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THE NEEDIEST CASES

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For Father Working Three Jobs, a Startling Diagnosis

By Jed Lipinski



Michael Kirby Smith for The New York Times

Jose Perez and his wife, Mary, with, from left, Joel, Jade, Jose and Starshae. Mr. Perez was told in 2009 he had renal failure.

The morning of March 31, 2009, is stamped on Jose Perez's brain. He woke up with stabbing pains in his legs. His wife called an ambulance, and he was taken to Staten Island University Hospital. A nurse ran a blood test. Half an hour later, five doctors walked into his room.

"They told me I had renal failure," Mr. Perez, 40, a father of four, recalled recently. "When I told them I needed to get back to work, they said, basically, 'You can go back to work and die, or you can start coming in for dialysis treatments.'"

Mr. Perez laughed and said, "I decided to come in for dialysis."

The timing was terrible. Two years before, Mr. Perez and his wife, Mary Luz Marin, 43, had bought their first house, on a quiet street in the New Brighton section of Staten Island. The couple's first son, Jose Perez IV, was eight months old, and the house seemed to be the perfect place to raise a family.

But a week after the family moved in, a severe storm backed up a sewer line, flooding the basement with sewage and causing over \$40,000 worth of damage. The family's insurance did not cover the cost because the house was not in a flood zone. Soon after, Mr. Perez, an experienced plumber and handyman, discovered that the house's foundation was slowly sinking because of a faulty support beam.

“I was devastated,” said Mr. Perez, who is the size of a linebacker and is disarmingly upbeat. (He made “devastated” sound like a good thing.) “We spent our life savings and most of our [401\(k\)](#) repairing the house.”

The Federal Emergency Management Agency provided \$3,500 in aid, he said, but the flooding persists to this day.

By the time the renal failure was diagnosed, Mr. Perez was trying to make ends meet by working three jobs — as a teacher’s assistant, as a handyman for the Jewish Board of Family and Children’s Services and as a counselor for the AHRC, a social services agency. But he said his mortgage bank had repeatedly denied him a loan adjustment because of the flooding issue. And soon, as Mr. Perez’s debt mounted, he said, the bank filed papers to begin the foreclosure process.

Mr. Perez, who was then unable to work, was at his wits’ end.

“I wasn’t used to depending on others,” he said. He had learned to take on responsibilities early: At 17, he became the breadwinner in the family, providing for his mother and his three younger siblings after his father left the household.

Now, as Mr. Perez was on the verge of going to [food pantries](#), he approached Staten Island Legal Services on the advice of a housing counselor. Legal Services lawyers represented him in court and helped him negotiate a short payoff of his second mortgage, using money from The New York Times [Neediest Cases](#) Subprime Mortgage Program.

The lawyers introduced Mr. Perez to Lucille Swarns, a volunteer with the Advocacy, Counseling and Entitlement Services program of the [Community Service Society of New York](#), one of the seven agencies supported by the Neediest Cases Fund. Ms. Swarns helped him get \$600 in food stamps and a \$400 grant from the fund to pay his heating and utility bills.

Today, Mr. Perez receives \$1,366 a month in [Social Security](#) disability benefits, and [Medicare](#) covers most of his medical bills, which average \$50,000 a month.

Every other day, from 4 a.m. to 10:30 a.m., he undergoes dialysis.

“The pain is just overwhelming,” he said with a laugh.

Just then, his daughter Jade, 3, wearing a pink floral outfit, jumped into his lap and asked to be picked up. “Not now, Mami,” Mr. Perez said.

When she ran off, he said, “My kids don’t understand that I’m too weak to lift them.”

But his wife, Ms. Marin, who has started working full time as a social worker, said: “The kids are like his medicine. They give him strength to keep going.” The couple have another son, Joel, 1, and Ms. Marin has a daughter, Starshae, 14, from a previous relationship.

Presently, Mr. Perez is traveling to different states to register for a kidney transplant. If one becomes available in Connecticut or New Jersey, for instance, he believes he has a better chance of receiving it than if he remained on the national list.

After putting their children to sleep each night, Ms. Marin and Mr. Perez pray for the return of his health.

“When God wants him to get a kidney,” she said, “it will happen.”