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THE NEEDIEST CASES



Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

Nadja Smith fell behind on her rent while looking for work.

Educated and Experienced, but Struggling to Find a Job

By Abby Aguirre

It was 11 in the morning on Inauguration Day, and Nadja Smith, 55, was rushing home from an appointment with an employment counselor to her studio on East 90th Street. She had supported Hillary Rodham Clinton in the primaries, and had resented a seemingly widespread assumption that, because she is black, she would back Barack Obama. But she ultimately did vote for him in the general election, and she now wanted to hear from him something, anything demonstrating that he grasped what things were like for people in her position: college-educated and urbane, with professional experience, fluency in several languages and no job prospects in sight.

“It wasn’t supposed to be this way,” she said, in a self-mocking tone.

Ms. Smith grew up in the Riverton Houses, a middle-class housing development built in Harlem in the 1940s. Her father was a teacher, her mother a guidance counselor. She attended Middlebury College in Vermont and, after developing an interest in acting, New York University.

In 1974, she left N.Y.U. to study with Jerzy Grotowski, the experimental-theater director, in Wroclaw, Poland. From there she moved to West Berlin, where she settled into a kind of charmed, bohemian life that on account of her race, she says, she had been unable make for herself in New York. Between lead roles on stage, including that of Jenny in “The Threepenny Opera,” she sang in a punk band called Blitz.

“Things got a lot more interesting when I left America,” she said.

Then, early one morning in 1985, the phone in her Berlin apartment rang, and her first thought was that something had happened to her mother. In fact, the 4 a.m. call was from a friend, inviting her to a party at a cafe. But that was when she resolved to return to New York.

“I realized that if I was thinking that way, I had become anxious about the distance from my mom,” she said. “So I came home.”

Uncertain at first if she would stay, Ms. Smith moved in with her mother, who had separated from her father, in an apartment in the Bronx. In time, she moved into her current apartment, enrolled at Hunter College and started working toward a degree in film and media studies. When not in class, she worked at “South Africa Now,” a PBS television news magazine on apartheid.

When the show ended, in 1991, she intended to look for more work in journalism. But her objective faded after her mother developed a congestive heart condition. For the next four years, she worked part time and took the occasional class at Hunter, but mostly cared for her mother.

“She had to give up the independence that defined her,” she said.

After her mother’s death in 1995, what she thought would be temporary work for a marketing research firm turned into a decade’s worth of employment in the field. The jobs provided her with income, if not fulfillment, until May 2006, when the company she worked for went out of business. Unemployment payments sustained her through December, odd jobs through the following year. But by May 2008, she owed four months in back rent.

Community Service Society, one of seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, provided Ms. Smith with \$3,633 to help her pay her arrears.

From May until November, Ms. Smith worked a seasonal job at the parks department. She has since paid her \$1,000 rent with \$150 a week in unemployment payments, a \$200 monthly subsidy from the Human Resources Administration, a small bit of savings and by “scrimping like nobody’s business.”

She spends her days sending out résumés that emphasize her bachelor’s degree, which she received in January 2008, her fluent German and French, and her proficiency in Polish, Russian and Spanish.

“I have to keep telling myself that I’m not a loser,” she said.

She does not revisit a scrapbook from her years in Berlin. She prefers not to look at the newspaper clippings of her band, in which she appears in a leather jacket next to her guitar player, Carlo Karges, who after Blitz wrote the lyrics for the international hit “99 Luftballons.” She does occasionally belt out an old Blitz song: “There’s no gas for my car, not enough food to eat, had to sell my TV, lost my job last week!”

When Mr. Obama’s name was announced before he took his oath of office, Ms. Smith, who as a rule is disinclined to sentimentality, could not curb an upwelling of emotion. She grabbed from the mantle above her closed fireplace a photograph of her mother, an elegant woman with high cheekbones, and held it up to the television, so that her mom, too, could watch.

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.

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