

After Losing a Mother, Facing Up to Lingering Problems

By MONICA POTTS

Every New Year's Eve, Omelia Henderson returned home from work with a bottle of Champagne. Not an expensive bottle, but something for a small celebration for her family.



The
Neediest
Cases

New Year's Eve 1997 was no different. She returned from her job at a laundry, carrying a sensibly priced bottle, but when she arrived at her home in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, she stopped to sit on the front stoop.

Her daughter, Lorinda Henderson, saw her from the upstairs window and ran down to see what was wrong. Omelia Henderson died of a heart attack on that stoop a few moments later, at the age of 52, still clutching the bottle of Champagne in her right hand.

"By the time I got there, she was mumbling something — I don't know what it was — and then it was nothing," Ms. Henderson said. "Then it was nothing."

When her mother died, Ms. Henderson, then a 27-year-old single mother, and her brother, Paul, 19, lost the family's sole provider. And Ms. Henderson's daughter, Shaquanna, then 5, lost not only her grandmother, but also her best friend.

The Hendersons soon also lost their home. They were facing eviction while Omelia Henderson was alive, and when they returned from burying her in her native North Carolina, they were forced to move out.

With no money, no job and nowhere to go, Paul Henderson went to live with his father's mother, while Ms. Henderson and Shaquanna traveled from the home of one friend to the next. About a year later, they found their current apartment, on a sunny, stately street in the same Brooklyn neighborhood. The landlord welcomed them despite their financial instability, Ms. Henderson said, adding that she did not always know how she was going to pay the rent.

Through a welfare-to-work program, she found a job providing clerical support for the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service, a beneficiary of The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund. Still, with all of her worries, Ms. Henderson, who had de-



Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

Lorinda Henderson, right, and her daughter, Shaquanna, found a new home after the death of Ms. Henderson's mother, their sole provider.

pression throughout her life, became increasingly downbeat.

Then a friend persuaded her to seek counseling at the bureau, and she began to get better. By 2004, she had a steady job as an administrative assistant in the Finance Department's bail refunds unit.

In some ways, she said, the death of her mother forced her to face up to her problems. At the end of 2003, Ms. Henderson and Shaquanna began going to counseling together each week. Shaquanna started doing well in school.

But further trials awaited Ms. Henderson. Early last year, a back pain that she had had for a long time started to worsen. She had believed it was a pinched muscle or a cramp. But when she went to a doctor, she was told that one of her cervical disks, which serve as cushions between the vertebrae in the neck, was herniated, putting pressure on her spinal cord. The doctors warned that she would have to undergo surgery almost immediately or risk being paralyzed.

Ms. Henderson had the operation and was released from the hospital two weeks later, in June, several days before Shaquanna's 13th birthday.

Because she could not return to work immediately, she applied for disability insurance, but there would be a two-month delay in receiving it.

Previously recorded	\$5,367,663.05
Recorded Thursday	\$99,985.51
Total	\$5,467,648.56
Last year to date	\$5,095,335.37

Ms. Henderson again turned to the Brooklyn Bureau for help. With \$1,000 from the Neediest Cases, she was able to pay her July and August rent.

Shaquanna said she missed having the apartment to herself this past summer vacation. Her mother was always watching Lifetime Television or cleaning the house, making Shaquanna move whenever she wanted to fluff the sofa pillows.

"When she was home, I couldn't stand it," Shaquanna said, laughing.

Ms. Henderson returned to work in September. She and her daughter sat in their sun-drenched living room recently as they talked about the turns their lives have taken. Photos of a smiling Shaquanna lined the fireplace mantle.

The smell of baking chicken, string beans and rice wafted in from the kitchen.

"I always cook dinner on Sundays," Ms. Henderson said on a Sunday evening last fall, noting that she was a little slower than her mother, who always had Sunday dinner ready by 1 or 2 p.m.

Shaquanna's good grades recently earned her a spot on the dean's list. She said she was happy in junior high, with one exception: she has to wear a uniform of black slacks and a white shirt. But, she said with a slight smile, the boys have to wear ties.

Ms. Henderson says her back could go out again, and she has to be careful lifting or pulling heavy things. But when asked what was the best thing that she could imagine happening, now that she is back at work and life is on track for her and Shaquanna, she thought for a moment and replied, "I think it already has."