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THE NEEDIEST CASES

## Back in the Driver's Seat, With a Small Boost

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Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Martha Hernandez passed the road test for a commercial driver's license on the first try.

Sometimes all it takes is a little help if it is the right kind of help.

With two grown children and a baby granddaughter depending on her, Martha Hernandez was struggling to provide for her family in a [New York City Housing Authority](#) project on the Lower East Side.

Ms. Hernandez, 47, a former special education teacher with a winning smile, could have been eligible for up to 60 months of federal cash assistance under the Temporary Aid to Needy Families program.

"I was offered that, but I refused," she said. "I didn't want to maybe overuse the system. That's the way I am."

Her account was confirmed by Amanda Frick, coordinator of the [Single Stop](#) program at [Brooklyn Workforce Innovations](#), a career service agency that aided Ms. Hernandez through a \$15,000 partnership grant from the Community Service Society of New York, one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund.

Ms. Hernandez's request was more modest: Could someone help her get a commercial driver's license so she could become an intercity bus driver?

"I learned to drive at 16 and had my first car at 17 — a used 1974 Chevy Caprice, green, with a stick shift, that I bought for \$200," Ms. Hernandez recalled.

She drove daily from Pike Street on the Lower East Side, where she lived with her divorced mother, to City College in Harlem, where she never quite graduated but won M.V.P. honors in softball and basketball. And

after 1982, when she married a former grade-school sweetheart, then a Marine reservist, they drove to his base in San Diego, to a new home in Seattle and on visits back to New York.

“We used to drive cross-country, right, guys? Remember that?” she asked her son Hector, 26, who is disabled, and her daughter, Jessica, 19, as Jessica’s 2-year-old daughter, Emma Velez, played in the project’s concrete plaza. Ms. Hernandez laughed, recalling the time Hector snatched her driver’s license from the sun visor and tossed it to his baby sister, Jessica, who threw it out of the window.

In San Diego, Ms. Hernandez worked on the military base in a gas station. “Again, believe it or not, it had to do with cars,” she said, as if struck for the first time at the pattern.

After moving to Seattle in 1990 and getting an associate’s degree in transportation, she took a job moving containers for Federal Express and worked her way up to truck driver. Two years later, she and her husband divorced.

When she came back to New York in 1997 with Jessica and Hector and another son, Mark, to live with her mother, she rejoined FedEx, delivering packages. She obtained certification as a special ed teacher, and in 2000 took a second job at her former grade school, Junior High School 56 on Henry Street.

Then her life started to unravel. In 2006 her diabetic mother succumbed to a heart attack at 66. In short order, her grandmother and an uncle also died. She had quit FedEx in 2001, and in June 2008, overwhelmed by family demands, she left her teaching job.

Denied unemployment insurance, she struggled to pay for food and rent. Jessica helped out with a job at the B & H electronics store and won an [AmeriCorps](#) scholarship in exchange for work at the Grand Street Settlement. She is now attending the Sanford-Brown Institute in Manhattan to become a medical assistant.

That is when Ms. Hernandez sought help at the Henry Street Settlement, where she spent two weeks in April polishing her résumé and her interviewing skills. She was referred to Brooklyn Workforce Innovations, where one of the four job training programs is [Red Hook on the Road](#), helping job seekers gain a commercial driver’s license.

She encountered skepticism. “I was told that couldn’t happen; I was a woman,” she said. “But I didn’t take no for an answer.”

In fact, Ms. Hernandez was so confident she would land a good job behind the wheel that she turned down the cash assistance program, while signing up for food stamps. Single Stop provided her other aid out of the Community Service Society grant: \$338 to meet part of a month’s back rent of \$649; \$145.50 in MetroCards to get to her appointments; and \$20 for the driver’s license upgrade fee.

It was a hard three-week course. “We used to drive all over Brooklyn in a white school bus,” Ms. Hernandez recalled. The final road test was hard, too. “We had to parallel park, go in reverse, and make sure we don’t hit anything,” she said.

She passed on the first try. A month later she landed a \$32,000-a-year job with Peter Pan Bus Lines and started its eight-week training program on routes to Boston, Philadelphia and Washington. The first thing she learned, she said, was what to call her vehicle. “It’s not a bus,” she said. “They want you to say ‘motor coach.’”

She had to interrupt her driving when, once again, family issues required her presence at home. But she said she expected to resume working shortly.

Her goal is “to give back,” she said. “I’m so grateful to those people, I can’t really wait until I get back on my feet so I can send them some money.”