

DATE: 5/9/09

SOURCE: MSNBC

HEADLINE: Homeless, 9, and Coping with a Hard Life



Homeless, 9, and coping with a hard life

For Brehanna, a loss of school, friends and a beloved stuffed animal



No place to call home

After her father loses his construction job and her family is evicted from their home, a young girl struggles with her new life.

PORTLAND, Ore. - At first, 9-year-old Brehanna didn't seem to understand.

Her family was being evicted from their home in Tualatin, a Portland suburb. Her father, Joe Ledesma, a homebuilder for 20 years, was without a job and couldn't find another. He couldn't pay the \$800 rent on the three-bedroom house where he, his wife Heidi and daughter lived.

And he couldn't get through to Brehanna as they packed the family's navy blue 1986 Pontiac Firebird that she would not be able to bring her bed. She would not be able to bring every toy or trinket, or that checkered desk she had spent hours painting and sanding, either.

She wanted to bring it all to the next place, she told her dad as she stood in her bedroom filled with packed bags. But the Ledesmas had no new place to go this time.

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"I was trying to explain to her there were some things we could take," Joe said, "and some things we were going to have to leave behind."

That was in December, when Brehanna joined the unhappy ranks of American children who experience homelessness — a group that includes one child out of every 50 in America, according to the National Center on Family Homelessness.

In the months that followed, the Ledesmas stayed with relatives and lived in shelters and churches as they tried to regain their financial footing — or at least to stay afloat.

Joe spends most days searching for jobs. Heidi, who at 42 is disabled because of severe arthritis in her ankles, shuffles her feet and limps as she tends to domestic duties. She cooks for her family — not in a home, but in the crowded kitchen of an east Portland homeless center.

"I never thought this would happen to us," she says. "Not in a million years."

Brehanna — affectionate and playful — has transferred to a new school, one that caters to students who are homeless or in transition.

She remains in many ways a fourth-grader like any other. She sports Hannah Montana sneakers, swings on monkey bars and ties her long, brown hair in ponytails. She boasts she can read as well as an average sixth-grader.

But she has lost some of her innocence. She understands her circumstances, and she can speak frankly in her soft voice about how her family gets by.

"We are having a hard time paying rent," she tells her reading teacher Mary Weller. She yawned and coughed, battling the second cold she has caught in less than a month at the shelter.

"But if you want to pay rent and you need to get money you can donate blood," she says. "My dad does that."

Brehanna awakes before dawn. At about 6 a.m., a shelter coordinator flicks on the fluorescent lights and Brehanna sets her feet on the thin carpet.

She puts on her school clothes: Jeans. A pink Old Navy T-shirt. A hoodie with hearts.

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By her count, there are about 40 other people — single women, men with their sons, other couples with children — in the room filled with Army-style cots. She and her family slept in one corner. A fellow fourth-grader, Jeffery, and his father slept a few feet away.

"I go to sleep at 10," she says. "That's hardly any sleep at all."

This is the Warming Center, a Portland shelter for families with children that opens at 7 p.m. and closes 12 hours later the next day — every day.

With her parents, Brehanna climbs into the family car and heads to Daybreak, a homeless center inside the Peace Church of the Brethren four miles away. She waits in line to shower in a narrow stall, then catches the school bus.

At the Community Transitional School, children in kindergarten through eighth grades write in journals. They eat breakfast and lunch, laugh and take art classes in a cafeteria. Windows in the classrooms look out onto a track and basketball hoops behind the school, where students spend their daily recess.

For Brehanna, it's just not the same as what she left behind in Tualatin.

"My other school had a bigger playground," she says. "I miss my friends."

In Tualatin, she found a niche for herself after an early childhood marked by moves from Washington to Texas then Oregon. She also met her best friend, Sienna; the two girls still get together, and Brehanna returns to the shelter asking if she might have "an MP3 player like Sienna's?"

Her father's eyes widen, and he shakes his head. She knows not to ask again.

Occasionally, she raises a more obvious question: When will we get a house?

In the blink of an eye

Each move promised better pay and steady work for Joe. By the time the housing boom went bust in Oregon, a state that in many ways remained beyond the fray of the housing crisis until the last half of 2008, he had worked on dozens of Portland properties.

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He could point to high-end homes in the thick of the metro area's tree-covered hillsides and tell his daughter he helped build them. Pounding nails to assemble frames earned him roughly \$17 an hour.

"It was good for us," he says. "But I tell Brehanna over and over again that if I knew now what I didn't know then, I probably would have pursued my education more."

Joe and Heidi both graduated high school, and while his salary as a homebuilder was modest by some standards, it was enough to keep the Ledesmas happy in their doublewide modular home. The rental had a backyard. There, Joe and Brehanna dug up worms for their fishing outings.

Joe says he was blind-sided at the end of last year by the quick decline of the job market in Oregon, where the unemployment rate reached 12.1 percent in March, second highest in the nation.

When he got into the homebuilding business in the 1980s, he could open the newspaper and find as many as 15 job listings. Now, there are often none, and when there is one, 50 other people are likely to apply for it.

"It was within a blink of an eye, we went from having a home to here," he says, looking around Daybreak.

For gas money, he collects cans and bottles. On a good day, the containers will yield him \$15 at an east Portland recycling center.

Twice a week, he donates plasma at a local blood bank, which earns him about \$65. He uses the money to pay for medicine, gas and odds and ends. The family buys groceries with food stamps.

A sign at the door of teacher and principal Cheryl Bickle's classroom says "Leave your worries here." Brehanna enters and takes her seat.

Inside the classroom, colorful chains made of construction paper stretch from wall to wall. A glittery star hangs over Brehanna's desk.

The school serves about 200 students a year. Bickle says she didn't know how many are new to homelessness. Administrators at the school don't ask for details.

Still, school staff can see the effects of the down economy.

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"Once every other week, we would hear, 'I got an apartment,' and then a family would move on," says Jennipher Cochenour, who teaches kindergarten and first grade. "I haven't heard that in a longtime."

Brehanna's desk is at the front of the classroom, set away from most of her 31 classmates and nestled in a corner that's bordered by a book shelf and bulletin board.

She's reluctant to say why. Maybe she chose the corner, however isolated, because it's a defined space. It offers privacy to a girl who hasn't had any in weeks.

"This space belongs to her," Bickle says.

The corner also offers Brehanna a place where she can slowly adjust to a new school and a new life, whether she's in it for the long haul or just a few more weeks.

She hears her parents say they'll have a place to call home again within a couple of months. When she gets her own bed again, she said, she'll layer it with Sponge Bob Square Pants sheets.

She shares her simplest thoughts, and seldom speaks of being homeless or having less.

Only every so often, she breaks down. Once, she sheds tears over a lost stuffed animal. She rests her head against her father's chest and he reminds her they had bigger worries than lost toys.

Sitting in silence

"Nobody talks to me really," she says as she rides the bus home. "I wish I could just get out of that school and go back to Tualatin."

She taps her feet, rests her arms on the seat in front of her and looks out the window. A girl sitting across the aisle tells Brehanna to stop, so she sits in silence.

Before reaching Daybreak, the bus, carrying about a dozen youths home, makes three stops, including one at a one-story motel where half the kids spill out of the bus. The other two stops are made at neighborhood homes. Two brothers get off at their aunt's house.

Because students at the Community Transitional School don't always know where they will be sleeping the next night, Penny Scrivner, the bus driver, follows a new route that's mapped out

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each afternoon. On any given day, she will stop at hotels, shelters, houses and grocery store parking lots.

Brehanna gets off the school bus, walks into the shelter and passes through the kitchen. Without a word, she throws her arms around her mom, who sits at a table.

The Ledesmas' days run on a regimented schedule determined by Brehanna's school and the family's hours at Daybreak and the Warming Center.

They spent their first night there on New Year's, after staying with Joe's sister during the holidays. They didn't exchange Christmas presents. Brehanna gave her father a note instead, and thanked him for caring for her.

In swirly, bubbly penmanship, she wrote that she still loved him — "NO MATTER WHAT!!" She also thanked him for allowing her to take her cat — a cat she would eventually leave with her aunt because it wasn't allowed at the shelter.

Now, she says she wants to be a veterinarian when she grows up.

Back at the shelter, a mountain of blankets and clothes is piled on her family's bed — three Army cots pushed together in a corner of the shelter.

All they have — clothes, books, toiletries, blankets — is piled on the bed and along a wall.

It's too much, according to shelter rules, and they need to fit it into six bags or else find another place to stay.

Brehanna had taken to a narrow space between a cot and the east wall of the Warming Center. Her back to the wall, she sits on the ground, knees nearly to her chest.

"How do you spell San Francisco?" she asks her father as she does her homework, a stapled, six-page worksheet with math problems and maps. "Eight times six is 84? Oh no, it's 48."

Joe and Heidi sit on the bed and fold laundry. Wind beats against a window draped in quilts. A baby cries, and there is chatter in the next room, where single women who have also fallen on hard times sleep.

Heidi holds up a pair of Brehanna's sweat pants; "Angel" sparkles in studded rhinestones on the left leg. Heidi smiles.

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She has her own description of her daughter. Brehanna, says her mom, is a trooper.

Finally, a home

Two months pass. It's the end of April. Joe has a job painting houses; he no longer has to collect cans from strangers' trash bins or donate plasma.

And the family is no longer homeless. They have moved into a two-bedroom, first-floor apartment on Portland's gritty eastern edge. The \$750 rent is paid by the same nonprofit that ran the shelters where the Ledesmas had been staying. The subsidy lasts for a year.

"We're getting a place. Wee!" Brehanna says, as she and her parents drive to their new home.

Brehanna, who has turned 10 in the time her family was homeless, walks into the apartment for the first time. "I can roll on the floor," she says.

She proceeds to do just that. Then she runs through the living room, leaping and trying to touch the ceiling. She giggles — a lot. She opens and closes the door to her room over and over again, and tells her parents she wants her name spelled in big block letters on her door.

"Here you can walk around in your bare feet if you want," she says.

Floor tiles in the kitchen are cracked. The beige carpet in the living room has black scuff marks. The neighborhood is not the best, and Heidi is hesitant to let Brehanna to play outside.

Still, it's a home.

Brehanna's parents say they'll stay for at least a year. Maybe by next spring, Joe and Heidi say, they'll move on. Maybe, they'll move up.

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