

A Warm Coat for a Woman With Endless Stories to Tell



Ruby Washington/The New York Times

Sally Mae Jenkins with a coat she bought with money from The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund.

By JENNIFER MASCIA

Sally Mae Jenkins is full of stories. In a breathless rasp, she recalls traipsing through the woods of her native South Carolina, running from snakes and getting into dicey escapades with her 13 brothers and sisters.

Then she talks of having a daughter at 17, only to lose her 25 years later. Each reverie is delivered in her thick-as-molasses Southern accent and punctuated with "Lord have mercy!"

"I spend hours just listening to her stories," said Ramona Diaz, a counselor at the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service, where Ms. Jenkins, who is mentally retarded, has spent 30 hours a week for the last 22 years.

As the words spilled out of Ms. Jenkins, a curse word, or half of one, came out, prompting Elina Mushinskaya, the program's coordinator, to remark on her tendency to populate her yarns with profanity. "She's toned it down some," she said.

Ms. Jenkins replied, "I caught myself."

Memories pour out Ms. Jenkins at a breakneck speed, the past and present bumping up against each other. Ms. Jenkins, a small woman who looks younger

than her 58 years, told about how she had moved to Brooklyn to be with her sister in the 1980s after the death of their mother, who had been caring for her.

Then Ms. Jenkins started to talk about her daughter, Janet, who died in 1990 from complications from a seizure disorder at age 25.

"I had a daughter but I lost her. She said, 'Good night, Ma.' She told me that night when she was going to bed, 'I won't be here that long,' and that's it."

The next morning Ms. Jenkins could not wake her daughter and she called for an ambulance.

Ms. Jenkins went to the hospital with her sister, Mary Jackson. Ms. Jenkins said that something told her not to go into her daughter's room. "Oh Lord, my baby's going to leave me, Mary," Ms. Jenkins had told her sister.

Janet is buried in Cypress Hills cemetery in Brooklyn, a location, Ms. Jenkins insisted, that was chosen by her daughter.

"If something happens to me, mom, bury me there," Ms. Jenkins remembered her daughter saying. She scolded her daughter for even entertaining the thought.

Ms. Jenkins's eyes grow moist as she neared the end of her story. "And that's what happened, and that's all," she said.

But today, Ms. Jenkins is not alone.

She goes to work every day at the Brooklyn Center, earning a stipend for performing a variety of tasks, such as stuffing inserts into shopping bags for college bookstores. She gets paid by volume, about \$6 or \$7 per box of bags. Ms. Jenkins completes about three boxes a day.

Ms. Jenkins also receives about \$500 per month from Social Security and about \$100 in food stamps.

She lives with her sister in Bushwick among a revolving door of her sister's visiting grandchildren.

Also sharing the apartment is Ms. Jenkins's boyfriend, Ed, who also attends the Brooklyn Center. When asked about her 15-year romance, she declined to discuss it.

"I don't want to tell none of his business," she said.

But she will talk about anything else. "I got a lot of friends," she said, counting them off on her fingers.

She quickly shifted gears and said that she likes to cook oxtail, spareribs, chicken with stuffing and collard greens with mustard. And though it is not good for her asthma and conflicts with the medications she takes for a heart murmur, she drinks beer.

"Not every day," she assured Ms. Mushinskaya, who had cast a worried glance in her direction.

Despite her disability, Ms. Jenkins retains a streak of independence, walking two hours in the morning and two hours in the evening on her commute from Bushwick to the Brooklyn Center, in downtown Brooklyn.

She is something of a favorite of the supervisors at the center, and she rarely offers them any complaints. So when the weather turned cold Ms. Mushinskaya, aware of Ms. Jenkins's preference for walking, asked her if there was anything she needed. Yes, Ms. Jenkins said, she needed a coat.

The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund supplied \$49.99 to allow her to buy a brown coat, with a hood and a dark faux-fur collar, that cinches at Ms. Jenkins's small waist. On the first cold day of the year, Ms. Jenkins shuffled out into the frigid sunshine and shoved her hands into the pockets, smiling proudly.

Several of her friends at the center joined her.

"She's always on the go," Ms. Diaz said. It was Ms. Diaz who had accompanied Ms. Jenkins to the Burlington Coat Factory and helped her choose her coat.

After showing off her prized possession, Ms. Jenkins waved to no one in particular. Then she bid the small crowd adieu. "O.K., got to go back to work," she said, and went inside.