

Finding Help to Bear the Load as the Burdens of Diabetes Pile Up



Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

Edward Monroe, 43, a single father who cannot work because of a gangrenous left foot, worries without the help of home attendants who keep his apartment in order, he will lose sons, Shakheem, 8, left, and Rasheem, 7.

By KARI HASKELL



Edward Monroe of East New York, Brooklyn, calls diabetes “the sugar,” a mild name for an insidious disease. It killed two of his cousins, a niece and, two years ago, his brother. His mother is in constant pain caused by diabetes. And now Mr. Monroe, who has had two operations to remove diabetes-related gangrene from his left foot, is afraid that the disease will take his leg.

But his fear of having a leg amputated is eclipsed by an even greater concern: that his two boys, whom he raises alone on public assistance, could be placed in foster care.

With the help of the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service, one of the seven charities supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, Mr. Monroe received financial assistance and help from home attendants that has kept his family intact.

Problems like Mr. Monroe’s are all too common among poor New Yorkers who are afflicted with diabetes, a growing scourge in the city. The circumstances in some of the city’s poorer neighborhoods, where cheap fast-food restaurants are plentiful and fresh produce is scarce, can pose a special challenge for diabetics, whose symptoms may worsen when they eat the wrong things.

Keeping a Family Afloat

“Sometimes I look at my leg and it is really, really bad,” said Mr. Monroe, 43, gripping his

cane and carefully settling into a living room chair. His left calf was swollen and black. “Every doctor tells me something different.”

Before diabetes, Mr. Monroe was a strong man who hauled heavy boxes and labored in stockrooms. He would spend his free time with his sons, Shakheem Scott, now 8, and Rasheem Monroe, 7. They enjoyed fishing on lazy weekend afternoons.

But since his second foot operation, last fall, Mr. Monroe is more likely to stay upstairs and watch his sons play in the backyard of their apartment building. They sometimes fight over a bike. “I could only afford one,” he said. “They have to learn to share.”

The operation last fall removed the gangrene from his foot, but not the throbbing pain. “The pain, I can’t tell you about the pain, boy,” he said, shaking his head.

On his bedside table, there is a cluster of pill bottles. One prescription is for pain and one controls his blood pressure. He also takes pills for his diabetes, in addition to injecting insulin twice a day.

Working a stockroom job has been impossible since it became painful just to stand up, he said.

Mr. Monroe lives on Supplemental Security Income payments of \$651 a month and \$174 a month in welfare. Medicaid covers most of his medical care. He pays \$225 in rent for his subsidized apartment and \$125 for electricity every month. What is left is used to pay for transportation to doctors, co-payments for his medications, food and, if pos-

sible, clothing for the boys.

“I didn’t think I was going to come down with sugar,” he said. “My mother warned me not to eat ice cream. I didn’t listen.” Now he is afraid to eat, he said. Unable to afford fresh produce, he buys canned or frozen food.

And he sometimes breaks down and gives the boys “kid food” like frankfurters or cereal. He spends \$60 in addition to \$93 in food stamps for groceries every month.

“I raise my boys like my mother raised me and my four brothers. She told us to love one another,” Mr. Monroe said. “That’s the same thing I tell to my boys.”

Since his foot problems began, he has worried about losing the children. That possibility seemed imminent about a year ago.

He and the boys were living in a shelter when he had the foot operation last fall. While he was recovering in the hospital, an Administration for Children’s Services caseworker inquired about the boys, who were staying with Mr. Monroe’s mother in another part of Brooklyn and were not going to school.

When he was released from the hospital, the children’s services agency asked the shelter to help Mr. Monroe obtain the subsidized apartment in which he now lives.

The agency also contacted the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service. Marilyn Mellien-Harris, a caseworker who visited Mr. Monroe in his new home, saw that the boys had outgrown their clothes and that the apartment was bare. With \$648 from the Neediest Cases she bought some pants and shirts and a dining table and chairs. She also assigned morning and evening homemakers, who tidy the apartment and prepare the boys’ meals and get them ready for school.

“I am grateful for the table and for their service,” Mr. Monroe said. “Without them I would be lost. I was doing it before, but I had more strength then.”

Most of the other furnishings in the home are items that Mr. Monroe found on the street. “You would be surprised with what people throw away,” he said. He spent \$175 at a secondhand store to buy bunk beds for the boys. But just before he sat down in his living room for an interview, the bunk beds collapsed.

“When I see it crumble, I said, ‘Oh, my God, now I have to focus on that,’” Mr. Monroe said. He stood up, leaning on a cane, and limped into the boys’ room. He directed the boys to put the twin mattresses on the floor.

“I don’t want to sleep on the floor,” Rasheem said in a tiny voice.

Mr. Monroe responded: “But the bed fall apart. Now Daddy’s got to do something to get you another bunk bed.”

“When?” asked his son.

“I can’t tell you that, Ra Ra,” Mr. Monroe said. “I can’t tell you that, boy. I don’t know myself.”

The Brooklyn community service bureau responded, using \$478 of Neediest Cases money, and within weeks Shakheem and Rasheem had new bunk beds.