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THE NEEDIEST CASES

Behind on the Rent, and Then a Baby Needs Surgery



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

Cheryl Brooks signed a lease for a larger apartment for her children, from left, Cheyenne, Arianna, Ashley and Lewis.

BY KARI HASKELL

It was Memorial Day 2007. Cheryl Brooks and her family were enjoying a cookout with her youngest children's father in Upper Manhattan when her 2-month-old, Arianna Williams, started to cry. Then Arianna's heart began to race.

As an experienced mother of three other children — Cheyenne, 10, Lewis, 8, and Ashley, 5, — Ms. Brooks knew at once that something was terribly wrong.

She took Arianna to New York-Presbyterian/Columbia hospital's emergency room. Doctors told Ms. Brooks that Arianna had to stay the night. In the morning, her condition had not improved. More tests were done. A cardiologist was called in.

"One of the valves was not moving," said Ms. Brooks, 33, holding her daughter, now 9 months old. The diagnosis was a condition called mitral valve stenosis, which meant that a valve was not opening wide enough to allow blood to flow into the chambers of Arianna's tiny heart.

Surgery was necessary to repair the valve, but the outcome was uncertain.

“What touched me the most was that all the nurses lined up outside her room to see her go off to surgery,” said Ms. Brooks, trying to hold back tears as she remembered the awful moment.

The surgery went well but required Arianna to stay in the hospital for several weeks. She was fed through a tube hanging from a bag hooked to a tall pole.

When Ms. Brooks took Arianna home on July 2, the feeding equipment was also in tow.

“You can see I don’t have a lot of space,” said Ms. Brooks, pointing to the machine wedged between her bed and the radiator. Her apartment is a long and narrow railroad flat, just a block from the apartment where she grew up with a loving foster family, in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan.

The bathroom door connects to the kitchen, followed by three rooms, all with beds. There is no storage, so belongings are piled in bags, boxes or plastic containers. The pipes leak, and there are vermin. “This building hasn’t had an exterminator since May,” Ms. Brooks said. She got a cat, Kibbles, whom the children love, but Ms. Brooks complains he is not doing his job.

When she moved into the apartment 10 years ago, the size and the rent — then \$501.50 a month — were acceptable. But over the years her family has grown, and so have the problems.

When she was pregnant with Arianna, she asked the management company if she could move into larger place. But the complications with her daughter’s health stalled the process, she said, and she gradually fell behind in rent.

On paid maternity leave from her claims clerk position at Guardian Life Insurance Company of America, she earned \$780 a month, about half her regular pay.

In April, she missed a rent payment. An eviction letter arrived in mid-May, after she had returned to work and shortly before the crisis with Arianna.

Then Ms. Brooks was back and forth to the hospital; there could be up to six appointments a week. When she missed work, she was not paid.

Her earnings and the \$614 monthly disability income Arianna receives were covering expenses for the home and ensuring that the other children were safe in after-school programs or being watched by a baby sitter.

By November, Arianna’s condition had stabilized, but Ms. Brooks owed five months’ rent. Through several agencies she contacted from a list given to her in housing court, she was able to pay the balance, she said. One organization that offered relief was the Community Service Society of New York, which is among the seven agencies supported by The [New York Times Neekest Cases Fund](#).

Madelyne Hidalgo, a social worker at the society, paid \$564, one month's rent, from the Neediest Cases Fund.

Once her balance was back to zero, Ms. Brooks continued petitioning for the larger apartment. Recently she was told a four-bedroom apartment in a Section 8 building would be available soon.

She signed the lease but has yet to move in, she said. Her older children are beginning to ask why they have not moved.

"It is very upsetting," she said. "Every day we think we are getting closer, then we are pushed farther away." But she added that she would persist. "It is for my children; they are my life, and I do everything for them."