

# A Home Short on Cash but Overflowing With Love and Laughter



Andrew Stern for The New York Times

Dominick, 14, and Cheyenne, 12, with Maria Williams, 45, who took them in after they lost their home to fire.

By JENNIFER MASCIA



Maria Williams and her brood of eight eat dinner together, traverse the country together and watch movies together. They excel at math, music and sibling rivalry. But their most remarkable talent, the one that truly sets them apart, is playing the dozens; quips find their targets with the speed and precision of a surgical air assault.

Tashawna Williams, 17, teases Cheyenne, 12, asking her if she thinks she is cool "because you have a nameplate."

"She's just jealous because I look better," Cheyenne tells her audience.

That audience consists of Maria Williams, 45, a native of Jamaica, and her daughters: Ayeesha, 27, Michelle, 23, Tashawna, who is also known as Munchkin, and Chanel, 7. Then there is Diamonte, 10, Maria's nephew, and D-Andre, 16 months, Michelle's son.

Rounding out this crew is Dominick, 14, and Cheyenne, the adopted children of Maria's father, Norval Williams, and his wife, Dorothy.

Dorothy died last April. Soon afterward, the apartment where she had lived with Mr. Williams, Dominick and Cheyenne was damaged by fire and rendered uninhabitable.

At that point, Dominick and Cheyenne were welcomed into Maria's home, a three-bedroom apartment in Flatbush filled to the brim with plastic-covered couches, racks of DVDs, and dozens of trophies, all earned by various Williams children over many years in the extracurricular Brooklyn Music and Arts Program. Participation in the program's marching band has taken them to Washington and Atlanta, among other places.

And when they go, they all go together.

"You should see us," Maria Williams said. "All of us in the same hotel room."

Of course, that is no different from their daily commute, which has many of them taking the same bus route.

"I try to ignore her on the bus," Maria said teasingly of Cheyenne.

Watching the interplay in this melting pot of immediate and extended family, it is not obvious that tragedy has shaped their recent past. Dorothy and Norval adopted Dominick and Cheyenne in 1996, when the couple was in their 60s. The children, then 2 and 4, had been removed from their biological mother's care because of her drug abuse. Though Dominick and Cheyenne periodically met with their mother after their adoption, the Williams family has not been able to find her in the last several years.

But uncertainty has not slowed the adopted pair. Cheyenne, a straight-A student, excels at algebra, though she professes to hate it. And Dominick, who also insists he hates math, recently placed second in a math contest, one which garnered another trophy for the already swollen family collection.

And there is always ribbing to keep everyone's spirits buoyant. One recent evening, when Cheyenne named her favorite musical artists: "Omarion, Ne-Yo, Chris Brown I like anyone --"

Ayeesha quickly finished Cheyenne's sentence: "Basically anyone who doesn't wear a shirt in their video." Everyone burst out laughing.

The family has real quarrels, mainly of the "Who touched my stuff?" "Who drank my juice?" and "Those are my socks!" variety.

Maria explains her time-tested conflict-resolution technique in her sing-song Kingston lilt: "I tell them, 'I put you out of my house. I'm the only one paying the bills.'"

But Ayeesha contended that she is the true peacemaker: "I am the one who can usually shut everyone down."

Supported only by Maria's income as a school aide for the Department of Education and Ayeesha's salary as a substitute teacher, the family strains to support itself, spending more than \$350 on groceries per week. All but \$478 of their \$1,331 rent is paid for by Section 8, but there are five school-age children in the house, and the family often falls short when it comes to the essentials.

When Cheyenne and Dominick came to live with Maria, "I didn't have the money to buy stuff for school for them," Maria said.

Dominick and Cheyenne had been attending family counseling with their adoptive parents at the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service, and Maria continued to take them. When their social worker discovered that they did not have enough money to start the school year, he applied to The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund. With \$605.75, Maria was able to provide these essentials. But with eight children, money will often be short.

Still, they make it work.

They try to eat dinner together every night. Sunday is family day, no matter what. There is one rule: No fast food. And Sunday night is given over to movie screenings.

Despite the cramped quarters and the relentless financial strain, the Williamses laugh their way through life, one quip at a time.