

# The New York Times



Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

Nia Harris, right, has helped her mother, Leslie Sterling, through cancer and the loss of a job.

January 16, 2009

THE NEEDIEST CASES

## Drawing Inspiration From the Optimism of Youth

By Abby Aguirre

On a recent afternoon, the gray sky was no matter to Nia Harris, 18, who was contentedly hanging around in her bedroom, singing backup to [Beyoncé's](#) "Single Ladies," while her mother, Leslie Sterling, 48, organized books in an adjacent room. "The Courage to Heal" was stacked near "Healing and the Mind," which sat by "Mind Over Mood."

Ms. Harris and Ms. Sterling share subtle bone structure, shy smiles and close quarters in a basement apartment in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. They do not share Ms. Sterling's tendency toward depression.

"She would catch me crying," Ms. Sterling said about a dark period in 2001, when her daughter was 11. "Or she'd hear me at night and come into my room and tell me everything was going to be all right."

"It made me sad to see her crying, but I'm the type of person that's optimistic," Ms. Harris said. "Even then, I saw nothing but good things."

It became trickier for her to see nothing but good things in 2003, when her mother received a diagnosis of breast cancer. But as she watched her mother get two lumpectomies, weeks of chemotherapy, a double mastectomy and weeks of radiation, Ms. Harris, then 13, remained unflappable, Ms. Sterling said.

The daughter was again the more composed of the two when, in June 2007, her mother was laid off from her job as an administrative assistant at the [Brooklyn Botanic Garden](#), where she had worked for 12 years. Facing

the prospect of months without income, Ms. Sterling had a tough time forgiving herself for having spent so much of her \$52,400 salary.

“We had been living la vida loca,” Ms. Sterling said. “We traveled, Nia went to sleepaway camp and dance camp, we saw Men to Boys — — ”

“Boyz II Men,” Ms. Harris cut in.

“Sorry, we saw Boyz II Men, we saw Beyoncé,” Ms. Sterling said.

Ms. Harris suggested that her mother focus on the consolations: a generous severance package and a not-insignificant accumulation of savings.

In June 2008, Ms. Harris briefly had to take her own advice when she received a thin envelope from Marymount Manhattan College, her first-choice school. She read the rejection letter, and then calmly folded it back up.

“That’s O.K.,” she told herself as she went through two days’ worth of mail. “I’ll just reapply. Eventually, they will accept me.”

Then she came to the last envelope in the stack, another from Marymount, with a more recent postmark. Moments later, Ms. Sterling entered her daughter’s bedroom.

“I found her sitting on the floor, holding her head in her hands, crying,” Ms. Sterling said. “She had been accepted after all.”

June was also when Ms. Sterling’s severance and savings ran out. Left with only \$111 in weekly child support payments, Ms. Sterling was unable to pay her \$875 in rent that month, or the following two months. She borrowed from friends and family to pay rent in September and in October. In November, when \$405 in weekly unemployment benefits came through, she was able to begin paying rent herself.

To help Ms. Sterling pay off her three months’ back rent, the Community Service Society of New York, one of seven agencies supported by The [New York Times Neediest Cases Fund](#), drew \$875 from the fund and \$825 from a program of its own. It then referred Ms. Sterling to the [Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies](#), another of the agencies, which provided her with an additional \$875 from the fund.

Ms. Harris, meanwhile, took out [student loans](#) to cover the \$22,000 in tuition at Marymount, where she is a freshman. She continues to live at home.

The walls of her room are adorned with a map of the New York subway, another of the world, and, above a full-length mirror, a sheet of lined notebook paper on which she had scribbled these goals for the next four years:

“Scholarship and full aid.” “Work at garden.” “Join clubs/meet people.” “Become R.A.” “Study abroad.” “Move into apartment.” “Be bilingual.” “All A’s for all years.” “Internship leading to full-time job!”

Ms. Sterling, passing through her daughter’s room on her way to the living room, paused near the mirror to take in the four-year plan. She hoped her path to a full-time job would be more direct than her daughter’s.

“I hope she’ll stay a little while longer,” Ms. Sterling said finally. “I want her to rub off on me.”

All contributions made to the Neediest Cases Fund go to one of seven charities: Children's Aid Society; Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service; Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York; Catholic Charities, Diocese of Brooklyn and Queens; Community Service Society of New York; Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies; and UJA-Federation of New York.

To donate, please send checks to The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, 4 Chase Metrotech Center, 7th Floor East, Lockbox 5193, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11245. To use a credit card, call (800) 381-0075. To donate online, go to [www.nycharities.org/neediest](http://www.nycharities.org/neediest).