an extra room. It would last a month or so, and then, of course, they'd make me move on. No matter how friendly you are with someone, after a while, they don't want you there. I'd be here all day if I told you how many places I lived. I just lived here for a couple weeks, lived there for couple weeks. People were nice to me, but it always ended up that it was temporary. 'Oh, you know I like you a lot, but you can't stay.' I was always sleeping on a couch, which drove me crazy because now I had a baby. It was unfair to my baby, you know, to live that way.

So, I went, from guy to guy also, 'cause you always look for this certain guy who's going to change your life, which really is never going to happen. Boys. You meet all these boys and you think you love them. They're going to take care of you. They buy me clothes or whatever. Girlfriends, you know, mothers of the girlfriends were nice to me. Odd jobs here and there. 'Take this to this,' you know, 'I'll give you a couple of dollars.' Little things like that. Things I shouldn't be doing, but, you know, when you're hungry, you're hungry. You need money so you do it.

One or two boyfriends were physically abusive, and it was because a lot of times they knew I had nothing, so they felt that I had to take it from them because they were taking care of me. I was theirs, you know. And, um, some of them, two of them, felt that they had the right to hit me or whatever. Some of them hit me hard. One boyfriend was kind of psychotic. He penciled my name on his chest. And we weren't even that serious and he would follow me and things like that. Sometimes he would get rough and he would try to grab me and forcefully, um, 'we're going to' whatever. Once he did and, um, we had a big fight in his house, and his mother came in. She saw blood all over the wall. She thought it was mine. It was his! You know, I smashed up his head or whatever. I left. He never did it again because he saw that I was not going to allow that. I would never be weak. That was one thing. You know, I'd stay with them because I needed to, but that wasn't, that didn't mean I was going to let them do whatever they wanted. You know,

I was a really strong girl. Thank God I never had any sexual abuse. That would have led me to murder and then I'd be getting interviewed from inside a cell.

I left for Florida for three months. I went to live over there with a sister-in-law. My brother who passed away, his wife, I went to live with her. She was living in a hotel. She had five kids. She was very nice to me. But it was like I was a burden. She had two jobs, five children in a small hotel room, and here I came with my baby. But she was very good to me, you know. I was her daughter, too. You know, she was very good to me. She loved my son. But it wasn't fair, you know. We had a hot plate to cook on. And the thing is when I left, she begged me not to leave. She begged me not to leave and I told her that it was not fair. I didn't have any money coming in. She would buy my son Pampers and his milk, his clothes and stuff like that. And I said, 'There's no way I'm going to stay, me and the baby, makes seven for you.' So, um, I came back to the city.

When I was 16, I met my second son's father, Louis. And, um, he was 24 I think, 24 or 25, and we started seeing each other, whatever. He doesn't take drugs, you know, he worked. He was much more together. And, um, things worked out. I had a son from him. And, um, he wanted to take care of me and I didn't let him. I said, 'It's not because you weren't good to me or whatever,' but I, I felt that I couldn't keep looking for someone to take care of me. So finally I hit 18, which is old enough to go into the shelter system, and I did. And I told him, 'If you want to wait for me to get my apartment, we can be together, but if you don't, then you don't, you know, because I have to do this for me and I want something better for my son, not with any help from any man so they can take it away later.' And, um, he did, he stood by me for that year. You know, now we're still together.

I went to the EAU. That's where you wait until they place you. And that place is hell. There's a lot of people fighting over seats, cigarettes, 'the way you looked at me,' you know, simple things. When I went in, I was afraid. Louis was hysterical crying and I was afraid. I couldn't cry. I was too scared to cry. He saw his newborn. He was begging me to leave and I said, 'No.' And he cried that whole night. He didn't want to be there. He didn't want me to be there. Um, I stayed there for one night. My son was two months-old. The other was two years old. And, um, we sat, I sat on one chair, and I didn't want

to fight with anybody, so I sat all my children on my lap. Then the next day, they put me in a hotel.

I was there for one year. It was one room, near LaGuardia Airport. It's a regular hotel where people go, you know, to stay the night. It was two buildings and one was people who were homeless and one was regular people just wanting to stay. In the sense that at least this was my bed and I had a key to this little room, and I had steady water coming in and food, it was better. It was clean, it was warm and the kids had a bed. It was better, but I couldn't stand it. It was one room. There was a bathroom in the room. A dresser, a television and a baby crib. No cooking facilities, which, with a newborn and a two-year-old, I don't know what they were thinking. You couldn't have a hot plate. If you did, you got thrown out. I got one so I would cook secretly or whatever 'cause what I was going to do, give them coldcuts every day? You know, that's impossible.

In order to get to anywhere, I would have to take a bus and a train. You know, which is like impossible. You don't have any money. Most of the time, you're eating out. So, you know, it was hard for me. I had no money, the noise, the fighting, the dirt around. My room was clean, but still, you know, everyone's was dirty.

Every day Louis was there. He would go stay with his grandmother and he would come. Sometimes he'd stay there, but, um, there was a guard there, whatever, security, and he had to go to school, whatever. But he came every day. After school, he came straight over. He'd go bring food from his house, and, um, we would, I would leave every day. 'I'm going to come in the morning, let's leave. I'm going to pick you up early so you don't have to be there all day,' which is what I try to do. Leave and just stay there at night to sleep.

I had just moved in. It was like a week since I moved in. I was the only light-skinned person. Most of them were sort of dark people. And the lady knocks on my door and she's like, 'Somebody called last night and cursed me out in Spanish and I know it was you.' I was the only Spanish person in the building. I was like, I put my kids in the room, locked the door so no one could come in from the outside and I told her, 'You know very well that I didn't call you. This is an excuse for you to talk to me or for you to start something.' I came here because I don't have a place to live and I want a place to live, not to argue with you, not to become your friend, not for any trouble,

you know. I just spoke to her very calmly for a second and then turned around and opened the door. I guess she expected a reaction, there would have been a fight, whatever. That's not what I was there for, you know. And, um, it was sickening. It was sickening.

The people there, you know, some of them act crazy. If you were to live there, you would think the stereotype, they live just like the stereotype. They are pigs. They are always fighting. They were always screaming. And I'm Hispanic. I don't live that way, you know. But certain people mess it up for everybody. They would fight over the stupid things. There was a woman who lived next door to me who had a newborn same age as my baby, and she would ask me for formula all the time. It's like three dollars a can. And the first time, I gave it to her. The second time, I gave it to her. She's got a newborn. What am I going to say, 'No'? You know. But then it got to the point where I was like, 'No.' She has three kids which means she gets to use more money than I do. There's no reason why her child shouldn't have. And, um, I, one day I told her, 'No.' And her baby cried that whole day and into the night, that night. And then I knocked on the door and I gave her the milk, but I told her, 'Don't ever knock on my door again.' I said, 'You're trash and garbage. I can't believe you're going to let your baby cry like that.' She had water in the bottle. The baby's two or three months-old. I couldn't stand it either. I cried all the time when I was living there.

When they called me for my interview for housing, I was so happy. And they showed me to my apartment and I went into the bathroom and I started jumping up and down. And I came out and I was like, 'Yeah, I'll take it.' You know, really calmly, 'Yeah, I'll take it.' And it's the projects. It's no major thing, but it's better than living there.

Now that I'm not there, it went by so fast. It went by so fast. It was worth it. It was the best thing I ever did. The shelter, it's the easiest way to get an apartment. If I didn't have my own place, I'd be doing bad things, staying from house to house, being with different people, you know, making money in the street, doing little things here and there. I had to, you know. I don't have to any more. I have security. And now that I have my own place, I don't need to do those things because I'm secure. It's just the fact of having my own, like one step.

Louis stood by me for that year. You know, now we're still together. We struggle, whatever. I'm

very independent. What's mine is mine. And a lot of what happened to me when I was young has affected me, the way I am with men. Sometimes I think this is the right person. I can see myself 60, you know, being 60 years and with him, but a lot of times I make it hard on him.

I'm moody. I either cry or get very angry. Sometimes I, I cry for no reason. Or actually, it's not for no reason, but I'm like 'It's over, why am I still crying?' And sometimes I'll think about my mother and, um, I'll cry or I'll be angry. You know, why didn't she love me? Sometimes I hate her. Sometimes I love her. I wish my kids had a grandma. All kids need grandma. Some days I'm, some days I feel like I'm 12, like a little girl and some days I feel like a woman now.

I just get angry. It could be the simplest thing. Something major can happen, and I'll be like, 'That's okay.' And then it could be, it could be spilled milk, and I'll go through the roof and I'll be ready to explode. You know, and sometimes I do. My son's father tells me, 'I'm going to have send you to Bellevue. You know, when you get older, we're going to have you locked up somewhere 'cause you're going crazy.' I'll just get an attitude and I don't want anybody next to me. I'm like throwing things. Or insomnia, I don't sleep. I stay up at night. Or like I clean. I'm very clean. You know, if my house is spotless, you know I've been angry, because I clean on top of what of I clean. You know, if I know there are dishes in the sink, other people would relax, it would drive me crazy. It could be one cup, and I'll be like, 'That cup shouldn't be there.'

I was doing it with my son and I stopped, like when he first started writing in school. He was just learning his alphabet and it was like, 'You have to write this A this way.' And I, you know, I would look at it, 'This is crazy.' He's supposed to write sloppy. He's supposed to write like a little kid does. And, um, even now in his class, he writes better than everybody because I think I pushed him so hard. But I don't want to push him hard. I want him to feel carefree. You know, I don't want him to be like that. So I, I stopped myself from doing it.

I think I got lucky with Louis because he's patient, you know. When he sees that I'm in a bad mood, he takes the boys and takes them to the park, to the movies. They go to the movies on weekends. Every Sunday, he takes my son to baseball. He's the kind of man, he cooks, he cleans. You know, I got friends

with babies and their, their boyfriends never cook, never clean. It's the girl's job to change Pampers, things like that. When my babies were little, he changed their Pampers. He wakes up at night, you know. He cleans the bathtub, he dresses them. He's not like a pig. No offense, but a lot of men, especially in these neighborhoods, they have this attitude of what a woman should be and what a man should be. And he's nothing like that. I was lucky to find him because if I would have found someone who was into doing bad things, they could have dragged me down with them. It's easy to be dragged down.

He works for a law firm, in the library. He wants to be a lawyer. He's got two years of college and he has goals. He wants to be married. I don't want to be married. Actually I know I'll be with him for a long time, but I don't want to marry him and then end up divorced. I want to marry him. I think I deserve a white wedding even though I didn't wait, but I think I deserve it. I think every woman should have that. So I want to do it when I'm a little older and I know this is the person I'm going to be with. I don't want to marry him to divorce and find somebody else.

We have a normal relationship. We're like, you know, 'Leave it to Beaver' on TV. Dumb. I do everything the way you grow up watching people on TV and you always say, 'I wish my life was like that,' I do that with them. I don't remember ever getting a book read to me. My kids get a book read every night. And if I can't read them a book, he does. If he can't, I have a Fisher Price radio, I buy blank tapes and I record stories and songs. I read to them and I sing to them, so when I can't do it, I put the tape recorder on and they can hear my voice, and it puts them to sleep. You know, just little things like that.

And I'm very protective of my kids. And in a way it's good, but in a way it's bad. My sons can't go to school a whole day without me being there. You know, I, I have to be in the building, which is insane. The first year of my son's school, I stood in his class. I'm still in the building. You know. And then, um, I would do odd jobs outside of the building, but I had to be there some time of the day to check on them. I have to take him because I have to see him open his classroom door. You know, and if his father was to pick him up, which is rarely, I'm like this until, you know, he walks in the door. The first day they went to camp, the bus and drove away, and I'm hysterical. Hysterical crying or whatever. My girlfriends who

work here are in the bus laughing at me because they know that I'm overprotective. I have to let them breathe.

My thing is that, sometimes, like now, with the school, I see other kids with problems. There's a little girl about ten years-old, a pretty thing, and no one in the school wants anything to do with her. So I'll go over to where she is. And the teachers say, 'Why are you helping her?' I say, 'Because she will remember that one person who helped her,' because I remember that. I remember everyone who was mean to me and I remember that one or two, you know, people who were kind of like, 'She'll remember this. There's reasons why she's acting this way. No child acts this way for no reason.'

I walk down streets, you know, the kids call me by my name. They all know me. And my son loves it. He's so proud to walk down the street with his momma, which I love that, you know. I didn't have that and I love that he has that. A kid gets hurt in school, I clean their cuts. They make mistakes. In the classroom, we have change of clothes for them, so I come down and I change their clothes and brush their hair, and sew buttons on for these little kids.

I asked Rosalita if she had any contact with her family-of-origin.

My sister is like me. She has a job, she goes home, she's a good mom. But my brothers are, one was killed in prison and he, one is in prison now and the other one is on drugs. So I don't have anything to do with them. So it's just me and my kids and my sister. That's my family. I have aunts and uncles. I have very, I have a big family actually. But I don't have anything to do with them. They bring me down. They think very little of me. They live upstate, or Florida. They all own houses.

I hadn't seen my stepmother again until my mother's funeral. She came to the funeral. And she kissed me and she said that, um, although we couldn't, me and her, that we couldn't be friends, she was sorry that my mother had died. You know, and every now and then, she'll call and we'll talk.

And my father asked me now, 'cause I see him every now and then, he asked me why didn't I ever accept her. And I told him I, I, I needed my mother and it made me angry that she wasn't there, but it

made me more angry that he tried to pick someone else. I'd rather have been alone than have somebody else, you know, just out of the blue, the way he did it.

And we talk sometime, and it's funny because my father was the kind of man who never spanked me lightly. He was the kind of person that would draw blood. And now, we went to the Bronx Zoo last summer and my son caught a tantrum and was telling him, 'Don't tell me what to do, you're not my father.' Had it been me, to do that to him at, you know, that age, my son's five last summer, he would have probably split my head open in the park. He told my son, 'You don't talk to me like that.' He did this to my son's hand, you know, he tapped it lightly. When he first went to my son, I thought he was going to hit him. Like I like thought back. And I said, 'If he hits him, I'm going to jump on him.' And then it happened, and he just tapped his hand and said, 'You don't talk to me that way.'

And I went home thinking this is not the same man that I grew up with. Had it been me, forget it. You know, I would have came home blue. And I told him that. I said, you know, 'Do you remember those things?' He really doesn't like to talk. He acts like it never happened. But he, he knows. He said, 'Well, it's not my son, and I don't want you to get mad.' I was so happy that he didn't hurt my son. You know, but I was surprised. I didn't expect it. I guess with age you learn those mistakes. I wish he would have learned a long time ago.

But, you know what, too? Now that we're adults and we spoke, sometimes I bring conversation out. He tells me what my grandparents did to him, and it's like ten times worse than what he did to me. And they like, it was not like he did it because he was cruel. He did it because he thought that was the way things should be. You know, and you just learn in time that that's not the way things should be. So, I, I try sometimes, I forgive a lot of what he did because I can imagine, and he lived in a house with like 11 kids and poor in a little shack. You know, they go there in Puerto Rico, they have to go behind other people's houses and steal fruit from the tree and things like that.

He comes to my house now and he sees things and he still has somewhat old fashioned values because a lot of the things he sees, he says they're not necessary. He go to my son's room, it's like out of a catalogue. You know, they have everything, all you can possibly imagine. They have cars, they have

dinosaurs on the wall, toys on the floor. My bedroom, it has nothing. It's a bed, a dresser and a mirror. And their bedroom has everything. They have TV, VCR. They're going to have everything, you know, even if they don't need it, they going to have it just because.

So he comes in the house and he's like, 'I can't believe that, you know, they have all this.' But I think they deserve it. I mean you only have one life and life is so short, and I have so many things happen to children every day that, you know, we're lucky when we got those one or two left that lead good lives. You know, I fight sometimes in the house or whatever, but they have a pretty good life. I think so. And other people tell me. Like family members now, sometimes I talk to them now and they tell me that, um, I didn't turn out anything like what they expected. And that's their way of complimenting me. It's kind of an insult because they expected me to be trash, but then it's kind of a compliment because they see that, you know, I'm doing good and that's what they're saying.

I asked Rosalita about her hopes for the future.

In five years I see myself in college. I started school last semester for my GED. I loved it. You know, I walked in, I said, 'I love it.' Ten years ago when I was in school, I sat in the back of the class and never wanted to speak. And now, when I went to school, I sat in the front seat and my hand was always up in the air. The teacher would tell me, 'You have to give everybody else a chance.' I haven't been learning anything but reading, writing, regular stuff now 'cause I'm just in the beginning. So it's really basic. But it's just the thing of sitting there and reading a book and being able to. And the thing is when I was young, um, the teacher used to tell me all the time, 'You're so bright, but just out of control.' And everything comes to me like this (snaps fingers). I love it. I sit there and, I love it 'cause I know the answers. You know, I read and it's like, it's good for me.

And then now, they hired me for tutoring, two hours a day. To little first graders, in my son's school. And the photography studio, they want me working days. But I'm not sure, because if I start working a job, I might get comfortable there and never go to school. So I might just work the two hours a day and go to school. If I were to work, I really don't have a good education and I'd be there for a little while or I'd be there for the rest of my life

in this dead-end job. If I stay in school, then when I get off public assistance, it will be forever. I want to be a vet.

Hopefully, I'll move from where I am 'cause I really don't like where I am. I don't like these tenement buildings. There's a lot of drugs and stuff. I want my kids to have a back yard while they can still enjoy it. And hopefully my mood swings will get better, which they do every year. I get better at it every year. It's taken me longer to get on my feet, but I am.

CHAPTER III

THE PAST

A goal of this investigation was to better understand women's experiences of homelessness through an examination of their past. In the following chapter, major themes that emerged from the 24 women's stories about the past are elucidated. These themes, divided into the two broad categories of childhood and adulthood, are discussed relatively briefly as each is fleshed-out in considerable detail in the six narratives that comprise Chapter II.

Childhood

Each of the women interviewed spoke about her childhood at some length. With few exceptions, the women described childhoods that seemed filled with a great deal of unhappiness and instability. Three broad themes emerged from the women's stories about their childhood: poverty, neglect and abuse.

Poverty

All but one of the mothers I interviewed grew up poor. Some had parents who worked at low-paying jobs while others were raised on public assistance or in the care of poor relatives. The women's descriptions of poverty varied considerably. For example, several of the women talked about having to work at a very young age. Juanita said that starting at age 11, she worked several hours every day

doing the laundry and cleaning at a convent in Puerto Rico. "They had me like a slave," she recalled. Similarly, Grace described picking cotton in the South for eight hours a day beginning at age nine. She also described living with her 13 siblings in a house that lacked indoor plumbing and remembered being especially happy when Christmas came because her and her siblings would "each get a dollar." She added, "I didn't get nothing on my birthday. We lacked for so much, you know."

None of the women interviewed indicated that they experienced hunger as a result of poverty (although some said that they experienced hunger as a result of neglect or abuse). Many of the women, however, did talk about not having decent clothes as children as a result of their poverty. Candice, for example, described feeling badly about herself because peers at school would make fun of her for wearing hand-me-downs. She recalled once stealing some money from her father so she could buy a new outfit. "I got the worst beating of my life," she said. "But it was worth it 'cause we had new shoes that wasn't hurting our feet plus we had clothes. But it was rough." Similarly, Tracy commented: "When I was a child, you know, I never had the clothes. I've always had to do without. I never had really good things. All I ever wanted was to wear nice clothes, so that when I went to school, I would feel good about myself."

Another aspect of poverty that many of the women spoke about was inadequate housing. Many described growing up in dilapidated and/or overcrowded dwellings and moving around a great deal as a result. Vivian, for example, described five different overcrowded apartments in a single two-year period. Likewise, Carla recalled sharing a two-bedroom apartment for several years with seven relatives, including an uncle and a sister's boyfriend. She eventually moved to a one-bedroom apartment which she shared with four relatives. "But it was all right," she remarked, "'cause it was all ladies."

There were a few women for whom poverty seemed somewhat less harsh, but even they expressed a sense that they could take little for granted. Wilhemina, for example, talked about how much she appreciated the fact that she had her own room and enough food to eat when she was growing up. Likewise, Donna spoke about the way her grandmother spoiled her with "up-to-date sneakers and jeans," and by giving her a pair of fancy earrings when she turned 13. "Now mind you," she added, "we are Black people. We're not supposed to have no damn diamond earrings at no 13 years old."

Neglect

All of the women talked about their relationships with their parents. While some described relationships with either their mother or father in positive terms, a majority

described feeling neglected by one or both of their parents. Many also witnessed domestic violence in their parents' relationships.

Only about one-fourth of the women grew up with fathers who lived in the same household as them. Some, like Harriet and Teresa, indicated that they had never met their fathers. Most said they saw their father's only occasionally and described very troubled relationships.

Many of the women said that their relationships with their fathers were often severely complicated by their fathers' drug or alcohol abuse. Sarah remembered visiting her father in another state when she was about 12. "He didn't remember who I was," she said. "It was kinda sad 'cause he was into drinking. He would drink his liquor, heavy, heavy, so it messed up his liver. It ate it away and stuff like that."

Several of the women also expressed resentment over the fact that their fathers never supported their family financially or otherwise. Crystal spoke of having "one of them on-and-off relationships" with a father who worked regularly but would not help out his family. "He didn't really like me," she said. "He didn't used to want to buy me nothing or give me nothing, you know. I felt bad about that as I was coming up."

No matter how troubled the relationship, almost all of the women expressed a feelings of sadness and longing with regard to their fathers. Tracy, for example, commented:

Um, it was somewhat of a dysfunctional family. There were seven kids. The only one who has the same father in my mother's house is myself and my other two brothers. That's what I mean, it was a broken down house. My mother was always there, but, you know, we didn't have a father figure. I've always felt that if my father was there, it would have been more of a stable household, you know, as in the money, moneywise, you know, schoolwise. I think just my father would have kept everything on line, you know, want to know who I'm dating and who I am, you know what I mean?

Several women described relationships with their mothers that seemed relatively positive. Pam, for example, talked of having a very close relationship with her mother which continues to this day; others, such as Elaine and Sarah, suggested that there were often conflicts in their relationships with their mothers but that overall they admired their mothers' strength and efforts to raise them properly.

Many women, however, described relationships with their mothers that seemed quite distant and painful. Some described their mothers as emotionally detached for reasons that they were still trying to understand. Others talked about mothers who were absent due to problems involving drug abuse. Alma, for example, described when she was 12, finding her mother on the street one day, skinny and wearing a disguise: "I said 'Ma.' But she didn't even know who I was. I say, just because she's using drugs, she should know who her own kids is, but she didn't know. So I started crying."

Almost all of the women who described troubled relationships with their mothers simultaneously expressed a great deal of sadness and longing. Carla, for example,

said: As far as me seeing my mother from I think from 11 on up, it was just like she was never there. It just started when my mother was just like hanging out, being in the street all of the time. I was with my grandmother for nine years. And then my mother died when I was 19. I think of my mother a lot. And, um, I'm just lost. Once you lose your mother, that's it.

For a number of women, their relationship with their parents was complicated by the presence of domestic violence. The type of violence the women described ranged from an occasional physical altercation in which both parents were fighting one another to frequent wife battering of a very severe nature. Candice, for example, commented, "I remember my father kicking my mother's butt for breakfast, lunch and dinner" and talked about seeing her mother go into premature labor after being repeatedly hit in the head. Several women described their feelings of fear and helplessness at such times and their efforts to intervene: "I used to be a little girl and get on the phone and call the cops," Alma recalled. "'Hurry up because he's fighting my mother again.'"

Many of the women's relationships with their parents were also greatly complicated by the presence of childhood abuse, which is discussed in the following section.

Abuse

One of the most common themes in the women's narratives was the experience of childhood abuse. A majority of the women were physically and/or sexually assaulted as children. The nature of this abuse varied. Some were beaten by siblings or other relatives. Edie, for example, remembered being assaulted in many different ways by her brothers, cousins and an aunt when she was growing up in Jamaica. She described having her arm broken and also being set on fire with kerosene. "I've been through the worst of the worse," she concluded.

Other women were beaten by their parents. In many cases, drugs or alcohol were described as a factor. Wilhemina, for example, talked about her mother's cocaine habit and the beatings with "extension cords, shoes and broomsticks, anything that was in her reach." Candice was beaten by her father. "My father used to kick our ass too," she said. "One time he got drunk and hit one of my sisters with a brick. There ain't no excuse to bust no child in the head, but he did it."

Many women described a history of sexual abuse. Leslie shared her memories of her brother coming into her room and assaulting her beginning in pre-adolescence. She said that one of the reasons that she got pregnant as a teenager was in the hopes that it would make him stop. Others described being sexually assaulted by their stepfathers or mother's boyfriends. Teresa recalled:

My childhood. It was bad. I was, um, I was raped when I was five. By my stepfather, all the way up to 10. This man, he destroyed my youth; he stole my virginity. He stole everything. He did it, he raped me on Christmas. I didn't believe in holidays, 'cause it happened on holidays. Every day. He took me as a woman every day. He did penetration on me. He did everything in the book. My mother was in the living room, he was already finger-popping me in the kitchen. He was disgusting. I could tell you everything, but I don't want to get into it. But you could name what he done.

Still others were sexually abused by strangers.

Crystal described the ordeal of being brutally raped when she was 16. She talked about her memory of being abducted in the park by two men who kept her in a workshed for over eight hours. She said that after they finished they gave her a piece of paper with some phone numbers and suggested that she consider becoming a prostitute. "It bothered me a whole lot," she said. "Afterwards, it was hard to let a boy touch me or something like that, you know."

At least in part as a result of their experience of abuse and/or neglect, a number of women described trying to kill themselves when they were very young. Candice described taking 50 aspirins at age 10, in part, she said because she was desperate for her mother to pay some attention to her. Leslie, who had been sexually assaulted by her brother, described cutting her wrists and trying to overdose with pills at age 15. "I was just through with it," she commented. Juanita talked about trying to kill herself on three separate occasions because she had been abandoned by her mother and abused by relatives with whom she was living in Puerto Rico: "The first time I put a

rope around the closet. Then another time, I drink some pills. And last time I drink Clorox."

A number of women also talked about running away from home in order to escape abuse. Wilhemina, for example, described her experiences of "running from pillar to post" to avoid her mother's beatings. She lived on the streets and subways on-and-off for nearly two years. She said that sometimes she wasn't sure which was worse, her mother's cruelty or "not knowing where you were going to sleep the next night and where you were going to eat."

Adulthood

There was a substantial amount of continuity between the women's stories of childhood and adulthood. Virtually all of the women described an adulthood that seemed filled with a great deal of unhappiness and instability. Poverty continued to be a major theme, as did troubled interpersonal relationships, in this case primarily with adult partners. These relationships were often filled with domestic violence.

Poverty

Virtually all of the women I interviewed continued to struggle with poverty as adults. Many of the women indicated that they used what few resources they had to provide food for their families and to pay household utility bills. They indicated that they rarely had sufficient resources for new clothing, transportation and

other essentials. Many of the women also talked about overcrowded or inadequate housing conditions. Crystal, for example, described living for several years in a very overcrowded four-bedroom apartment where she cared for her five children and eight grandchildren. "I ain't going to tell you it wasn't hard when 13 kids was living with me," she said. "'Cause yes, it was."

Many women talked about moving around a great deal looking for a better life for themselves and their children. Grace, for example, described going back and forth between Alabama, New York and Tennessee over a 10-year period. She spoke of losing one apartment after another because she couldn't support herself and her children on public assistance or the temporary, low-paying work she was able to find. At three different times during our interview, she mentioned how sad she was that every time she moved she had to leave behind many of her possessions because she could not afford to move them: "To me, I have a hard life because of all the different places I have been with me and my children," she said. "I tell them, 'We keep moving around like this, we'll never have nothing.'"

Intimate Relationships

All of the women talked about intimate relationships in some detail. With few exceptions, these relationships appeared to be a source of considerable pain and unhappiness. Edie, for example, described a relationship

with her husband that was "okay for awhile" but then quickly deteriorated when he began to cheat on her and invite friends into the house who would try and force her to have sex with them.

Candice described a series of disappointing adult relationships. Her first was at 17, with a man with whom she had five children and two miscarriages within a five-year period. "My husband didn't give me no time to breath," she said. "He was making these babies but he didn't want these babies, because he never did nothing for my five children." Candice was subsequently involved with a man who went to jail for life for murder, and later entered into an 11-year relationship with another man, with whom she had a son. This relationship ended when he left Candice for her younger sister. Candice remarked:

And I've been thinking of ways that I can murder both of them without doing any time in jail. And I went to my sister and I told her, I said, 'Listen. Everything is cool. We blood. You know, I'm going to love you regardless.' But the hurt, I'm the one that got to walk around with the hurt inside of me. (Cries.) I'm like, damn, it seemed like as soon as I think everything is going all right, here come a blow.

Many of the women experienced a great deal of domestic violence as adults. A few of the women described mutual fighting with their partners. "Every time we used to fight," Alma said, "I used to pick up a knife and I would cut him. My mother would say it ain't gonna stop before one of us get really hurt." Most of the women, however, talked about being battered by their partners. Crystal, for example, described how her husband began to steal from

her and beat her on a regular basis after they had children and he began smoking crack. Juanita was also severely beaten by her ex-husband. She described part of her ordeal as follows:

Every Friday, Saturday, any time, he used to like get mad with the television, my children's father used to come for me. I didn't know what was happening to him. But I was real scared. He broke my nose, he injured my back, everything. I used to see him coming, I used to shake. And he used to grab me running down the stairs and push me and beat me up. I used to go to the doctor in the ambulance. It was very severe. I had three miscarriages because of it.

The violence and infidelity many of the women experienced in their intimate relationships was invariably the source of a great deal of despair and anger. Sarah, for example, described "getting sick" every time she would discover that her husband was cheating on her again. She said she often thought of leaving him but was reluctant because her husband had convinced her that no one would want her and their four children. She talked about putting the barrel of her husband's unlicensed gun in her mouth on multiple occasions.

Wilhemina also talked about how much she was hurt by her husband's infidelity. She said that at one point, when she was eight months pregnant, she saw her husband kissing another woman on the street corner. She ran home and got a butcher knife. "I don't know where it comes from," she said. "I was knocking guys that were like 180 pounds out of my way so I could get to him. They had to grab me all at once, 'cause if I got him, I probably would have ripped his

heart out with my bare hands. That's all I could think about was rage."

CHAPTER IV

HOMELESSNESS AND THE PRESENT

In this chapter, information about the women's experiences of homelessness and of their lives since leaving the shelter system is presented. All of the women described their experience of family homelessness in some detail, including events that precipitated their entry into the shelter system. The amount of time that the women were homeless ranged from five to 36 months, with the average being approximately 13 months. Three of the women had been homeless more than once.

Homelessness: Precipitating Events

The events that precipitated each woman's entry into the shelter system varied a great deal. Several lost their apartments due to fire or dangerous living conditions. Edie, for example, described living for a long period of time in a building with shaky stairs and in an apartment with holes in the ceiling. She entered the shelter system when authorities condemned her building.

Many women and their children were already doubled-up with friends or relatives before entering the shelter system. Elaine, for example, described losing her apartment after she and her daughter's father split up. Before entering the shelter system, however, she first stayed as long as she could with a girlfriend and then with her mother. Others, had never had an apartment of their

own to begin with. Wilhemina, for example, said that she had been living with her family-of-origin all along but had to leave when her mother's drug habit became so bad that it was unsafe for her and her children.

Others sought shelter due to domestic violence. Rolanda described leaving her apartment after being stalked by her children's father. "He was a Vietnam veteran and he had gone off the beam," she said. "I don't know what he had in his mind, but it was like a real very scary existence. My life was in danger." Likewise, Teresa sought shelter after being battered by her husband for more than two years. "One night," she explained, "I couldn't take it anymore. So I spoke to my son. And he says, 'Mommy, let's pack up and let's go.' So we left to a shelter."

The Shelter Experience

Almost all of the women went with their children to an Emergency Assistance Unit (EAU) in order to obtain a referral to a shelter. (The EAU's are described in some detail in Chapter I.) For most women, the EAU was the worst part of their experience of homelessness. Leslie's experience was typical:

We went to the EAU to start. Oh man, that was all messed up. It was like all these people there, you know. You had to sleep on the chairs. We stayed there for like two nights. And if you move out of your seat, somebody take your seat, so then you have to lay on the floor. You know, you see teenagers laying in the baby cribs, 'cause they had like kind of big cribs for a couple babies to sleep in. I would

cry at night time while my daughter would sleep. It was, whew! It makes me want to cry now just thinking about 'cause, you know, I didn't want to put her through that.

Once placed in a shelter, a majority of women described their experience in relatively positive terms. They talked about feeling safe, and of decent, comfortable living accommodations. The experience of having their own room(s), often with a private bathroom and cooking facilities were amenities that many women discussed at length and with considerable enthusiasm. Crystal, for example, described her experience in the shelter system as "great." "It was great because I had gotten to the point where I was tired of my family," she said. "So me and my kids lived great without people coming to see me. It was two bedrooms, one for the kids and one for myself. We all lived good."

While some of the women said that they kept to themselves in the shelters, others said that they made new friends and found the support of other residents to be extremely valuable. Many of the women also indicated that they found the shelter staff to be very helpful and expressed gratitude for their care and support.

For many of the younger women in particular, the shelter gave them what they described as their first taste of independence and security. Wilhemina's description was typical:

I had like a lot of trouble trying to actually go to the shelter because of the stories that people tend to tell you about the shelter. But it wasn't bad at

all. When I got there, it was like a state of mind that I never experienced before, tranquillity, peace. It was like being on my own and I liked the feeling of independence. It was like a place to call my own, being away from a lot of headaches and confusion that I didn't need to be around. The accommodations were very nice. The apartment had a couch, a big dresser, lamps, a queen size bed, a crib. We had a refrigerator, like wall-to-wall cabinets, a big bathroom with tub and shower and washing machines on the premises. The staff treated us very nicely. We had cookouts together that some of the parents would initiate. We had day care and a play yard for the kids. They had like group meetings almost every day to talk about different things like sex, AIDS, home-making. If, basically, they turned the shelter into a regular apartment building, I would move in there, because I mean leaving that place was hard. I cried leaving there because I got used to it.

A few of the women, however, described their time in the shelter system in less positive terms. This was particularly the case for women who had been placed in hotels or shelter facilities other than Tier II's. And for some, even Tier II's were experienced as stressful. Edie, for example said that while she appreciated having a relatively safe and comfortable place to live, the monotony of shelter life and isolation from her friends was extremely difficult. She said that at one point all she could do was sleep or eat. "I used to keep myself awake, you know, at night," she commented. "I would get all this, ice cream, chips, candy and I would mix everything together in one bowl and just sit there and just eat, eat, eat, eat, eat. I used to shake for the Pepsi. I reached up to 210 pounds. It's just like I didn't want to hear nothing or do anything. So it was awful."

Many of the women also indicated that they very much disliked the restrictions that the shelters imposed on their freedom. The most common complaints were curfews requiring them to be in their apartment by a certain time and having to sign in and out whenever they were coming back to or leaving the shelter. In spite of such complaints, however, many women said that they felt that most shelter rules were probably necessary in order to operate them safely and effectively.

While the overwhelming majority of women described the shelter system as a positive experience for them, there were more mixed feelings in terms of the women's perceptions of its effect on their children. About half described it as either positive or in more or less neutral terms. For example, Pam said that her children liked being there and made a lot of new friends. "They had a playground right on premises," she said. "Enclosed, you know, so very nice." Likewise, Tracy said that her daughter responded in a positive way and that the experience also brought them closer together.

Other women felt that they lost control of their children in the shelter system and/or that it exposed their children to a variety of bad influences, such as poorly disciplined children from other families. Crystal echoed the sentiments of several other women when she commented, "It makes your kids wild. Very wild. Very bad. A shelter will change the children. I think the shelter was good for

me, to tell you the truth. But for my kids, my kids got very bad from it, very bad."

The Present

All of the women talked about their lives since leaving the shelter system. The amount of time that the women had been out of the shelter system at the time of the interview ranged from five to 60 months, with the average being approximately 18 months. Some women appeared to be doing relatively well, certainly in comparison to their situations prior to entering the shelter system. Others appeared to be experiencing a considerable amount of distress. The major themes that emerged in the women's descriptions of the present were: poverty; interpersonal relationships; mental health; and hopes for the future.

Poverty

All but one of the women indicated that they had been placed in apartments of their own upon discharge from the shelter system. All of these apartments were located in impoverished areas of New York City, such as East Harlem and the South Bronx. For some, these apartments represented a major improvement over their living situations prior to becoming homeless. Tracy, for example, talked about her new one-bedroom apartment with a great deal of pride, noting that she had her own bedroom set and dining table, a bathroom and also that her building "is not

drug-infested." Likewise, Rolanda described her search for and acquisition of a spacious apartment for her and her children. "I love it, love it, love it, love it," she said. "The people that run it, um, do their best to keep it in good condition. It's cheaply put together, but it looks nice."

Other women described their post-shelter living conditions as woefully inadequate. Grace, for example, talked about having to leave the apartment she was placed in after the shelter because the building was filled with drug dealers and was falling down. She indicated that she had since moved to a somewhat better apartment but noted that her daughter has been getting sick because the building is rat-infested. Likewise, Candice described being placed in a building teeming with rats and people using drugs. "I got a hole in my kitchen wall and in my bathroom," she added. "You got to sit in the bathroom with an umbrella over your head 'cause you don't want the water that's dripping from upstairs to drip on you. I keep a red umbrella right next to the toilet."

All but one of the women were currently receiving public assistance as a primary means of support. Each described an ongoing struggle to make ends meet on incomes that placed them well below the poverty line. While sufficient food did not seem to be a major concern, other necessities such as transportation and clothing were. Sarah, for example, talked about her inability to take her

children to other parts of the city. "Well, if I don't have the money, I can't go nowhere," she said. Likewise, Crystal talked about trying to provide decent clothing for herself and her children. "Myself, I need clothes and I need shoes," she said. "And I want to stop letting my kids wear those cheap sneakers so people won't be seeing. And I would like a wall unit and a stereo. I don't want too much, but I want to be like everybody else." Similarly, Leslie commented: "I used to want, I used to want a lot of things. Jewelry, name brands like everybody else. But I couldn't afford no jewelry or stuff. Now, I don't even think about stuff. I just go get me the cheapest pair of sneakers or cheapest pair of pants. That's it." And Grace said simply, "Well, it's kind of hard, you know, I don't have nothing."

Interpersonal Relationships

All of the women talked about their current relationships in some detail, including those with their children's fathers, significant others, family and friends. While the quality of relationships varied substantially among the women, it seemed that in general most of the women had very little social support outside of their own children.

Children's Fathers

A majority of women had been separated from their children's fathers for some time and described them as more

or less absent from their lives. This was often a source of considerable anger and frustration, often in the context of the added financial burden it created. Sarah, for example, talked about having to constantly badger her children's father for money to buy their children clothes. "It's been three weeks now, the man ain't got the sandals yet," she said. "He'll say, 'When I get the money, when I get the money.' I'll say, 'You have money, but you just keeping it for yourself. Why are you just buying yourself something?'" Other women said they had given up on asking their children's fathers for anything. Elaine, for example remarked, "My husband, he likes to gamble. When he makes the money, instead of coming and giving it to me, you know he'll gamble it right back. So now if he gives me, fine. If he doesn't give me, it's no problem, because like I tell him, my kids will survive and I will survive."

There were some exceptions. Wilhemina, for example, indicated that her children's father sees them a couple times a week and "does what he can" to help her out. Likewise, Pam talked about "getting along for the children's sake." She said, "He comes to my house and he takes my son to get a haircut or get new sneakers. He has his bills to pay, but he does for them, so I have no complaints about that."

Intimate Relationships

Several of the women indicated that they were currently involved in intimate relationships. Some of these relationships were described in positive terms. Vivian, for example, described the man she is currently seeing as "very playful" and "different" from other men she has dated in the past. And Tracy talked about seeing an older man who "inspires" her and is different from the "ghetto guys" she grew up around. "We see a future together," she added.

A majority of women, however, indicated that they were either not involved in an intimate relationship or, if they were, that they were unsatisfying. Elaine, for example, indicated that she doesn't have a partner and really doesn't see herself in a serious relationship again. "See I don't need another man to come in to try to tell me how to raise my children, I been doing it all along," she said. Crystal talked about having a boyfriend who she recently discovered was cheating on her. She said, "I really need a true relationship. I haven't found one yet." And Leslie described an unhappy relationship with a woman she has been seeing for several years: "And it's, um, headaches. I've been wanting to break up with her, too, for a while, but, you know, it's like she's been in a car accident and she needs help, so I feel pity for her."

Family and Friends

The women also talked about their current relationships with family and friends. The overwhelming majority described relationships that seemed to be lacking in closeness. Many women talked about difficulty getting along with members of their family-of-origin. "I don't hate my family," Edie said. "I don't know how to put it, but I just don't want to be around them. It's just one agony between my stepmother, my husband, it's just one, one living nightmare."

Many also shared that they had few if any friends and talked about difficulty trusting others in general. "You can't trust too much," Grace said. "Too many people let you down." A few of the women did talk about close relationships with family members or friends, including new people they had met since moving into their apartment buildings. But even these relationships were often problematic due to a lack of financial resources for travel or other activities. For example, Tracy remarked:

I only have two friends really, you know, and that's it. One of my friends, she lives in Boston. She's married, you know. She's a nurse. She's doing very good. I'm proud of her, you know. She's the one I have to look up to. And I have another friend, and she's an R.N., you know. And they're doing so good, you know, with their life. I'm not jealous because you're not supposed to be jealous for anyone. I'm happy for them, you know, and I wish them the best. But, you know, sometimes I just feel so bad (cries) when I can't pull out, you know, a credit card. It's hard, you know, that I can't go with them shopping, credit cards, you know. You know, it hurts me.

Children

All of the women described their relationship with their children as extremely important. Indeed most of the mothers indicated that their lives revolved primarily around their offspring and that in many cases they were their sole source of social support. Harriet, for example, said that her children give her a reason to keep living. "I'm just here with the kids, even my nieces, they all call me 'mom.' I cry myself to sleep sometimes. But I go on 'cause I have something to live for." Pam expressed a similar feeling: "You know, my main concern is my children. That's my main prerogative in my life right now 'cause they can't live without me." And Teresa shared the following: "I just like to be with my kids, involved with them. I want to be the mother that I never knew. I'm not a perfect mother. Nobody is. But I'm going to try to be one."

Indeed, often one of the few bright spots in many of the women's stories in general was their relationships with their children. While having children at a young age and trying to raise them in poverty was frequently described as quite stressful, it seemed often to be outweighed by the sense of responsibility and pleasure associated with motherhood. As Leslie recalled, "All my happy memories really is with my daughter. The only thing that has really kept me going is my daughter. That's my heart."

Mental Health

Many of the women talked about their current mental health. Only a few had ever been in therapy. Some of the women felt that they were doing better now than they had been before entering the shelter system. Elaine, for example, said that "life's been going fine" since leaving the shelter. She noted that she had a nice place to live, that her children are doing well in school and that she is attending classes in order to obtain her GED. "I'm very happy now, you know, me and my kids," she said. "Sometimes you get depressed. But like I say, 'one day at a time.' I just take it as it comes, and that's it."

Vivian also described doing much better in comparison to her life before she became homeless. She said she does not get as stressed out as much as she used to. She added, "I don't think about killing myself anymore, anymore like that." Likewise, Teresa felt that she has been making strides at overcoming many of her past difficulties associated with her history of sexual abuse. "I chose not to let that destroy my life," she said. "I fought it and I beat it." Additionally, all but one of several women who talked about abusing alcohol and/or cocaine in the past, indicated that they felt they had successfully overcome this problem.

Many other women, however, indicated that they continued to experience a great deal of psychological distress. Several women described what sounded like recent

episodes of Major Depression. Sarah, for example, talked about recently feeling "like all of the life had drained out of [her] body," crying a great deal, sleeping problems and loss of appetite. Likewise, Leslie shared that she had been feeling down for as long as she can remember: "You know, I know my life is miserable. (Cries.) I say that all the time, you know, 'I had a miserable life.' So it's like I done got used to it. It's like I'm always depressed. I don't know why I'm still crying."

A few of the women talked about hallucinations and other symptoms of mental illness. Juanita, for example, said:

I can't go back to school 'cause I don't understand. I like read and I read and I read, and when you ask me, I don't, um, remember what, you know, what is happening. I forget. I know something is wrong. I'm always crying. And, you know, I cry because I know that me, I'm alone. Nobody never goes to my house. You know, I don't sleep in the nighttime. I be in the kitchen like three o'clock, four o'clock, five o'clock in the morning, every day. I'm always thinking, thinking about my sanity. Sometimes I'm like alone and I hear things. You know, I can't be alone. And when I go into the room, I see people there. I know somebody's watching me. At nighttime when I go to the bathroom, I'm scared of that, the shower curtain. I know somebody's in the back of it, like going to ram me or something. I don't know. Well, that's not true, right? I have something wrong with me. I don't know what.

Hopes for the Future

All of the women talked about their hopes for the future. These hopes were frequently closely connected to issues of education, employment and their children's well-being.

A majority of women expressed a strong desire to find work in order to get off public assistance and to provide a sense of purpose. Many had been previously employed at low-paying jobs, which they had to quit because of a lack of childcare or other difficulties. Only a couple of women were currently employed and most said they would settle for minimum wage-type work again even if it might not significantly improve their financial situation. Tracy's comments were typical: "I know I can't give up, because I'm not going to get nothing just sitting at home waiting for anything. I have to keep on struggling. That's it. I want to be somebody and I want more out of life, so I'm not going to settle for less, unless it's a lesser paying job."

Virtually all of the women, including those few who had graduated high school, expressed the belief that their chances of obtaining work depended on them going back to school. Several had already enrolled in GED programs or college, while others expressed determination to do so. "I made a promise to myself," Elaine said. "I will go back to school and get my GED. where I could get off public assistance, where I could find a job and live the way I want to live. I'm going to do it."

Some of the women who were trying to get into school or had recently succeeded in doing so, however, expressed more mixed feelings. Crystal, for example, had recently begun a GED program but had to stop because of her childcare arrangement fell apart. "I still have a reading

problem, I can't read that well," she said. "I made up enough courage at the age of 37 years old to go back to school. I had started feeling important. I started, you know, getting out. I started feeling good about myself. I bragged about it all the time. Then I had to stop. Now I don't know if I'll ever go back."

The hope that the women expressed about going back to school, finding work and getting off public assistance, was invariably related to the desire to provide a better life for their children. Many felt that a job would allow them to get a better apartment and other essentials for their children. Some also said that they wanted to make their children more proud of them.

Almost all of the women expressed high hopes for their children's future. Many said that they would support their children in whatever they chose to do but that they very much wanted them to complete their education and to find a good job. Time and time again, the women said that they wanted their children to have a life different from theirs. "I tell them this," Grace said. "'Don't do like I do. Try to make something out of yourself.'" Likewise, Leslie commented: "I told her, you know, 'Whatever you want to be, take your time and do it and, you know, I'll be behind you.' Hopefully, her life won't turn out like mine." And Candice commented: "I'm looking at my kids growing up now and hoping that their life don't be nothing like their mother's and father's or their grandparents'."

Homelessness in the Context of Women's Lives

An majority of the women interviewed for this study described their experience of homelessness in positive terms. This finding seems to fly in the face of both common conceptions of and existing research on homelessness. However, when considered within the context of the women's lives and New York City's family shelter system, this finding may not be so surprising after all.

As discussed in Chapter III, virtually all of the women experienced extraordinary hardship prior to entering the shelter system. This hardship invariably extended well beyond events that may have precipitated their entry into the shelter system (e.g., loss of an apartment). Each of the women had experienced either extreme poverty, neglect, childhood abuse or domestic violence in their past. Most had experienced a combination of such events and often for years on end.

It is perhaps no wonder then that many of the women experienced the New York City shelter system as a kind of sanctuary. The relative security and supportiveness of the Tier II shelters seemed to provide a desperately needed break for women whose lives had often been marked by an enormous amount of instability. For some

of the women it was the first time that they had ever had a place of their own, so to speak.

The women's descriptions of their experience of homelessness also raises the issue of the extent to which the shelter system has had a lasting impact on their lives. The answer to this question is complex. As discussed in Chapter IV, some of the mothers seemed to be doing much better than others. It was beyond the scope of this investigation to try and determine why this may have been the case. Personality traits, a history of trauma, level of social support, education background and the services of a particular shelter are just a few of the many variables that may explain such differences.

Based on the information that the women shared, however, one could speculate that for those women who are doing better, the shelter system may have played an important role. Many of the women suggested that the shelter system allowed them -- often for the first time -- to break away from an abusive relationship, to experience independence, to receive counseling and support, to make new friends, to go back to school, to learn new skills, and/or to improve their relationship with their children. In addition, many of those who seemed to be doing well described having secured decent permanent housing as a result of the shelter system, a luxury which few had experienced in the past.

For other women, it seems that the shelter system may have been positive for them at the time of their homelessness, but it had not led to any tangible improvement in their lives. These women's stories suggested that many of the same problems with which they were struggling before going into the shelter system, such as extreme poverty, lack of social support, and mental illness, continue to haunt them. That many ended up in apartments that they felt to be dangerous and/or overcrowded also seems to have significantly contributed to their distress.

While it appears that the long-term impact of the shelter system may vary considerably, it is clear that the Tier II facilities do serve a valuable purpose. They provide relatively decent living accommodations with a wide array of important support services to families in crisis. The women's stories also made it evident that for the most part these shelters are supervised and staffed by very dedicated and caring professionals. Hotels or shelter facilities other than Tier II's, however, provided less of a safe haven and less satisfactory accommodations.

The women's stories also confirmed that the initial point of entry into the shelter system, the EAU's, are extremely inhospitable and degrading environments. One has to wonder how many homeless families may be so intimidated by the EAU that they return to abusive relationships or marginal living conditions instead.

It is important to consider the fact that the women's appraisals of the shelter system were all retrospective in nature. No matter how well the Tier II shelters are designed and operated, it is possible that if the women in this study had been interviewed at the time of homelessness, their appraisals would have been different. Rather than positive, they may have described the experience of being in a family shelter as very stressful -- the way that it tends to be described in almost all of the existing literature on family homelessness.

It could be reasoned that women who are interviewed at the time of homelessness are more likely to describe it in more negative terms for at least two reasons: first, one is likely to be much closer to and thus more easily affected by stressful events that may have precipitated one's entry into the shelter system (e.g., the loss of an apartment, domestic violence); second, when one is in the shelter system, especially for the first time, there may be a feeling of much more uncertainty in terms of how things will work out (e.g., whether or not it will lead to permanent housing) than from the perspective of having already successfully left the shelter system.

The fact that this investigation only looked at the experience of homelessness retrospectively may be considered a limitation. Another limitation of this study is the fact that it only focused on women who currently maintained their own apartments. There are undoubtedly

some formerly homeless mothers who may have left the shelter system before finding their own apartment or who have since lost their apartments and are now living doubled-up with friends or relatives. They might describe the shelter system in less positive terms.

Also, as noted in the methodology section in Chapter I, the sample for this study was based on availability of subjects as opposed to being one that was randomly chosen. It is possible that women who are making use of the kind of follow-up services available at All Children's House have a different opinion of the shelter system and are better (or worse) off than women who are not receiving such services. It is also possible, if not likely, that the women would have told their stories somewhat differently to a different interviewer. This issue will be discussed further in the following section on the interview experience.

The Interview and Interpretation Process

There can be little question that the way that the women told their stories to me, as well as how they were subsequently interpreted, was influenced by my background. As a male of Caucasian descent and from a relatively affluent background, I am sure I elicited narratives that were somewhat different than if I had been more like the interviewees in certain respects. Similarly, if I had not worked extensively with homeless families prior to this investigation, the women's responses may have been

different and seen in a different light. These kinds of differences are inherent in any research based on interviews, especially interviews that are as open-ended as those used for this investigation. It is one of the reasons that it seemed important to include the six narratives that comprise Chapter II, so as to give the reader the opportunity to make some of his or her own interpretations.

For me, the interview process was an extremely rewarding and moving experience. I felt very much welcomed by and at ease with all but a few of the women. The exceptions included one woman who appeared to be under the influence of cocaine or a similar substance during the interview, and two other women who seemed somewhat suspicious of me or reluctant to talk about their feelings. I felt, however, that these interviews were quite informative and valuable nonetheless.

The fact that virtually all of the women seemed to be very open with me and willing to share details about their lives did not surprise me. Based on my experience, I knew that many homeless and formerly homeless women often feel quite isolated and believe that most people do not care about them. I had expected that when approached by someone who expressed a genuine interest in their lives, there would not be a great deal of resistance to opening-up.

Based largely on my own experiences with homeless families and in light of the improvements in the New York

City shelter system in the last decade, I had anticipated the possibility that homelessness would frequently be described in positive terms. Also not surprising, was the fact that the shelter system for many, even for those who described it as stressful, paled in comparison to the other hardships they experienced in their lives.

There were, however, two major surprises for me during the interview and subsequent interpretation process. One was the frequency and extent of childhood abuse in the women's stories. I had expected that the women's stories would be filled with details of great hardship, including relentless poverty, a lack of social support, and some abuse, but I was unprepared for the descriptions of extraordinary cruelty that a majority of the women shared with me. I remember thinking during several of the interviews that the experiences of abuse that were being described to me were among the most awful and upsetting stories I had ever heard.

The other major surprise for me was the women's lack of expression of anger at society for some of their hardships. I had expected many of the women to talk about experiences of racism or discrimination as factors contributing to their past or current difficulties. When the first few women I interviewed did not raise such topics, I began to ask women at some point in each interview if they felt that racism or discrimination had played a role in their lives. While it is possible that

the women were reluctant to express their real feelings about this topic to an interviewer of Caucasian descent, it was my sense that they were sincere when they responded time and time again that they felt they had not been subjected to racism or discrimination.

The one notable exception to this was Rolanda. One of the oldest of the women I interviewed, she felt very strongly that racism and discrimination contributed to the hardships that she and many women like her experienced. She also offered a compelling argument for why other women I interviewed may not have chosen or been able to see the role that racism and discrimination had played in their lives. She explained:

Well, I would say that most people are so busy knocking themselves out for their failures to achieve the television lifestyle that they really don't see that someone else is writing their story. If you're being told for years and years that you're the cause of the problem here, how could you ever be expected to think that you're not? They say, 'Well, Black people can't do that. They can't do anything.' That's how men live up to that, you know, that's Pavlov's dog stuff. You know, 'you can't, you can't, you can't, you can't.' It's really an insidious like thing going on. It's very painful. (Cries.)

If you ever had a Highlights book, there are hidden pictures. And the people don't see the hidden pictures. They're like wildebeests. The predator comes in, bites, eats, feeds, and everybody just goes right back to normal. Nobody wants to hear some of that crap I'm talking about. You know, 'Don't make my life any more complicated than it is, please.' And it's the hidden pictures are like not as hidden as they have been. And it's just really like vampires feeding on a very strong population that has sustained them for hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years. It's like being that rhesus monkey group, you know, or Jane Goodall, whatever her name is, how they spend years just sitting there watching you so that they can

learn everything there is to know about you, and then they feed off of you. They feed off of you like marrow.

The reality of it is that I'm looking at a nightmare. I'm having a very bad dream. Either it's a real serious case of paranoia or my people are really under a serious hypnotic trance and they're just sorta like going with the flow and running like the buffaloes over the side of the cliffs, you know, which is really very painful. It's very, very, very painful. Manipulating you, giving you less and less, building more and more prisons, more and more shelters, taking more and more documentation and information on how it is to be single. That hurts me.

Towards the end of every interview, I asked each woman how she felt about talking with me. The responses tended to be not only positive but also quite moving. Juanita, for example, said the following:

When you carry something, let me see, when you carry like a television, you know, that's heavy, you have something heavy and you put it down, you feel better. That's how I feel today. You don't see me crying no more, you know. I need somebody to, to understand me and help me. Like I say, if you're going to go to my house or you're going to call me, or you need to see me, please ask me how I am 'cause I got my problems. I need somebody to come and help me talk. Don't give me nothing. I don't want nothing from nobody. I just want you to sit with me. 'Juanita, how are you today?' That's all.

Tracy's response was similarly poignant. She said, "Sometimes, you know, like today I cry. You know, for me to tell someone personal things about my life, um, it hurts me. But I have to deal with the hurt to be able to get over it, you know. It feels good to get it out, you know, it feels good, but it's emotional for me." And then she added: "Okay, a question. Um, do you see me going anywhere in the future, you know, progress and making it, you know?"

I took this last comment as an opportunity to share with Tracy (as I had with other women toward the end of each interview) my admiration for her strength, determination and openness; encouraging her in the struggle to realize her dreams.

Future Research

This investigation is one of the very first to look at the experience of family homelessness from both a qualitative perspective and from the perspective of a group of women who are no longer homeless. As such it is largely exploratory in nature and by definition raises more questions than it answers. Some of these questions could form the bases for future investigations.

One question that needs to be addressed is how do we account for the fact that some formerly homeless women are doing much better than others? What are the factors that have allowed some women to thrive, relatively speaking, in the face of extraordinary hardship? What needs to be done to help keep these women afloat and to rescue many others who seem close to drowning?

Many of the women interviewed said they found a kind of safety and support in the New York City shelter system. The kinds of services that Tier II's offer are needed on a much more permanent and far-reaching basis. It is obvious that without long-term interventions that focus on issues such as the housing crisis, poverty, and the emotional

needs of mothers and their children, the plight of many formerly homeless and poor families will continue to be desperate. It is my hope that this investigation will help to increase people's awareness of the need to develop and support such interventions.

APPENDIX

DEMOGRAPHICS

Alma is a 20-year-old of African-American descent. She has one daughter, age three.

Ayesha is a 21-year-old of African-American descent. She has one child, a son who is five years-old.

Candice is a 41-year-old of African-American descent. She has seven children, four daughters and three sons ranging in age from 24 to 11.

Carla is a 19-year-old of Latino descent. She has two children, a daughter age three, and a boy age two.

Cora is a 33-year-old of African-American descent. She has four children: boys, ages 17 and 12, and girls, ages 15 and seven.

Crystal is a 38-year-old of African-American descent. She has five children, two sons and three daughters, ranging in age from 21 to eight.

Donna is a 29-year-old of African-American descent. She has two daughters, ages six and two.

Edie is a 30-year-old of Caribbean-American descent. She has four children, a daughter age 11, twin sons age nine, and another son, age two.

Elaine is a 36-year-old of Caribbean-American descent. She has 6 children, three daughters and two sons, ranging in age from 18 to five.

Frances is a 30-year-old of African-American descent. She has one child, a daughter who is seven.

Grace is a 52-year-old of African-American descent. She has three daughters, ages 32, nine and six.

Harriet is a 43-year-old of African-American descent. She has two daughters, ages 25 and 18.

Juanita is a 45-year-old of Latino descent. She has three children, two boys, ages 25 and 28, and a girl, age 19.

Leslie is a 31-year-old of African-American descent. She has one daughter, age 15.

Lisa is a 24-year-old of African-American descent. She has three children; ages three, two and ten months.

Maria is a 29-year-old of Latino descent. She has five children, two boys ages six, and one, and three girls, ages ten, seven, and three.

Pam is a 32-year-old of African-American descent with two children, a son age eight and a daughter age six.

Rolanda is a 51-year-old of African-American descent. She has four children, a daughter and three sons, ages 36, 21, 12 and 10.

Rosalita is a 21-year-old and of Latino descent. She has two boys, ages six and four.

Sarah is a 29-year-old of African-American descent. She has four daughters, ranging in age from four to 10.

Teresa is a 29-year-old of Latino descent. She has two sons, ages 10 and seven.

Tracy is a 21-year-old of African-American descent. She has one daughter, age five.

Vivian is a 25-year-old of African-American and Hispanic descent. She has one daughter, age six.

Wilhemina is a 20-year-old of African-American, Hispanic and Native-American descent. She has two daughters, ages three and two.

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