Girl in the Shadows: Dasani’s Homeless Life

By ANDREA ELLIOTT

SHE wakes to the sound of breathing. The smaller child must have been sleeping, but she stirs now, tossing and turning under the winter coats and wool blankets. A few feet away, their mother and father sleep beside them. They have no one to turn to.

It’s not easy being there. It’s not easy being here. It’s not easy being better. This child of New York is almost too beautiful before she smiles. She then begins to cry — the first one to be born, the first to go to school, the first to take the bus, the first to be tested, the first to be seen. The first to be examined. The first to be given. The first to be loved. The first to be left. The first to be gone.

She wakes to the sound of breathing. The smaller children lie tangled beside her, their chests rising and falling as if he were there. Their mother and father sleep beside them. They have no one to turn to.

Low-premium health policies bought through exchanges are offering discounts to consumers who buy them and out-of-pocket costs than typical employer plans. The nation’s largest city ever to declare bankruptcy was not long after a federal judge in its close neighbor. Making the rounds on Twitter.

The protest continues the day before the opening of the United Nations General Assembly, with thousands of people in 30 countries, including China, and 200 cities, including New York. The protests were not challenged by the police, and they have been characterized as a peaceful demonstration. The police have been respectful of the protesters’ rights, and they have been willing to engage in dialogue with them. The protesters have been calling for a fair and democratic election in Ukraine, and they have been demanding the resignation of President Yanukovych.

Detroit — Kevyn D. Orr, the man who must now revive Detroit, the former mayor of Cleveland, said that he was not sure whether he had any idea what to do. He said that he was a lawyer who had been a lawyer for decades, and he said that he was not sure whether he had any idea what to do. He said that he was a lawyer who had been a lawyer for decades, and he said that he was not sure whether he had any idea what to do. He said that he was a lawyer who had been a lawyer for decades, and he said that he was not sure whether he had any idea what to do.

The protests continued on Monday, with thousands of protesters answering the call to the streets, demanding the resignation of President Yanukovych and his government. The protesters were not challenged by the police, and they have been characterized as a peaceful demonstration. The police have been respectful of the protesters’ rights, and they have been willing to engage in dialogue with them. The protesters have been calling for a fair and democratic election in Ukraine, and they have been demanding the resignation of President Yanukovych.

The protests continued on Monday, with thousands of protesters answering the call to the streets, demanding the resignation of President Yanukovych and his government. The protesters were not challenged by the police, and they have been characterized as a peaceful demonstration. The police have been respectful of the protesters’ rights, and they have been willing to engage in dialogue with them. The protesters have been calling for a fair and democratic election in Ukraine, and they have been demanding the resignation of President Yanukovych.

The protests continued on Monday, with thousands of protesters answering the call to the streets, demanding the resignation of President Yanukovych and his government. The protesters were not challenged by the police, and they have been characterized as a peaceful demonstration. The police have been respectful of the protesters’ rights, and they have been willing to engage in dialogue with them. The protesters have been calling for a fair and democratic election in Ukraine, and they have been demanding the resignation of President Yanukovych.

The protests continued on Monday, with thousands of protesters answering the call to the streets, demanding the resignation of President Yanukovych and his government. The protesters were not challenged by the police, and they have been characterized as a peaceful demonstration. The police have been respectful of the protesters’ rights, and they have been willing to engage in dialogue with them. The protesters have been calling for a fair and democratic election in Ukraine, and they have been demanding the resignation of President Yanukovych.

The protests continued on Monday, with thousands of protesters answering the call to the streets, demanding the resignation of President Yanukovych and his government. The protesters were not challenged by the police, and they have been characterized as a peaceful demonstration. The police have been respectful of the protesters’ rights, and they have been willing to engage in dialogue with them. The protesters have been calling for a fair and democratic election in Ukraine, and they have been demanding the resignation of President Yanukovych.

The protests continued on Monday, with thousands of protesters answering the call to the streets, demanding the resignation of President Yanukovych and his government. The protesters were not challenged by the police, and they have been characterized as a peaceful demonstration. The police have been respectful of the protesters’ rights, and they have been willing to engage in dialogue with them. The protesters have been calling for a fair and democratic election in Ukraine, and they have been demanding the resignation of President Yanukovych.

The protests continued on Monday, with thousands of protesters answering the call to the streets, demanding the resignation of President Yanukovych and his government. The protesters were not challenged by the police, and they have been characterized as a peaceful demonstration. The police have been respectful of the protesters’ rights, and they have been willing to engage in dialogue with them. The protesters have been calling for a fair and democratic election in Ukraine, and they have been demanding the resignation of President Yanukovych.
Homeless Girl: Dasani’s Life In the Shadows

From Page A1

Chinese. After tidying the dresser drawers she
Tropicana grape juice and containers of leftover
formula distributed by the shelter is not, once
she changes, dresses and feeds, checking that the
they begin to stir on this frigid January day, Dasani
foot room with her parents and seven siblings. As
since the Great Depression, in the most unequal
nation, as one population has bounced back from the
margins, and not just in New York. Cities across
wealthy.

Dasani was born.

In the shadows of this renewal, it is Dasani's
prospects that Mr. Bloomberg explained by saying
10-story brick building, which dates back almost a
years. The family's need for a home was also grow-
1985, the city repurposed the former hospi-

The family's need for a home was also grow-
Papa Khaliq and Aviana

Homeless Girl: Dasani’s Life In the Shadows

Continued on Following Page
Girl in the Shadows: A Homeless Life

By Emily Bazelon

The boy is 13, the girl is 10, and they come from a world the rest of us barely know. They steal for food and shelter. They are homeless, and they are children. They are, in the New York City of their dreams, the C.I.A.

They are the centerpiece of the film "Girl in the Shadows," a documentary about the lives and challenges of children who live on the streets of New York City. The film centers on two children, Dasani and Sahai, who are played by Dasani McCarty and Sahai Gooden, respectively.

Dasani is a dancer, and Sahai is a student, but they both face the same struggles. They live in a shelter, where they sleep on mattresses on the floor, and they attend school, where they must learn to read and write in order to get ahead.

The film follows Dasani and Sahai as they navigate the challenges of their daily lives, and it explores their experiences with homelessness, education, and the often harsh realities of childhood poverty.

The film is a powerful and poignant reminder of the impact of poverty on children, and it serves as a call to action for all of us to do more to help these vulnerable young people.

For more information about the film and its makers, please visit www.girlintheshadowsfilm.com.
Girl in the Shadows: Dasani’s Homeless Life

By ANDREA ELLIOTT

SHE wakes to the sound of breathing. The smaller children lie tangled beside her, their chests rising and falling under winter coats and wool blankets. A few feet away, their mother and father sleep near the mop bucket they use as a toilet. Two other children share a mattress by the rotting wall where the mice live, opposite the baby, whose crib is warmed by a hair dryer perched on a milk crate.

Slipping out from her covers, the oldest girl sits at the window. On mornings like this, she can see all the way across Brooklyn to the Empire State Building, the first New York skyscraper to reach 100 floors. Her gaze always stops at that iconic temple of stone, its tip pointed celestially, its facade lit with promise.

“It makes me feel like there’s something going on out there,” says the 11-year-old girl, never one for patience. This child of New York is always running before she walks. She likes being first — the first to be born, the first to go to school, the first to make the honor roll.

Even her name, Dasani, speaks of a certain reach. The bottled water had come to Brooklyn’s bodegas just before she was born, catching the fancy of her mother, who could not afford such indulgences. It hinted at a different, upwardly mobile clientele, a set of newcomers who over the next decade would transform the borough.

Dasani’s own neighborhood, Fort Greene,
is now one of gentrification’s gems. Her family lives in the Auburn Family Residence, a decrepit city-run shelter for the homeless. It is a place where mold creeps up walls and roaches swarm, where feces and vomit plug communal toilets, where sexual predators have roamed and small children stand guard for their single mothers outside filthy showers.

It is no place for children. Yet Dasani is among 280 children at the shelter. Beyond its walls, she belongs to a vast and invisible tribe of more than 22,000 homeless children in New York, the highest number since the Great Depression, in the most unequal metropolis in America.

Nearly a quarter of Dasani’s childhood has unfolded at Auburn, where she shares a 520-square-foot room with her parents and seven siblings. As they begin to stir on this frigid January day, Dasani sets about her chores.

Her mornings begin with Baby Lele, whom she changes, dresses and feeds, checking that the formula distributed by the shelter is not, once again, expired. She then wipes down the family’s small refrigerator, stuffed with lukewarm milk, Tropicana grape juice and containers of leftover formula distributed by the shelter is not, once again, expired. She then wipes down the family’s small refrigerator, stuffed with lukewarm milk, Tropicana grape juice and containers of leftover formulation, the tall, iron fence that envelops what she calls “the jail.” She steps into the light, and is met by the worn brick facade of the Walt Whitman projects across the street.

She heads east along Myrtle Avenue and, three blocks later, has crossed into another New York: the shaded, graceful abode of Fort Greene’s brownstones, which fetch millions of dollars.

“Black is beautiful, black is me,” she sings under her breath as her mother trails behind.

Dasani suddenly stops, puzzling at the pavement. Its condition, she notes, is clearly superior on this side of Myrtle.

“ Worlds change real fast, don’t it?” her mother says.

In the short span of Dasani’s life, her city has been reborn. The skyline soars with luxury towers, beacons of a new gilded age. More than 200 miles of fresh bike lanes connect commuters to high-tech jobs, passing through upgraded parks and avant-garde projects like the High Line and Jane’s Carousel. Posh retail has spread from its Manhattan roots to the city’s other boroughs. These are the crown jewels of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg’s long reign, which began just seven months after Dasani was born.

In the shadows of this renewal, it is Dasani’s population who have been left behind. The ranks of the poor have risen, with almost half
of New Yorkers living near or below the poverty line. Their traditional anchors — affordable housing and jobs that pay a living wage — have weakened as the city reorders itself around the whims of the wealthy.

Long before Mayor-elect Bill de Blasio rose to power by denouncing the city’s inequality, children like Dasani were being pushed further into the margins, and not just in New York. Cities across the nation have become flash points of polarization, as one population has bounced back from the recession while another continues to struggle. One in five American children is now living in poverty, giving the United States the highest child poverty rate of any developed nation except for Romania.

This bodes poorly for the future. Decades of research have shown the staggering societal costs of children in poverty. They grow up with less education and lower earning power. They are more likely to have drug addiction, psychological trauma and disease, or wind up in prison.

Dasani does not need the proof of abstract research. All of these plights run through her family. Her future is further threatened by the fact of her homelessness, which has been shown, even in short spells, to bring disastrous consequences.

Dasani’s circumstances are largely the outcome of parental dysfunction. While nearly one-third of New York’s homeless children are supported by a working adult, her mother and father are unemployed, have a history of arrests and are battling drug addiction.

Yet Dasani’s trials are not solely of her parents’ making. They are also the result of decisions made a world away, in the marble confines of City Hall. With the economy growing in 2004, the Bloomberg administration adopted sweeping new policies intended to push the homeless to become more self-reliant. They would no longer get priority access to public housing.
and other programs, but would receive short-term help with rent. Poor people would be empowered, the mayor argued, and homelessness would decline.

But the opposite happened. As rents steadily rose and low-income wages stagnated, chronically poor families like Dasani’s found themselves stuck in a shelter system with fewer exits. Families are now languishing there longer than ever — a development that Mr. Bloomberg explained by saying shelters offered “a much more pleasurable experience than they ever had before.”

Just three days before the mayor made that comment at a news conference in August 2012, an inspector at Auburn stopped by Dasani’s crowded room, noting that a mouse was “running around and going into the walls,” which had “many holes.”

“Please assist,” the inspector added. “There is infant in room.”

Dasani was about to start sixth grade at a promising new school. This would be a pivotal year of her childhood — one already marked by more longing and loss than most adults ever see.

A tangle of three dramas had yet to unspool. There was the question of whether Dasani’s family would remain intact. Her mother had just been reunited with the children on the condition that she and her husband stay off drugs. The city’s Administration for Children’s Services was watching closely. Any slips, and the siblings could wind up in foster care, losing their parents and, most likely, one another.

The family’s need for a home was also growing desperate. The longer they stayed in that one room, the more they seemed to fall apart. Yet rents were impossibly high in the city, and a quarter-million people were waiting for the rare vacancy in public housing. Families like Dasani’s had been leaving the state. This was the year, then, that her parents made a promise: to save enough money to go somewhere else, maybe as far as the Pocono Mountains, in Pennsylvania.

Dasani could close her eyes and see it. “It’s quiet and it’s a lot of grass.”

In the absence of this long-awaited home, there was only school. But it remained to be seen whether Dasani’s new middle school, straining under budget cuts, could do enough to fill the voids of her life.

For children like Dasani, school is not just a place to cultivate a hungry mind. It is a refuge. The right school can provide routine, nourishment and the guiding hand of responsible adults.

But school also had its perils. Dasani was hitting the age when girls prove their worth through fighting. And she was her mother’s daughter, a fearless fighter.

She was also on the cusp of becoming something more, something she could feel but not yet see, if only the right things happened and the right people came along.

Dasani is a short, wiry girl whose proud posture overwhelms her 4-foot-8 frame. She has a delicate, oval face and luminous brown eyes that watch everything, owl-like. Her expression veers from wonder to mischief. Strangers often remark on her beauty — her high cheekbones and smooth skin — but the comments never seem to register.

What she knows is that she has been blessed with perfect teeth. In a family where braces are the stuff of fantasy, having good teeth is a lottery win.

On the subway, Dasani can blend in with children who are better off. It is an ironic fact of being poor in a rich city that the donated garments Dasani and her siblings wear lend them the veneer of affluence, at least from a distance. Used purple Uggs and Patagonia fleeces cover thinning socks and fraying jeans. A Phil & Teds rain cover, fished from a garbage bin, protects Baby Lele’s rickety stroller.

Dasani tells herself that brand names don’t matter. She knows such yearnings will go unanswered, so better not to have them. But once in a while, when by some miracle her mother produces a new pair of Michael Jordan sneakers, Dasani finds herself succumbing to the same exercise: She wears them sparingly, and only indoors, hoping to keep them spotless. It never works.

Best to try to blend in, she tells herself, while not caring when you don’t.

She likes being small because “I can slip through things.” In the blur of her city’s crowded streets, she is just another face. What people do not see is a homeless girl whose mother succumbed to crack more than once, whose father went to prison for selling drugs, and whose
she changes, dresses and feeds, checking that the
that pay a living wage — have weakened as the
roots to the city's other boroughs. These are the
sel. Posh retail has spread from its Manhattan
three blocks later, has crossed into another New

Nearly a quarter of Dasani's childhood has un-

Dasani guards her feelings closely, dispensing

Dasani' s Life

parents made a promise: to save enough money to

were impossibly high in the city, and a quarter-

ing desperate. The longer they

unemployed, have a history of arrests and are bat-

ment. Its condition, she notes, is clearly superior

crown jewels of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg's

Bloomberg took office in 2002, New York's home-

food, asbestos exposure, lead paint and vermin.

Bloomberg took office in 2002, New York's home-

century, was formerly Cumberland Hospital, one of

NIJAI

Dasani could close her eyes and see it. “It's

Hand-washed clothes line the guards on the win-

a long, dark gap where mice congregate.

a mattress, bicycles and coats piled high. To the left

inoperable.

There are few signs that children live at Au-

on the front lawn. In a city that has invested mil-

MENT. Its condition, she notes, is clearly superior

met by the worn brick facade of the Walt Whitman

projects across the street.

escapable. In the presence of her brothers and sis-

laces or doling out peanut butter sandwiches, tak-

with anger through humor. Beneath it all is a child

“I have a lot on my plate,” she says, taking in-

ASANI ticks through their faces, the girls

September morning. Fresh braids fall to one side of

in a shelter system with fewer exits. Families are

been reunited with the children on the condition

family would remain intact. Her mother had just

promising new school. This would be a pivotal year

But school also had its perils. Dasani was hit-

she wore a uniform, the new faces. She will hopefully slip

noise of this first day — the start of sixth grade, the

ASANI is a short, wiry girl whose proud

posture overwhelms her 4-foot-8 frame.

Runny nose makes no difference. Dasani and her

When she was growing up, her mother used to

She wears them sparingly, and only indoors, hop-

She does not cry. She does not cower from the

I see, if only the right things happened and the right

What she knows is that she has been blessed

She has a quiet, feral smile, a back that is

“Mommy say” before reciting.

But Dasani's trials are not solely of her par-

But the opposite happened. As rents steadily

Nope.”

KHALIQ

NIIJAI

BABY LELE AND AVIANNA

PRRRA

BABY LELE

A25

HAD, LEFT, AND MAYA

BABY LELE
cousins and aunts have become the anonymous casualties of gang shootings, AIDS and domestic violence.

“That’s not gonna be me,” she says. “Nuh-uh. Nope.”

Dasani speaks with certainty. She often begins a sentence with “Mommy say” before reciting, verbatim, some new bit of learned wisdom, such as “camomile tea cures a bad stomach” or “that lady is a dope fiend.” She likes facts. She rarely wavers, or hints at doubt, even as her life is consumed by it.

When strangers are near, Dasani refers to Auburn as “that place.” It is separate from her, and distant. But in the company of her siblings, she calls it “the house,” transforming a crowded room into an imaginary home.

In reality, Auburn is neither. The forbidding, 10-story brick building, which dates back almost a century, was formerly Cumberland Hospital, one of seven public hospitals that closed because of the city’s 1970s fiscal crisis.

In 1985, the city repurposed the former hospital into a shelter for families. This was the dawn of the period known as “modern homelessness,” driven by wage stagnation, Reagan-era cutbacks and the rising cost of homes. By the time Mayor Bloomberg took office in 2002, New York’s homeless population had reached 31,063 — a record for the city, which is legally obligated to provide shelter.

Among the city’s 152 family shelters, Auburn became known as a place of last resort, a dreaded destination for the chronically homeless.

City and state inspectors have repeatedly cited the shelter for deplorable conditions, including sexual misconduct by staff members, spoiled food, asbestos exposure, lead paint and vermin. Auburn has no certificate of occupancy, as required by law, and lacks an operational plan that meets state regulations. Most of the shelter’s smoke detectors and alarms have been found to be inoperable.

There are few signs that children live at Auburn. Locked gates prevent them from setting foot on the front lawn. In a city that has invested millions of dollars in new “green spaces,” Auburn’s is often overrun with weeds.

Inside, prepackaged meals are served in a cafeteria where Dasani and her siblings wait in one line for their food before heading to another line to heat it in one of two microwaves that hundreds of residents share. Tempers fly and fights explode. The routine can last more than an hour before the children take their first bite.

The family’s room is the scene of debilitating chaos: stacks of dirty laundry, shoes stuffed under a mattress, bicycles and coats piled high. To the left of the door, beneath a decrepit sink where Baby Lele is bathed, the wall has rotted through, leaving a long, dark gap where mice congregate.

A few feet away, Dasani’s legally blind, 10-year-old sister, Nijai, sleeps on a mattress that has come apart at the seams, its rusted coils splayed. Hand-washed clothes line the guards on the windows, which are shaded by gray wool blankets strung from the ceiling. A sticky fly catcher dangles overhead, dotted with dead insects.

There is no desk or chair in the room — just a maze of mattresses and dressers. A flat-screen television rests on two orange milk crates.

To eat, the children sit on the cracked linoleum floor, which never feels clean no matter how much they mop. Homework is a challenge. The shelter’s one recreation room can hardly accommodate Auburn’s hundreds of children, leaving Dasani and her siblings to study, hunched over, on their mattresses.

Sometimes it feels like too many bodies sharing the same air. “There’s no space to breathe ‘cause they breathe up all the oxygen,” Dasani says.

She carves out small, sacred spaces: a portion of the floor at mealtime, an upturned crate by the window, a bathroom stall.

The children spend hours at the playgrounds of the surrounding housing projects, where a subtle hierarchy is at work. If they are seen enough times emerging from Auburn, they are pegged as the neighborhood’s outliers, the so-called shelter boogies.

Nothing gnaws at Dasani more. A mucus-stained nose suggests a certain degradation, not just the absence of tissues, but of a parent willing to wipe or a home so unclean that a runny nose makes no difference. Dasani and her siblings can get hungry enough to lose their concentration in school, but they are forever wiping one another’s noses.

When Dasani hears “shelter boogies,” all she can think to say is what her mother always
Dasani ticks through their faces, the girls from the projects who might turn up at this new school. Some are kind enough not to gossip about where she lives.

The others might be distracted by the sheer noise of this first day — the start of sixth grade, the new uniform, the new faces. She will hopefully slip by those girls unseen.

She approaches the school’s steps on a clear September morning. Fresh braids fall to one side of her face, clipped by bright yellow bows. Her required polo and khakis have been pressed with a hair straightener, since Auburn forbids irons.

Her heart is pounding. She will be sure to take a circuitous route home. She will focus in class and mind her manners in the schoolyard. She has only to climb those steps.

Minutes pass.

“Come on, there’s nothing to be scared about,” her 34-year-old mother, Chanel, finally says, nudging Dasani up the stairs.

She passes through the metal detector, joining 507 other middle and high school students at the Susan S. McKinney Secondary School of the Arts.

Housed in a faded brick building two blocks from Auburn, McKinney is a poor-kids’ version of La Guardia Arts, the elite Manhattan public school that inspired the television series “Fame.” Threadbare curtains adorn its theater. Stage props are salvaged from a nearby trash bin. Dance class is so crowded that students practice in intervals.

An air of possibility permeates the school, named after the first African-American woman to become a physician in New York State.
There is Officer Jami-
on Andrews, the security
guard who moonlights as
a rap lyricist, and Zakiya
Harris, the dance teacher
who runs a studio on the
side. And there is Faith
Hester, the comedic, eye-
lash-battling humanities
teacher who wrote a self-
help book titled “Create a
Life You Love Living” and
fancies her own reality
show.

The children also
strive. Among them is a
voice that periodically lifts
the school with a “Madama
Butterfly” aria. When the
students hear it, they know
that Jasmine, a sublimely gifted junior, is sing-
ing in the office of the principal, Paula Holmes.

The school matriarch closes her eyes as she
listens. It may be her only tranquil moment.

Miss Holmes is a towering woman, by turns
steely and soft. She wears a Bluetooth like a per-
manent earring and tends toward power suits.
She has been at McKinney’s helm for 15 years
and runs the school like a naval ship, peering
down its gleaming hallways as if searching the
seas for enemy vessels.

Students stammer in her presence. She
leaves her office door permanently open, like a
giant, unblinking eye. A poster across the hall
depicts a black man in sagging jeans standing
before the White House, opposite President
Obama. “To live in this crib,” the poster reads,
“you have to look the part.”

Miss Holmes has no tolerance for sagging —
sartorial, attitudinal or otherwise.

McKinney’s roots run deep. Dasani’s own
grandmother studied there as a girl. Most of
the middle school students are black, live in the
surrounding projects and qualify for free or re-
duced meals. They eat in shifts in the school’s
basement cafeteria, watched over by the avun-
cular Frank Heyward, who blasts oldies from
a boombox, telling students, “I got shoes older
than you.”

For all of McKinney’s pluck, its burdens are
great. In the last six years, the city has cut the
school’s budget by a quarter as its population
declined. Fewer teachers share a greater load.
After-school resources have thinned, but not the
needs of students whose families are torn apart
by gun violence and drug use. McKinney’s staff
psychologist shuttles between three schools like
a firefighter.

And now, a charter school is angling to move
in. If successful, it will eventually claim McKin-
ney’s treasured top floor, home to its theater
class, dance studio and art lab. Teachers and
parents are bracing for battle, announced by fli-
er warning against the “apartheid” effects of a
charter co-location.

Dasani knows about charter schools. Her
former school, P.S. 67, shared space with one.
She never spoke to those children, whose clas-
srooms were stocked with new computers.
Dasani’s own school was failing by the time she
left.

At McKinney, Dasani quickly draws the no-
tice of the older students, and not because she
is short, though the nickname “Shorty” sticks.
It is her electricity. When they dote on her, she
giggles. But say the wrong thing and she turns
fierce, letting the four-letter words fly.

It is still September when Dasani’s temper
lands her in the principal’s office.

“Please don’t call my mother,” Dasani whis-
pers.

Miss Holmes is seated in a rolling pleather
chair held together by duct tape. She stares at
the anguished girl. She has been at McKinney
long enough to know when a child’s transgressions at school might bring a beating at home.

The principal slowly scoots her chair up to Dasani and leans within inches of her face.

“O.K.,” she says softly. “Let’s make a deal.”

From that day forward, Dasani will be on her best behavior. In turn, Miss Holmes will keep what happens at school in school.

With that, she waves Dasani off, fighting the urge to smile. She can’t help but like this feisty little girl.

**Dasani** closes her eyes and tilts her head toward the ceiling of her classroom. She has missed breakfast again.

She tries to drift. She sees Florida. For a child who has never been to the beach, television ads are transporting. She is walking in the sand. She crashes into the waves.

“Dasaaaaaan!” her teacher sings out.

She opens her eyes.

There is Miss Hester, batting those lashes.

Both she and another teacher, Kenya Mabry, were raised in the projects. They dress and talk with a polish that impresses Dasani, who studies them.

Miss Hester is also watching Dasani. She does not yet know where Dasani lives, or how hungry she gets. But Miss Hester finds two things striking: how late she arrives some mornings and how capable this girl is in spite of it. Without even trying, she keeps up.

Dasani possesses what adults at McKinney consider an intuitive approach to learning, the kind that comes when rare smarts combine with extreme life circumstances. Her intelligence is “uncanny” and “far surpasses peers her age,” one counselor writes. “Student is continuously using critical analysis to reflect upon situations and interactions.”

Principal Holmes is also taking note. She can already see in this “precocious little button” the kind of girl who could be anything — even a Supreme Court justice — if only she harnesses her gifts early enough. “Dasani has something that hasn’t even been unleashed yet,” Miss Holmes says. “It’s still being cultivated.”

For now, Dasani’s most honed skill might be obfuscation. She works hard to hide her struggles, staying quiet as other children brag about their new cellphones or sleepovers with friends.

If there is one place she feels free, it is dance class. When she walks into McKinney’s studio, and the music starts, her body releases whatever she is feeling.

“When I’m happy I dance fast,” she says. “When I’m sad I dance slow. When I’m upset I dance both.”

Dasani has been dancing for as long as she can remember, well before she earned her first dollar a few years ago break-dancing in Times Square. But the study of dance, as something practiced rather than spontaneous, this is new. She is learning to point her toes like a ballerina, and to fall back into a graceful bridge.

Perhaps it is no accident that amid the bedlam of Dasani’s home life — the missed welfare appointments and piles of unwashed clothes — she is drawn to a craft of discipline. Here, in this room, time is kept and routines are mapped with precision and focus.

Dasani never tires of rehearsing the same moves, or scrutinizing more experienced dancers. Her gaze is often fixed on a tall, limber eighth grader named Sahai.

Sahai is the middle school’s valedictorian. A breathtaking dancer, she has long silky hair and carries herself like a newly crowned queen. She is a girl with enough means to accessorize queen. When Dasani looks at Sahai, she is taking the measure of all she is not.

You can be popular in one of three ways, Dasani’s mother always says. Dress fly. Do good in school. Fight.

The first option is out of the question. While Dasani clings to her uniform, other students wear coveted Adidas hoodies and Doc Marten boots. In dance class, Dasani does not even have a leotard.

So she applies herself in school. “I have a lot of possibility,” she says. “I do.”

Her strongest subject is English, where a
poem she writes is tacked to a teacher’s wall.

By October, she is on the honor roll, just as her life at Auburn is coming apart.

It is something of an art to sleep among nine other people. One learns not to hear certain sounds or smell certain smells.

But some things still intrude on Dasani’s sleep. There is the ceaseless drip of that decaying sink, and the scratching of hungry mice. It makes no difference when the family lays out traps and hangs its food from the ceiling in a plastic bag. Auburn’s mice always return, as stubborn as the “ghetto squirrels,” in Chanel’s lingo, that forage the trash for Chinese fried chicken.

Dasani shares a twin mattress and three dresser drawers with her mischievous and portly sister, Avianna, only one year her junior. Their 35-year-old stepfather, Supreme, has raised them as his own. They consider him their father and call him Daddy.

Supreme married Chanel nine years earlier, bringing two children from a previous marriage. The boy, Khaliq, had trouble speaking. He had been trapped with his dead, pregnant mother after she fell down a flight of stairs. The girl, Naijai, had a rare genetic eye disease and was going blind. They were the same tender ages as Dasani and Avianna, forming a homeless Brady Bunch as Supreme and Chanel had four more children.

Two of Dasani’s half-sisters, 7-year-old Maya and 6-year-old Hada, share the mattress to her right. The 5-year-old they call Papa sleeps by himself because he wets the bed. In the crib is Baby Lele, who is tended to by Dasani when her parents are listless from their daily dose of methadone.

Chanel and Supreme take the synthetic opioid as part of their drug treatment program. It has essentially become a substitute addiction.

The more time they spend in this room, the smaller it feels. Nothing stays in order. Everything is exposed — marital spats, frayed under-wear, the onset of puberty, the mischief other children hide behind closed doors. Supreme paces erratically. Chanel cannot check her tem-
per. For Dasani and her siblings, to act like rambunctious children is to risk a beating.

By late fall, Chanel and Supreme are fighting daily about money.

It has been years since Supreme lost his job as a barber and Chanel stopped working as a janitor for the parks department. He cuts hair inside the shelter and sells pirated DVDs on the street while she hawks odds and ends from discount stores. In a good month, their combined efforts can bring in a few hundred dollars.

This is not one of those times. Supreme is keeping tight control of the family’s welfare income — $1,285 in food stamps and $1,122 in survivor benefits for his first wife’s death. He refuses to give Chanel cash for laundry.

Soon, all of Dasani’s uniforms are stained. At school, she is now wearing donated clothes and her hair is unkempt, inviting the dreaded designation of “nappy.” Rumors are circulating about where she lives. Only six of the middle school’s 157 students reside in shelters.

When the truth about Dasani emerges, she does nothing to contradict it. She is a proud girl. She must find a way to turn the truth, like other unforeseeable calamities, in her favor.

She begins calling herself “ghetto.” She dares the girls to fight her and challenges the boys to arm-wrestle, flexing the biceps she has built doing pull-ups in Fort Greene Park. The boys watch slack-jawed as Dasani demonstrates the push-ups she has also mastered, earning her the nickname “muscle girl.”

Her teachers are flummoxed. They assume that she has shed her uniform because she is trying to act tough. In fact, the reverse is true.

CHILLY, November wind whips across Auburn Place, rustling the plastic cover of a soiled mattress in a trash bin outside the shelter.

Chanel and Supreme stand nearby, waiting for their children to come from school. They are still short on cash. The children had pitched in $5.05 from collecting cans and bottles over the weekend.

Chanel inspects the mattress. Clean, it might fetch $10. But it is stained with feces. Janitors wearing masks and gloves had removed it from a squalid room where three small children lived, defecating on the floor. Their mother rarely bathed them, and they had no shoes on the day she gathered them in a hurry and left.

“You can smell it?” Chanel asks Supreme.

“No, I can see it,” he says, curling his lip.

“Those are the people that they need to be calling A.C.S. on,” Chanel says. At the shelter, the abbreviation for the Administration for Children’s Services is uttered with the same kind of alarm that the C.I.A. can stoke overseas.

“Nasty girl,” Chanel says, scrunching her nose.

Everyone knows Chanel. She weighs 215 pounds and her face is a constellation of freckles lit by a gaptoothed smile. She wraps her copper-hued hair in a tubular scarf. The street is her domain. When she walks, people often step to the side — not in deference to her ample frame so much as her magisterial air.

Chanel is in everyone’s business, scoping out snitches, offering homeopathic remedies, tattling on a girl’s first kiss. A five-minute walk through Fulton Mall can take Chanel hours for all the greetings, gossip, recriminations and nostalgia. She has a remarkable nose for people, sniffing out phoniness in seconds. Those who smile too much are wearing “a frown turned upside down.”

She is often spoiling for a fight, or leaving people in the stitches of laughter. While others want the life of the music mogul Jay-Z, Chanel would settle for being his pet. “Just let me be the dog. I don’t care where you put me.” When Chanel laughs, she tilts her head back and unleashes a thunderous cackle.

Dasani can detect her mother’s laugh from blocks away. Today, she returns from school lugging a plastic bag of clothes donated by a security guard at McKinney.

Dasani begins rummaging through the bag. She pulls out a white Nautica ski jacket and holds it up to her shoulders. It is too wide, but she likes it. “Look, Mommy!” she says, modeling her new coat.

“That fits you real nice,” Chanel coos.

Suddenly, Supreme leaps into the air. His monthly benefits have arrived, announced by a recording on his prepaid welfare phone. He sets off to reclaim his gold teeth from the pawnshop and buy new boots for the children at Cookie’s, a favored discount store in Fulton Mall. The money will be gone by week’s end.

Supreme and Chanel have been scolded
about their lack of financial discipline in countless meetings with the city agencies that monitor the family.

But when that monthly check arrives, Supreme and Chanel do not think about abstractions like “responsibility” and “self-reliance.” They lose themselves in the delirium that a round of ice creams brings. They feel the sudden, exquisite release born of wearing those gold fronts again — of appearing like a person who has rather than a person who lacks.

The next day, Dasani goes to school wearing her new Cookie’s boots. Feeling amped, she gets into a verbal spat with some boys in gym class and must spend her lunch hour in the principal’s office.

Miss Holmes glowers at Dasani, who tries to leaven the mood by bragging about her place on the honor roll. The principal is unmoved. Dasani still has a B average.

“I want the highest end of the honor roll,” Miss Holmes says. “I want more. You have to want more, too.”

Dasani stares at her tray. The discussion returns to her behavior in gym class.

“While we care for you, we’re not going to take any crap,” Miss Holmes says. “You understand?”

Trying not to cry, Dasani examines her food — a slice of cheese pizza, chocolate milk, a red apple. She wrinkles her nose. Miss Holmes has seen it before, the child too proud to show hunger.

“Can you hurry up?” Miss Holmes says. “The drama with the pizza is not working for me.”

Silence.

“I’ll feed you,” Miss Holmes says. “I will feed you. You don’t think I’ll feed you? Bring the tray.”

Dasani slowly lifts the pizza slice to her mouth, cracking a smile.

Miss Holmes has seen plenty of distressed children, but few have both the depth of Dasani’s troubles and the height of her promise. There is not much Miss Holmes can do about life outside school. She knows this is a child who needs a sponsor, who “needs to see ‘The Nutcracker,’” who needs her own computer. There are many such children.

Here at school, Miss Holmes must work with what she has.

“Apples are very good for you,” she says, smiling. “Bananas are, too.”

“I don’t like those,” Dasani says.

“Pretend you like them.”

When Dasani is finished, she brings her empty tray to the principal for inspection. Miss Holmes gestures at Dasani’s milk-stained mouth.

“Fix it,” she says. “Go.”

The tree is covered in Christmas lights that mask the lack of ornaments.

The children gather around it inside a dilapidated, two-story rowhouse in East New York, Brooklyn — the closest thing they have to a home. It belongs to Chanel’s ailing godmother, Sherry, whom the children call Grandma.

Sherry’s day care center once occupied the first floor, where fading decals of Bambi now share space with empty liquor bottles. Chanel’s two unemployed brothers, 22-year-old Josh and 39-year-old Lamont, stay in the dark, musty basement. When the children visit, they spend most of their time upstairs, sleeping on a drafty wooden floor beneath a Roman-numeral clock that is permanently stopped at 2:47.

Sherry’s electricity has been cut, but the tree remains lit and the heat stays on, via a cable illicitly connected to a neighbor’s power supply. Christmas gifts are scarce: coloring books, a train set, stick-on tattoos, one doll for each girl. A few nights later, the children are roused
by shouts and a loud crash. Uncle Josh has punched his hand through a window and is threatening to kill Uncle Lamont.

Josh lunges at his brother with a knife. The men tumble to the floor as Chanel throws herself between them. Upstairs, the children cower and scream.

Dasani calls out orders: “Nobody move! Let the adults handle it!”

Sirens rattle the block. Josh is taken away in handcuffs as an ambulance races Lamont to the hospital with a battered eye. They had been fighting over a teenage girl.

January brings relief, but not because of the new year. It is the start of tax season, when Dasani’s parents — and everyone they seem to know — rush to file for the earned-income tax credit, a kind of bonanza for the poor.

Their tax refunds can bring several thousand dollars, which could be enough to put down a rent deposit and leave the shelter.

On Jan. 7, the family heads to Manhattan for a rare outing. They take the Q train, which barrels high across the East River. The city’s lights shimmer, making Chanel think of opportunity.

They will start looking for a home soon, she says.

“I wanna go somewhere where it’s quiet,” Dasani says.

“I wanna go somewhere where there’s trees,” Chanel says. “I just wanna see a bunch of trees and grass.”

“Daddy say that he gonna buy this house with a lot of land with grass,” Dasani says, “so that each of us would get a part, so that you can do whatever you want with that part of the land.”

Supreme sits far-off, listening to music on his phone. Baby Lele wails.

Suddenly, Chanel spots Chinatown. The children squeal. Dasani mentions a book she read about the Great Wall of China.

“That’s not this town,” Chanel says.

“It’s a big wall though,” Dasani says.

“That’s the real Chinatown,” Chanel says.

“This is the New York Chinatown, where they got Chinese people in Popeyes.”

Dasani presses her forehead against the window and cups her hands around her eyes, as if preserving the view for herself.

OPPORTUNITY comes rarely, but Dasani is always waiting. She wakes early on Jan. 18, hours in advance of a track competition known for rescuing girls from the ghetto.

She has no running shoes, just a pair of imitation Conversees. She is unknown in the rarefied world of athletic recruiters and private coaches. But ask anyone in her small corner of Brooklyn, from the crossing guards to the drunks, and they will say two things about this tiny girl with the wayward braids: She is strong like a boy and can run like the wind.

Dasani heads out in the icy cold with her mother and two of her sisters. They walk a mile before arriving at the manicured grounds of the Pratt Institute in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Clinton Hill, which is hosting the Colgate Women’s Games.

The amateur track and field series is a magnet for athletic recruiters, and some of its champions have gone as far as the Olympics. Dasani will compete in the 200-meter dash. She heads
to the bathroom to change.

“She got shorts to put on?” one of the organizers asks. Dasani reaches for her leggings.

“Those are the sneakers?” the woman frowns.

Wearing no socks, Dasani ties her rainbow laces and walks to the track. When her number is called, she takes her place among four other girls.

The blank fires and she is off, ahead of the pack.

Win, Dasani tells herself. Win.

At the first bend, she trips and falls behind. By the second turn, Dasani has caught up with the lead runner.

“Run, Dasani!” Chanel screams. “Run!” They are in a dead heat for the finish line.

Dasani comes in second. It hardly matters that her time is insufficient to make it past the preliminaries. They leave the stadium feeling euphoric.

“My baby’s going to the Olympics,” Chanel crows. As they walk west along Willoughby Avenue, they talk of finding a trainer. Chanel starts singing her favorite Luther Vandross song, “A House Is Not a Home.”

The girls have heard it enough times to sing along.

A chair is still a chair
Even when there’s no one sittin’ there
But a chair is not a house
And a house is not a home
When there’s no one there
to hold you tight.

They turn north on Carlton Avenue, passing a renovated brick townhouse with sleek, metal window frames.

A skinny brunette is unloading her station wagon. At the sight of Dasani’s family, she freezes. She smiles nervously and moves slowly to her car, grabbing an infant from the car seat.

The mood shifts.

“She thinks we gonna jump her,” Chanel says as she keeps walking. The shelter is only three blocks away.

“Why do they feel like they’re so apart? She’s just two steps away from us. If you got jumped out here, a black man would be the first to save your ass. That’s what I feel like telling her.”

When they reach Myrtle Avenue, Chanel goes searching for a beer at her favorite corner store. Dasani trails her.

Inside, the short-order cook, a Mexican girl, stares at Chanel suspiciously.

“Don’t look at me,” Chanel says. “You so nice, that’s why I see you,” the girl responds cockily.

“You better watch that grill,” Chanel says. “I don’t want to scare you.”

“You think you scare me?” the girl yells.

“Let’s fight right now!” Chanel shouts.

“Wait for me outside!” the girl calls back.

Chanel moves toward her, reaching for a mop.

“Mommy!” Dasani screams.

The owner, Salim, races toward Chanel.

“I’ma wait for your ass when you come out,” Chanel says. “What time she get off?”

“You run your mouth,” Salim says, gently leading Chanel away, as he has done before.

As they leave, Dasani turns to the cook.

“She gonna knock you stupid, Chinese lady,” Dasani says.

“Don’t use those words,” Salim cries out. “You’re not supposed to turn out like your mother.”

SOURCE NOTES

“It makes me feel like there’s something going on out there” — Interview with Dasani. All quotes in the series are either from interviews or scenes witnessed by The New York Times.

It is a place where mold creeps up walls — Interviews with residents and photographs by The Times; videos and photos taken by residents; and city and state inspection reports.

Dasani is among 280 children at Auburn, and more than 22,000 homeless children — Department of Homeless Services. The Auburn figure is from January, the month in which this scene occurs. Unless otherwise stated, all references to the city’s homeless population are provided by D.H.S.
The highest number since the Great Depression — The city began recording its shelter population in the early 1980s, when the shelter system was created at the dawn of the period known as “modern homelessness.” The city’s current homeless population of more than 50,000 surpasses anything in the city’s record, and is the highest known figure since the Great Depression, according to Coalition for the Homeless.

New York is the most unequal metropolis in America — United States Census Bureau.

Almost half of New Yorkers live near or below the poverty line — New York City Center for Economic Opportunity. Forty-six percent of New Yorkers were within 150 percent of the city poverty level in 2011.

One in five American children is now living in poverty — United States Census Bureau. The measurement of poverty is the source of ongoing debate, but even by more conservative measures, the United States compares poorly with other developed nations.

Less affordable housing — Victor Bach, Community Service Society of New York.

Fewer jobs that pay a living wage — Interviews with James Parrott of the Fiscal Policy Institute and Mr. Bach.

The United States has the highest child poverty rate of any developed nation except for Romania — Unicef.

The staggering societal costs of children in poverty — Studies include The Social Genome Project and The Long Reach of Early Childhood Poverty — Stanford University.

Nearly one-third of New York’s homeless children are supported by a working adult — Analysis by the Coalition for the Homeless, based on D.H.S. data.

Rents steadily rose and low-income wages stagnated — United States Census Bureau and interviews with Mr. Parrott and Mr. Bach.

Mayor Bloomberg saying shelters offered a “much more pleasurable experience” — Article in The Times in August 2012.

The inspector noting a “mouse running around” — Family’s Department of Homeless Services case file.

The city’s Administration for Children’s Services was watching closely — Court documents, interviews with the family, the lawyer for the children and city officials.

A quarter-million people were waiting for the rare vacancy in public housing — Mayor’s office.

By the time Mayor Bloomberg took office in 2002, New York’s homeless population had reached 31,063, a record for the city — Department of Homeless Services. This figure is from January 2002, when the mayor was sworn in.

City and state inspectors have repeatedly cited the shelter for deplorable conditions — Documents provided to The Times by the Fort Greene Strategic Neighborhood Action Partnership, Legal Aid Society, Coalition for the Homeless, the state’s Office for Temporary and Disability Assistance and the Department of Homeless Services.

Auburn has no certificate of occupancy — The city’s Buildings Department, which since 1986 has given Auburn permission to operate as a homeless shelter in spite of its lack of certificate.

In the last six years, the city has cut McKinney’s budget by a quarter as its population declined — Education Department. Unless otherwise stated, information about McKinney is provided by the school.
Dasani’s former school, P.S. 67, was failing by the time she left — Education Department.

Her intelligence is “uncanny” — Records taken by the counselor and provided to The Times by the family.

Their 35-year-old stepfather Supreme — He is identified by the name he took as an adult.

The girl, Nijai, had a rare genetic eye disease — She suffers from familial exudative vitreoretinopathy, according to her optometrist at Lighthouse for the Blind in New York.

The family’s welfare income of $1,285 in food stamps and $1,122 in survivor benefits — According to the family’s records with the Human Resources Administration, pertaining to November 2012. Over the year, the family’s food stamp allotment has fluctuated, dipping to as low as $786.

Only six of the middle school’s 157 students reside in shelters — McKinney data for fall 2012.

Janitors wearing masks and gloves removed the mattress; the children defecated on the floor — Interviews with Supreme, Chanel and Dasani’s siblings.

Josh lunges at his brother with a knife — Police report and interviews with Josh, Chanel, Sherry and the children.
AN ELF MAY BE AN AGENT

A Future Resting on a Fragile Foundation

By ANDREA ELLIOTT

GRACE MANSION is something of an oddity. In a city with a 2 percent vacancy rate and a shortage of public housing, the mansion sits on 11 pristine acres of the Upper East Side.

It has been more than a decade since Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg chose to remain in his incumbent residence, converting Grace Mansion to serve as a state residence for visiting heads of state. But last week the mansion was born again. It was rededicated as the official residence of the mayor of New York City.

Grace Mansion is a pillar of foreign policy and a close relationship with North Korea has considered strategically convenient. China and nowhere is the downfall of its former comrades watched. The spectacle of Mr. Jang’s humiliation and execution and not live in it?

“Look at that fireplace!” she marvels as her downstairs step into the parlor where Mrs. Bloomberg has given news conferences. The floor guide, a woman wearing gold-embroidered surcoat and tangerine lipstick, narrows eyes as she turns to check a miniature map of a museum and room for size.

It never occurs to Dasani that the mayor does not live here. Who could have a museum and not live in it?

“Look at that fireplace!” she marvels as her downstairs step into the parlor where Mrs. Bloomberg has given news conferences. The floor guide, a woman wearing gold-embroidered surcoat and tangerine lipstick, narrows eyes as she turns to check a miniature map of a museum and room for size.


La Russa and Bobby Cox. By MATT FLEGENHEIMER

December 10, 2013

SOME PARTS OF DRAFT ARE MORE STEINTHAN FINANCIA

Neigh

Your Medical Costs (Maybe)

Police Take On Protestors in Ukraine


Your Medical Costs (Maybe)

Police Take On Protestors in Ukraine


A Future Rests On a Foundation That’s Fragile

Dasani of Auburn Family Residence, a four-poster mahogany bed.

New York’s homeless children have an abysmal rate of graduation and an even higher rate of dropouts. The city has failed to help the students catch up, and many of the schools do not offer remedial or advanced classes. By third grade, when some of these kids are in the Marcy Housing Projects, they are behind at least two years. A study found that 60 percent of students at two schools in the Marcy Projects are homeschooled, even though there are plenty of public schools nearby. The schools are underfunded, overcrowded and understaffed, and the students are often struggling to keep up with the curriculum. A recent report found that 44 percent of students at the Marcy Projects are not meeting basic standards in math and reading.

In 1979, Miss Hester was one of the first black students to attend the Marcy Projects. She went on to become a lawyer and to help found the Partnership for the Advancement of New York Children, a nonprofit that works to improve school funding and resources. She has a master’s degree in education and a master’s degree in social work. She started a theater program for students at the Marcy Projects and helped create a special education program for children with disabilities. She also founded a summer camp for at-risk children.

Diana, the play director at the Marcy Projects, says that her students are “very smart, very creative.” She uses the arts to teach the students about history, culture and social issues. She says that the students are passionate about their work and are always looking for ways to improve their skills. She has a master’s degree in education and a master’s degree in social work. She started a theater program for students at the Marcy Projects and helped create a special education program for children with disabilities. She also founded a summer camp for at-risk children.

The peeling paint on the wall at the Auburn Family Residence is a welcome escape. The family is stuck in a shelter system, creating 7,500 units of housing. Instead, inspectors focus on the family’s violations, including the presence of roaches, mold, bedbugs, lead and asbestos.

The Auburn Family Residence is a four-poster mahogany bed. Dasani’s legally blind sister, Nijai, has detector and their bags are searched for forbidden turtle or hidden clothing.

In the years that Dasani has lived in Room 207, the family has put $10 million on repairs and renovations at Auburn. The Auburn Family Residence is on an island of a man who exposes his genitals in a girls’ bathroom, but the family has been subjected to the same abuse. Dasani finds this curious: “They not talking about my motherland.” She favors expressions in Senegal on a trip to “learn the truth about my motherland.” She favors expressions of Senegal on a trip to “learn the truth about my motherland.” She favors expressions of Senegal on a trip to “learn the truth about my motherland.” She favors expressions of Senegal on a trip to “learn the truth about my motherland.” She favors expressions of Senegal on a trip to “learn the truth about my motherland.”

In the years that Dasani has lived in Room 207, the family has put $10 million on repairs and renovations at Auburn. Dasani is fed up. She crouches down and examines her class is the stage and her students, a rapt audience. She says that she wants to be a theater director. Her mother also says that she wants to be a theater director. Her mother also says that she wants to be a theater director. Her mother also says that she wants to be a theater director.

The Auburn Family Residence is on an island of a man who exposes his genitals in a girls’ bathroom, but the family has been subjected to the same abuse. Dasani finds this curious: “They not talking about my motherland.” She favors expressions in Senegal on a trip to “learn the truth about my motherland.” She favors expressions of Senegal on a trip to “learn the truth about my motherland.” She favors expressions of Senegal on a trip to “learn the truth about my motherland.” She favors expressions of Senegal on a trip to “learn the truth about my motherland.” She favors expressions of Senegal on a trip to “learn the truth about my motherland.” She favors expressions of Senegal on a trip to “learn the truth about my motherland.”

The Auburn Family Residence is on an island of a man who exposes his genitals in a girls’ bathroom, but the family has been subjected to the same abuse. Dasani finds this curious: “They not talking about my motherland.” She favors expressions in Senegal on a trip to “learn the truth about my motherland.” She favors expressions of Senegal on a trip to “learn the truth about my motherland.” She favors expressions of Senegal on a trip to “learn the truth about my motherland.” She favors expressions of Senegal on a trip to “learn the truth about my motherland.” She favors expressions of Senegal on a trip to “learn the truth about my motherland.” She favors expressions of Senegal on a trip to “learn the truth about my motherland.”

In the years that Dasani has lived in Room 207, the family has put $10 million on repairs and renovations at Auburn. Dasani is fed up. She crouches down and examines her class is the stage and her students, a rapt audience. She says that she wants to be a theater director. Her mother also says that she wants to be a theater director. Her mother also says that she wants to be a theater director. Her mother also says that she wants to be a theater director.

The Auburn Family Residence is on an island of a man who exposes his genitals in a girls’ bathroom, but the family has been subjected to the same abuse. Dasani finds this curious: “They not talking about my motherland.” She favors expressions in Senegal on a trip to “learn the truth about my motherland.” She favors expressions of Senegal on a trip to “learn the truth about my motherland.” She favors expressions of Senegal on a trip to “learn the truth about my motherland.” She favors expressions of Senegal on a trip to “learn the truth about my motherland.” She favors expressions of Senegal on a trip to “learn the truth about my motherland.” She favors expressions of Senegal on a trip to “learn the truth about my motherland.”
A Future Rests on a Fragile Foundation

Dias is well-versed in city politics, but not because he follows the story. She is simply in the news, not what other people are doing.

When Diplan tries to use her role to shape city policy, she must act cautiously. "I don't want to alienate anyone in the community," she says, "but I do want to make sure that the city is working for everyone, not just those who are already in the system."
A Future Resting on a Fragile Foundation

By ANDREA ELLIOTT

GRACIE MANSION is something of an oddity. In a city with a 2 percent vacancy rate and a shortage of public housing, the mayoral residence sits uninhabited on 11 pristine acres of the Upper East Side.

It has been more than a decade since Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg chose to remain in his opulent townhouse, consigning Gracie Mansion to the status of a museum and venue for civic events.

Dasani knows none of these particulars when she steps through Gracie’s doors on a school trip in February. She is looking for the mayor. She wants to see him up close, this mysterious “Wizard of Oz” figure who makes decisions about her life from behind a curtain of political power.

It never occurs to Dasani that the mayor does not live there. Who could have a mansion and not live in it?

“Look at that fireplace!” she marvels as her classmates step into the parlor where Mr. Bloomberg has given news conferences. The tour guide, a woman wearing gold-clasp earrings and tangerine lipstick, moves the children
along, reminding them not to touch.

They shuffle into the library. Still no mayor.
Dasani scans for clues like the F.B.I. agents of her favorite television show, “Criminal Minds.”
She inspects a telephone. “His last call was at 11:15,” she whispers.

The tour guide opens French doors onto the veranda where New York’s mayors have entertained dignitaries from around the world. “It’s a very gracious way of living,” she says. “Very elegant.”

What impresses Dasani most are not the architectural details or the gold-bound volumes of Chaucer and Tolstoy, but the astonishing lack of dust.

She runs her hand lightly over the top of a Steinway piano.

“I tell you,” she says. “This house is clean.”
Dasani was still an infant when Mr. Bloomberg took office in 2002. Declaring Gracie Mansion “the people’s house,” he gathered $7 million in private donations — much of it his own money — to rehabilitate the pale yellow 18th-century home, which overlooks the East River. In came new plumbing, floors, lighting and ventilation, along with exquisite touches like an 1820s chandelier and a four-poster mahogany bed.

Facing that same river, six miles away on the opposite side, is the Auburn Family Residence, the squalid city-run homeless shelter where Dasani has lived for more than two years. She shares a crowded, mouse-infested room with her parents and seven siblings, who sleep doubled up on torn mattresses.

Dasani spends her days in the care of another city institution: her public school in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. The Susan S. McKinney Secondary School of the Arts has suffered its own troubles under the Bloomberg administration: a shrinking budget and fewer teachers.

Dasani shuttles between Auburn and McKinney, just two blocks apart. They form the core of her life and the bedrock of her future, one that is in peril.

Adults who are homeless often speak of feeling “stuck.” For children, the experience is more like a free-fall. With each passing month, they slip further back in every category known to predict long-term well-being. They are less likely to graduate from the schools that anchor them, and more likely to end up like their parents, their lives circumscribed by teenage pregnancy or shortened by crime and illness.

In the absence of a steady home or a reliable parent, public institutions have an outsized influence on the destiny of children like Dasani. Whether she can transcend her circumstances rests greatly on the role, however big or small, that society opts to play in her life.

The question of public responsibility has gained urgency in recent decades. By the time Mr. Bloomberg was elected, children made up 40 percent of shelter residents.

“We’re not walking away from taking care of the homeless,” the mayor said early on. “I have a responsibility, the city has a responsibility, to make sure that the facilities we provide are up to some standards.”

The Bloomberg administration set out to revamp the shelter system, creating 7,500 units of temporary housing, a database to track the shelter population and a program intended to prevent homelessness with counseling, job training and short-term financial aid. The new
system also made it harder for families to be found eligible for shelter.

For a time, the numbers went down. But in the wake of profound policy changes and a spiraling economy, more children wound up in shelters than at any time since the creation of the shelter system in the early 1980s.

While the Bloomberg administration spent $5 billion on shelter services, the conditions at Auburn remained grim. Dasani and her siblings have grown numb to life at the shelter, where knife fights break out and crack pipes are left on the bathroom floor. In the words of their mother, they have “become the place.” She has a verb for it: shelterized.

For Dasani, school is everything — the provider of meals, on-the-spot nursing care, security and substitute parenting. On the Gracie trip, Dasani wears the Nautica coat donated by a school security guard and matching white gloves bestowed to her that morning by the principal.

A school like McKinney can also provide a bridge to the wider world.

It does not matter that Dasani’s entire sixth grade must walk a mile to the subway in icy winds, take two trains, then walk another 10 minutes before arriving. This round-trip journey, which occupies much of the day, is a welcome escape.

As Dasani leaves Gracie that afternoon, she refasts her neon-pink snow hat. She has given up on the mayor.

“He lives somewhere else,” she says, waving an arm along East End Avenue before heading back to the subway.

There is no sign announcing the shelter at 39 Auburn Place, which rises over the neighboring Walt Whitman Houses like an accidental fortress. Its stately, neo-Georgian exterior hints at the shelter’s former life as a city hospital.

Two sweeping sycamores shade the entrance, where smokers linger under brick arches, flicking cigarette ashes onto an empty, untended lawn. A concrete walkway leads to the heavily guarded front door, where residents pass through a metal detector and their bags are searched for forbidden objects like canned food, hair dryers and irons.

Visitors are restricted to the bleak lobby.

Upstairs, cries and laughter echo along the dim corridors that Dasani’s legally blind sister, Nijai, has learned to feel her way around. The shelter is ill equipped to handle the needs of its numerous disabled residents, among them premature infants and severely autistic children.

Yet the manual given to incoming families boasts a “full complement of professional and support personnel” who are “available to assist you 24 hours a day, seven days per week.” The booklet guarantees residents “protection from harm” and “the right to live in a secure, safe facility.”

A starkly different Auburn — the one to which Dasani is witness — emerges from stacks of handwritten complaints, calls to 911, internal staff reports and dozens of inspections over the last decade. It is less a haven than a purgatory.

There is the 12-year-old boy who writes, on Oct. 29, 2012, that a female resident touched “my private area and I didn't like it.” His mother also files a complaint, saying the woman was showing pornography to children.

The police are never notified.

Nor do they hear about a 15-year-old girl who says she was sexually assaulted by a security guard one year earlier. The complaint, written by her mother in Spanish, never appears to have been translated. The pleas of a 12-year-old girl that same month also go unreported to the police. She writes of a man who exposes his genitals in a girls’ bathroom, making her too afraid to go back without a parent: “I am still scared that someone will come in.”

It stands to reason that the complaints of
children would be ignored, given how often the warnings of inspectors go nowhere.

Over the last decade, city and state inspectors have cited Auburn for more than 400 violations — many of them repeated — including for inadequate child care, faulty fire protection, insufficient heat, spoiled food, broken elevators, nonfunctioning bathrooms and the presence of mice, roaches, mold, bedbugs, lead and asbestos.

Dasani can pick out the inspectors by their clipboards and focused expressions. They work for the State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, which supervises homeless housing around the state. Given that Auburn is partly funded by the state, these inspectors should presumably hold sway.

Year after year, their reports read like a series of unheeded alarms. Responses by the city’s Department of Homeless Services attribute Auburn’s violations to a lack of money. To the state’s complaint, in 2003, that only one staff member is tending to 177 school-age children in the shelter’s recreation room, the agency responds: “We lack resources for teenagers!”

Auburn’s children have yet to assume their parents’ air of defeat. The children’s complaints recount their fear or discomfort as reason enough for action. The adults write as if no one is listening.

Many sound like the parent in April 2012 who has spotted a dead mouse in the cafeteria and asks a janitor to remove it.

The next day, the mouse is still there. “A child could have touched it,” the parent recounts telling the janitor, to which the janitor laughs and responds, “Well then you should have cleaned it up.”

There is no place on the inspection forms for the most common complaint: the disrespect accorded to residents by the shelter staff. Were there such a box to check, it could never capture how these encounters reverberate for days, reinforcing the rock-bottom failure that Auburn represents.

Even egregious incidents are sometimes mentioned in passing. One mother summarizes her grievance, at the top of the form, as “All of my belongs went in garbage.” In explaining how her possessions were discarded, she men-
tions, tangentially, that her caseworker had “groped” her. She ends the complaint on a conciliatory note: “Peace.”

The signature at the bottom belongs to Dasani’s mother, Chanel. After she filed the complaint in September 2011, the worker was taken off her case, but kept his job and recently got a raise. Chanel never told Dasani, for fear of passing on the shame she feels whenever she sees the man.

Like most children, Dasani absorbs more than her mother would like. She can see how the shelter shrinks Chanel’s self-regard. Dasani is there when the guards rip through her mother’s carefully folded laundry in the name of “inspection,” or when a caseworker dresses her down like a cheeky adolescent. “Sometimes it feels like, ‘Why you guys messin’ with my mom?’”

Chanel is not the first woman to encounter sexual advances by an Auburn employee. Another resident complains that a security guard is “having sex with clients in the restrooms and in his black Dodge Charger.” A 2012 letter by state inspectors to the Department of Homeless Services mentions a security supervisor and guards having “improper sexual contact” with a resident.

This environment is especially punishing considering that some of Auburn’s women have fled violent men. After a caseworker touched his 46-year-old client on the breast in February 2012, another male employee smiled at her the next day and asked “if I was being good,” she wrote in a complaint, adding, “I walk around every day feeling violated.”

Auburn initially suspended the caseworker, Kenneth Durieux, for 30 days. But he kept his job for nearly a year, even after the police charged him with sexual abuse. He was dismissed last January, before pleading guilty to forcible touching.

Just this year, there have been some 350 calls to 911 from the shelter — including 24 reported assaults, four calls about possible child abuse and one reporting a rape.

City officials declined to comment on the reports of sexual abuse. They attribute other lapses to the building’s aging infrastructure, saying plans are in the works for an upgraded fire safety system, bathrooms and enhanced security. Since Mr. Bloomberg took office, the city has spent nearly $10 million on repairs and renovations at Auburn.

In the past decade, Auburn’s directors have fared well, receiving raises even as the shelter’s problems persisted. One former director, Susan Nayowith, was promoted to head of client advocacy at the Department of Homeless Services.

These kinds of facts are lost on the shelter’s children, who see only what is before them — like the Swedish meatballs that come frozen in prepackaged trays or the Cheerios served one night for dinner.

And then there are the elevators, which frequently break down. Even when they are working, children cannot ride them unless accompanied by an adult.

A month before the trip to Gracie Mansion, when Dasani’s sister Avianna walks into the shelter gasping from an asthma attack, a guard refuses to take her up in the elevator. Dasani lifts her wheezing sister, twice her girth, and carries her up four flights of stairs to their room.

Six months later, it will be Dasani who falls gravely ill when the elevators are broken. She rocks and vomits bile one evening, trying to distract herself by watching television. At 3:02 a.m., Chanel calls 911.

She helps Dasani down four sets of stairs before she collapses on a row of chairs in the lobby. There is no ambulance, so Chanel calls again. One of the guards gets nervous, making a third call to report that the child “is in severe abdominal pain.” Two more calls are placed.

At 4:02 a.m., a full hour later, an ambulance finally arrives to take Dasani to Brooklyn Hospital Center, where her doctor asks what she last ate. Her answer: a shelter dinner of spinach lasagna.

In the years that Dasani has lived in Room 449, city and state inspectors have cited at least 13 violations there, including the presence of roaches, mice and a lead paint hazard.

Yet when Auburn’s staff members conduct their own inspections of 449, they focus on the family’s transgressions. The room is found to be chaotic and insufficiently clean. There are few mentions of Auburn’s own lapses — the absence of dividers for privacy or assistance with permanent housing. Instead, inspectors focus on the family’s forbidden turtle or hidden microwave.

Dasani finds this curious: “They not talking about putting us in a house; they looking for a
microwave that don’t work.” Lately, it is the family’s sink, with its rotting wall and leaky pipe, that fails to get fixed. For weeks, the pipe drips through the night. Finally, Dasani is fed up. She crouches down and examines the pipe as her siblings watch. “Nobody thought about pushing it in and twisting it,” she says in her cocksure manner. A few quick jerks and she triumphs. The children squeal.

It goes unremarked that here, in this shelter with a $9 million annual budget, operated by an agency with more than 100 times those funds, the plumbing has fallen to an 11-year-old girl.

Dasani’s homeroom at McKinney is a cozy haven of book-lined shelves and inspirational words scrawled in chalk, like “Success does not come without sacrifice and struggle.”

Every morning, she quietly tucks her coat and backpack in the classroom closet, a precious ritual for a girl who has no other closet. She then slips into her small wooden desk, opposite her humanities teacher, Faith Hester.

Miss Hester can best be described as electric. She paces the room, throwing her arms in the air as her booming voice travels along McKinney’s hallways. Long after she gave up dreams of acting, her class is the stage and her students, a rapt audience.

Sometimes she arrives in an Audrey Hepburn updo; other days, she dons the brightly patterned prints procured in Senegal on a trip to “learn the truth about my motherland.” She favors expressions like “Oh my gooney goo hoo!” and “Okie pokie dokie shmokie!”

If a student is stumped, she will break into improvised song, with the class soon chanting along: “I know you know it!” — clap, clap — “I know you know it!” — clap, clap.

Miss Hester knows that students learn when they get excited. It bothers her that McKinney lacks the sophisticated equipment of other public schools. She shelled out more than $1,000 of her own money, as a single mother, to give her classroom a projector and document camera.

When Miss Hester looks around her classroom, she sees a glimpse of her younger self. She was raised by a single mother in the Marcy projects of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, a monotonous spread of 27 brick buildings with the singular distinction of being where Jay-Z grew up. She could never quite numb herself, like other children did, to the addicts shooting up in the elevator or the dead bodies on gurneys. Her salvation came at church and school.

In 1979, Miss Hester was one of the first black students to be bused from Marcy to the predominantly white Edward R. Murrow High School in Midwood, Brooklyn. Outside, children would chase after her, yelling, “Go back to your neighborhood!” Inside the school, she applied herself fastidiously. A teacher made all the difference, guiding her to college applications. She was only 16 when she graduated, bound for SUNY Cortland.

Thirty-three years and two master’s degrees later, it is Miss Hester who searches for the student in need of saving.

She sees promise in Dasani, who landed on the honor roll last fall. But lately, she is skipping homework and arriving moody and tired, if she makes it to school at all.

New York’s homeless children have an abysmal average attendance rate of 82 percent, well below what is typically needed to advance to the next grade. Since the start of the school year, Dasani has already missed a week of class and arrived late 13 times.

Her attendance is being closely tracked by a social worker in the school whose nonprofit organization, Partnership With Children, offers counseling and other services to some of the city’s most vulnerable students.

Miss Hester told Partnership about Dasani. She saw no point in turning to the school’s guidance counselor or psychologist, who serves two other schools. They jump from crisis to crisis, like E.R. doctors in triage, treating problems that have become acute or irreversible.

Prevention is a luxury reserved for schools with enough counselors. In their absence, McKinney turns to Partnership, which has weathered its own post-recession budget cuts and layoffs. Graduate students are filling in as interns.

This is how Dasani finds herself sitting across from Roxanne, who is pursuing a master’s degree in social work at Fordham University. She has been assigned to lead one-on-one counseling sessions with Dasani.

Dasani has never had a counselor. They meet once a week, passing the time playing Mancala as Roxanne tries to draw Dasani out,
which proves far more difficult than any board game. Dasani knows how to deflect questions with humor, avoiding talk about her family and the shelter.

She is also studying Roxanne. There is something soft about this Minnesota native, who uses words like “sweetie” and melts into giggles. Dasani is puzzled by Roxanne’s attire — the rumpled shirts and distressed boots that pass for hip in other Brooklyn quarters. Nothing she wears seems to match, and yet her clothes are spotless.

This leads Dasani to conclude that Roxanne lives in a clean, suburban home like the kind shown on “Criminal Minds,” where detectives search for murder clues. It is not the murders themselves that intrigue Dasani so much as the enormous, orderly closets of the crime scenes — closets big enough to live in.

Miss Hester wonders about these counseling sessions. She finds Roxanne bright and devoted, but worries that Dasani will run circles around the intern, whose overriding quality is sweetness.

“I don’t need ‘sweet,’” Miss Hester says. “I need a Ph.D.”

BACK at the shelter, Dasani spends countless hours with her siblings playing games on a Nintendo Wii. If Dasani could design her own video game, she would call it “Live or Die.” The protagonist would be an 11-year-old girl fighting for her own salvation.

In the first round, she confronts the easy villains — her chores — scrambling to bathe, dress and feed her siblings. She cannot find Baby Lele, who is crying. The baby’s tears turn into lethal rocks that fall from the sky, which the girl must dodge.

Next, she encounters her parents battling social workers in the guise of angry pirates. Chanel tosses magical powers to the girl, who defeats the pirates, melting them to the ground.

In the third round, she goes to school, finding danger and deliverance. Her math teacher is a supervillain whose weapon is numbers. “Ten” turns into 10 charging porcupines. Down the hall, the girl must rescue Miss Hester from...
giant, rolling cans. “If she dies, all the kids die, too.”

Finally, the girl faces off against her long-time rival from the projects, a purple hulk who picks up cars and hurls them. If the girl survives, she reaches the queen — the principal, Paula Holmes — who decides her future. Winning brings the prize of a new house. Losing means returning to the shelter, “which is death.”

“My goal is to make it to the end, but I keep dying,” Dasani says.

It is easier for Dasani to think of Auburn as the worst possible outcome because the alternative — winding up on the street — is unfathomable. She knows that if she and her siblings were to lose the shelter, they might land in foster care, losing one another.

So as bad as it is, the children try to make the place their own. When the lights are on, their room is flatly fluorescent, which prompts them to climb a dresser, remove the plastic lamp cover from the ceiling and color it in with crayons the shades of a rainbow.

When the lights are off, the room assumes a gray aura not unlike, Dasani imagines, the hospital ward it once was. “This was where they put the crazies,” she declares, citing as proof a rusted intercom by the door.

The communal bathroom closest to Dasani is, indeed, reminiscent of “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest.” Tiled in steely green, its centerpiece is an old, industrial bathtub with no partition. A limp plastic curtain divides the sole shower from the rest of the bathroom, which is marked by vulgar graffiti and shared by dozens of women and girls, though men sometimes intrude.

The floor is filthy. The children routinely wipe it down with bleach stolen from the janitors, as residents are forbidden to bring the cleaning solvent into Auburn. A changing table hangs off its hinge, pointing to the floor like a slide.

At night, the children hear noises. They are sure Auburn is haunted. Five-year-old Papa calls the ghost in their room “I-it.” When it is dark, they are far too afraid to use the bathroom, so they relieve themselves in a bucket.

Yet that bathroom has become Dasani’s makeshift sanctuary. She practices hip-hop routines across the floor. She sits alone in the toilet stall, the lid closed beneath her. Sometimes she reads, or just closes her eyes. Her mind feels crowded anywhere else.

Lately, she is worried about her mother, who has been summoned on Feb. 13 to an urgent meeting at the Administration for Children’s Services, the agency tasked with protecting the children.

Photographs of smiling children line the walls of the agency’s lobby in Bedford-Stuyvesant, where Chanel is greeted by her caseworker, who uses the nickname “Mr. James.”

“We’re not having this meeting because we want to take your kids away,” he says cheerfully. “We’re having this meeting because we want you to move to an apartment.”

Chanel stares at him. “Why don’t you ever tell my lawyer about these meetings?” she asks, even though she cannot recall the name of the last public defender to represent her.

“You don’t need a lawyer to attend an A.C.S. meeting,” he responds.

They ride the elevator up to a conference room, where Chanel is jarred to find the director of Auburn, Derrick Aiken, waiting. He is there to issue a warning: If Chanel and her husband, Supreme, do not comply with the Department of Homeless Services’ requirements, the family may be forced to leave the shelter system. At issue is their public assistance case, which has closed because Supreme failed to report to a job placement program, one of dozens of such lapses in the past decade. Currently, the family receives only food stamps and survivor benefits.

An open public assistance case allows the agency to be reimbursed with federal funds, while also making the family eligible for child care and job training — the kind of supports that could help in finding a home.

But the problem for Chanel and Supreme comes down to basic math: Even with two full-time jobs, on minimum wage, they would have combined salaries of only $2,300 per month — just enough to cover the average rent for a studio in Brooklyn.

New York, it often strikes Chanel, has no place for the poor.

Auburn offers plenty of proof. Residents like Jenedra, a home health aide, and her daughter, who works at a Pinkberry in Park Slope, Brooklyn, cannot afford city prices.

The gap between income and housing costs was widening when Mayor Bloomberg took of-
Auburn, Derrick Aiken, waiting. He is there to is-
though she cannot recall the name of the last pub-
must rescue Miss Hester from giant, rolling cans.
A Future Rests on a Fragile Foundation

Time-limited rental assistance, including through a
MAYOR’S BEST-KNOWN EFFORT WAS THE CENTER FOR ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY, WHICH SPENT $662 MILLION ON POVERTY PREVENTION PROGRAMS THAT EMPHASIZED EDUCATION AND JOB TRAINING AS A MEANS TO SELF-RELIANCE.

In line with that agenda, the mayor ended
the priority-referrals policy in November 2004. Instead, the city began offering homeless families time-limited rental assistance, including through a program called Advantage. Yet more

fice in 2002. The homeless population was also
growing. For decades, the city had tried to stem
the numbers by giving homeless families prior-
ity access to public housing, Section 8 vouchers
and subsidized city apartments. While the poli-
cy was in place, only 11.5 percent of the families
returned to shelters within five years.
Mr. Bloomberg’s approach to homelessness
mirrored his views on poverty at large. The
mayor’s best-known effort was the Center for E

To Mr. Bloomberg, priority referrals were
an incentive to enter the shelter system. “Our
own policies needlessly encourage entry and
prolong dependence on shelters,” he said in
2004.
than a quarter of them wound up back in shelters once their subsidies ran out.

Among them was Dasani’s family. After their $1,481 rent subsidy expired in 2010, they returned to a shelter system that spends roughly $3,000 per month on every family. It would end up costing the city $400,000 to house Dasani’s family over a decade.

In 2011, Mr. Bloomberg ended Advantage after the state withdrew its funding. Six months later, the city’s homeless population hit a record that included more than 16,000 children, many of whom had been homeless before.

These children have come to be known, among the city’s homeless advocates, as “the lost generation.”

Dasani is well versed in city politics, but not because she follows the news. She is simply forced to notice what other children miss.

When Mr. Bloomberg tried to ban the sale of large, sugary drinks, Dasani began calculating what two sodas would cost in place of the supersize cup that, in her family, is typically passed among eight small mouths.

Now it is the citywide bus strike that has called Dasani’s attention, by virtue of the fact that she must walk three of her younger siblings to school.

It is no small feat to corral Papa, Hada and Maya, who form a tempestuous gaggle of untied shoelaces, short tempers and yogurt-stained mouths.

Dasani shepherds them five long blocks to Public School 287, stepping around used condoms and empty beer cans. “Double up!” she yells in the manner of her mother.

The children go silent and reach for each other’s hands, waiting for the traffic to pause. Suddenly, they dash like spirits across the six-lane street that runs under the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway.

The strike has worn on for a month when, on Valentine’s Day, Dasani stops into a corner store outside McKinney. She scans the aisles before settling on an iced honey bun, a bag of nacho-flavored sunflower seeds and some red gummy bears — a rare $3 breakfast earned as part of her allowance for watching Baby Lele all weekend.

She glides into class only a few minutes late. Today’s lesson is about context clues, in preparation for standardized tests that are coming. “You come across an unfamiliar word,” Miss Hester explains. “You look at the surrounding words and ideas and you unpack that word.”

The theatrics begin.

“Flabbergasted,” she says. “I was flabbergasted when I found a million dollars in my purse.”
The class erupts in laughter.
“A million dollars!” Miss Hester hoots. “I know that that’s a lot of money. And it’s in my purse. And I’m supposed to be broke,” she says, batting her long lashes. “‘Flabbergasted' means ‘delightfully surprised.’”

Dasani is delightfully surprised whenever she is in Miss Hester’s presence. It does not matter that her mother finds the teacher “weird.” She makes Dasani want to learn.

One can only imagine the heights Dasani might reach at a school like Packer Collegiate Institute, just 12 blocks west of the shelter. Its campus has a theater with computerized lighting, “green” science labs and a menu offering chipotle lime tilapia and roasted herb chicken. Its middle school cultivates the interests of the “whole child,” for whom doors will open to the “public arenas of the world.”

Packer’s students might learn something from Dasani, too. Parents from five private Brooklyn schools recently filed into Packer, where tuition is over $35,000, to hear a clinical psychologist give a talk on how to raise “self-reliant, appreciative children in a nervous and entitled world.”

That world is unlikely to become Dasani’s. She is not the kind of child to land a coveted scholarship to private school, which would require a parent with the wherewithal to seek out such opportunities and see them through. For the same reason, Dasani does not belong to New York's fast-growing population of charter school students.

In fact, the reverse is happening: a charter school is coming to McKinney. Approved last December by the Education Department, Success Academy Fort Greene will soon claim half of McKinney’s third floor. This kind of co-location arrangement has played out in schools across the city, stoking deep resentments in poor communities.

The guiding ethos of the charter school movement has been “choice” — the power to choose a school rather than capitulate to a flawed education system and a muscular teachers’ union. But in communities like McKinney’s, the experience can feel like a lack of choice.

Dasani watched, wide-eyed, during a protest last December as McKinney’s parents and teachers held up signs comparing the co-location to apartheid. Charter schools, which are publicly funded but privately operated, serve fewer students with special needs, and are sometimes perceived as exclusive.

A web posting for Success Academy Fort Greene does little to counter that notion. Parents, it says, “shouldn’t have to trek to other Brooklyn neighborhoods or spend $30,000+ on a private school in order to find excellence and rigor.”

By late February, Dasani’s grades have plummeted. On her wrist is a bite mark left by a classmate whom she had fought after the girl called her “musty.”

The next day, Dasani lunges at a girl in gym class. Miss Hester has had enough.
“T’m really not happy with the way that you are victimizing others,” she says sternly. “I need it to stop immediately. Do you understand me?”

She nods at Miss Hester, her eyes dropping.

**Reporting was contributed by Rebecca R. Ruiz and Joseph Goldstein, and research by Ms. Ruiz, Joseph Burgess, Alain Delaquérière and Ramsey Merritt.**
For Dasani, school and life are indistinguishable. When school goes well, she is whole. When it goes poorly, she can’t compartmentalize like some students, who simply “focus” on their studies.

It is a place to love or leave.

Minutes later, Dasani is sitting in McKinney’s packed auditorium for an assembly on Black History Month.

She hates Black History Month.

“It’s always the same poems,” she says.

The new honor roll is called out. Dasani’s name is missing. It must be a mistake, she tells herself. But when she hears all the other names, the truth sinks in.

She slumps in her chair as a group of boys takes the stage to recite Langston Hughes.

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?

Dasani knows this poem well. They read it every year. She stares blankly at the stage.

Maybe it just sags
Like a heavy load
Or does it explode?

### SOURCE NOTES

The city has a 2 percent vacancy rate — Reis Inc., real estate research firm. The vacancy rate in the third quarter of 2012 was 2.4 percent, including all New York City boroughs except Staten Island.

Gracie Mansion sits on 11 pristine acres — The city has incorporated the 11 acres of grounds surrounding Gracie Mansion into Carl Schurz Park.

Declaring Gracie Mansion “the people’s house,” he gathered $7 million in donations — Mayor’s office.

Gracie Mansion renovations and chandelier and bed — Article in The Times in 2013.

Predictors of long-term well-being for homeless children — Interviews with Patrick Markee of the Coalition for the Homeless and Ellen Bassuk, former president of the National Center on Family Homelessness.

By the time Mayor Bloomberg was elected, children made up 40 percent of shelter residents — Department of Homeless Services.

“We’re not walking away from taking care of the homeless” — Article in The Times in 2001.

The Bloomberg administration’s revamping of the shelter system and expenditures of nearly $5 billion on shelter services — Mayor’s office; there were about 7,500 units or beds created under the Bloomberg administration.

The shelter is ill-equipped to handle the needs of disabled residents — State inspections.

A starkly different Auburn emerges from complaints, and calls to 911 — Complaints provided to The Times by the Fort Greene Strategic Neighborhood Action Partnership, obtained through Freedom of Information requests; 911 calls provided by New York Police Department; and city and state inspection reports.

There is the 12-year-old boy who writes — Client complaint report filed at Auburn. Such reports allow residents to make complaints in writing. Below each resident’s signature is a section for staff members to write about any follow-up: whether the director of the shelter or other supervisors were notified, at what time, and the outcome. In other complaints, there were notes in this section about the police being called or the director investigating. But in this complaint, as well as the two others involving children cited in the story, the staff section is left blank, indicating that no action was taken. In response to these three complaints, the city said that due
to legal requirements, “D.H.S. is unable to furnish any confidential information without signed consent from the parties involved.”

_The police are never notified_ — Officials at the New York Police Department.

_The complaint in Spanish filed by the 15-year-old girl’s mother appears never to have been translated_ — In separate complaints filed in Spanish by other residents that year, an English translation was provided and attached to the complaint. Yet this complaint, dated Oct. 26, 2011, had no translation attached, and the staff follow-up section was also left blank.

_Over the last decade, city and state inspectors have cited Auburn for more than 400 violations_ — Times analysis of city and state agencies’ annual and semiannual inspection reports from 2004 to 2013. The agencies that issued these violations include the State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, the Department of Homeless Services, the city’s Buildings Department and the city’s Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.

_They work for the State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, which supervises homeless shelters around the state_ — State officials say Auburn never had state certification, which limits the agency’s power over the shelter. City officials dispute this, saying that the state had certified Auburn until 2005, when it stopped renewing the shelter’s operational plan because of the cited violations.

_The shelter’s response to a state citation in 2003 that only one staff member was tending to 177 school-age children_ — D.H.S. response to inspection of the shelter in 2003 by the state’s Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance.

_A mother summarizes her grievance, at the top of the form, as “all my belongs went in garbage”_ — Client complaint report filed by Dasani’s mother, Chanel, at Auburn, found in the family’s D.H.S. case file.

_The worker kept his job and recently got a raise_ — City payroll data. Over the course of four recent years, the salary of the caseworker in question rose by 13 percent.

_Another resident complains that a security guard is having sex with clients in the restrooms and in his black Dodge Charger_” — Client complaint report filed at Auburn on Nov. 21, 2012.

_The caseworker, Kenneth Durieux, who was charged with sexual abuse, kept his job; the caseworker pleaded guilty to forcible touching_ — Police and court records. The Department of Homeless Services confirmed the suspension and ultimate departure of Mr. Durieux.

_Just this year, there have been some 350 calls to 911_ — New York Police Department.

_The city’s response to Auburn’s violations_ — In response to a recent state inspection concluding that no children under age 2 should be at Auburn, D.H.S. stated last week that the agency believes “Auburn is safe and suitable for children under 2 years of age,” but, at the state’s request, would direct families with children under 2 to other shelters “except when no other suitable unit is available,” in which case those families would remain at Auburn temporarily.

_In the last decade, Auburn’s directors have fared well, receiving raises_ — City payroll data.

_And then there are the elevators, which frequently break down_ — City Buildings Department records and interviews with shelter residents. Since 2007, the department has received 13 complaints for defective elevators and issued eight violations for failure to maintain elevators at Auburn.

_At 3:02 a.m., Chanel calls 911. At 4:02 a.m., a full hour later, an ambulance finally arrives_ — New York Police Department, the New York Fire Department, cellphone logs and interviews with Chanel and Dasani.
In the years that Dasani has lived in Room 449, city and state inspectors have cited at least 13 violations there — Inspection reports from the city and the state’s Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance.

There are few mentions of Auburn’s own lapses, including the absence of dividers for privacy or assistance with permanent housing — According to the family’s D.H.S. file and interviews with Chanel and Supreme about these lapses. In response, city officials say that state regulations do not require dividers and the room was large enough for the family. Steven Banks of the Legal Aid Society disputes that, saying the law requires “that the family be given more space than the single room they were provided, and even if they did not, occupancy laws applicable to everyone require a minimum of 80 feet per person.”

In this shelter with a $9 million budget, operated by an agency with more than 100 times those funds — The Department of Homeless Services. Auburn’s budget for the 2013 fiscal year was $9,193,418. The agency’s budget that year was $984 million.

When Miss Hester looks around her classroom — Interviews with Miss Hester; scenes are reported from hours spent observing her in class.

New York’s homeless children have an abysmal average attendance rate — Coalition for the Homeless.

Roxanne tries to draw Dasani out — Interviews with Dasani and firsthand reporting of her interactions with Roxanne at McKinney when they were not in the counseling sessions, which The Times did not attend.

“We’re not having this meeting because we want to take your kids away” — Witnessed by the reporter, who walked into the building with Chanel.

He is there to issue a warning — Interview with Chanel; the family’s D.H.S. records.

The gap between income and housing costs was widening when Mayor Bloomberg took office in 2002 — United States Census Bureau, New York City housing and vacancy surveys.

While the policy was in place, only 11.5 percent of the families returned to a shelter within five years — According to a study by the Vera Institute of Justice, which looked at homeless families that left shelters, with long-term subsidized housing, in 1998 and tracked their re-entry into shelters over the next five years.

The Center for Economic Opportunity, which spent $662 million on poverty prevention programs — Mayor’s office.

After ending the priority-referrals policy, more than a quarter of families in the Advantage program wound up back in shelters once their subsidies ran out — The Department of Homeless Services says that priority referrals were not a good policy solution because they went to programs that lacked reliable federal funding while serving a population already at risk of homelessness. Mr. Markee, of the Coalition, disputes the city’s claim that the referrals policy provided an incentive for families to enter the shelter system, as the number of homeless families soon rose again, even before the recession hit. He also says that the Advantage failure rate was higher than the city says, with nearly 50 percent of former Advantage recipients becoming homeless again.

After their $1,481 rent subsidy expired, they returned to a shelter system that spends roughly $3,000 per month to house a family, costing the city $400,000 for Dasani’s family alone — The Department of Homeless Services states that, since 2002, the family has received a minimum of $400,000 in rental assistance and shelter costs.

Packer Collegiate — School website
The charter school was approved last December — Education Department.

A web posting for the charter school says parents should not have to “spend $30,000+ on a private school.” — From the Success Academy website.

What happens to a dream deferred? — “Harlem” by Langston Hughes.

Graphic that accompanies this article — The data for the chart showing the number of children in New York City shelters is from the Coalition for the Homeless, except for the most recent data, which is from the Department of Homeless Services.
A Profound Divide in a Neighborhood Transformed

By ANDREA ELLIOTT

O n the Brooklyn block that is Dasani’s domain, shoppers can buy a $3 malt liquor in an airless deli where food prices are sky-high in comparison to other storefronts on the block. When Dasani is not there for the neighborhood children to sit and eat if they don’t have a place to go, she and her middle school friends will hang out on the corner, playing basketball and listening to music. A sign outside that locale, Gnarly Vines, that catches Dasani’s notice one spring afternoon, features the words “THE WORLD’S GREATESTiah.”

The neighborhood is a mix of privilege and poverty, where the rich and the poor live side by side. Dasani’s family is part of the lower-income group, which struggles to make ends meet. Her father, George, is a construction worker, and her mother, Marie, is a teacher’s aide. They have four children: Dasani, 15, her brother, China, 16, and her younger siblings, Abigail and Israel.

The neighborhood is also home to a large population of children who live in public housing projects, many of whom aremultiply displaced due to the city’s housing crisis. Dasani and her friends often find themselves in situations where they have to make tough choices about whether to spend money on food or on clothing or other necessities.

The neighborhood is a microcosm of the larger city, where inequality and segregation are pervasive. Dasani and her friends are aware of the challenges they face, and they are determined to overcome them. They are proud of their community and the resilience of its members, including Dasani’s grandmother, who has been a pillar of support for her family.

As Dasani and her friends continue to navigate the complexities of their lives, they remain committed to their studies and to their future. They know that education is the key to breaking the cycle of poverty and achieving their dreams.

December 11, 2013

First For Automakers

COMPANY WOMAN, BORN TO THE JOB, is now G.M. CHIEF

FIRST FOR AUTOMAKERS

Consensus Builder Rises Through the Ranks for 33 Years

By BILL VLIET

DETROIT — the very few at a die maker for 38 years, one of the legions of engineers who passed through the company, General Motors (the nation’s biggest employer and most powerful auto company) and the one who, ever since she was a child, said she wanted to be a doctor, became the company’s 18th chief executive officer on Tuesday.

Mr. Barra, 51, will take over a G.M. that is struggling to compete with Toyota and other competitors in the global market, and she will face the challenge of transforming the company’s culture and improving its performance. She has been with the company for 33 years and has held a variety of positions, including executive vice president of global product development, global vilian for manufacturing, and a head of its North American operations.

In an interview, Mr. Barra said that she had always been passionate about innovation and that she was excited about the opportunity to lead G.M. into the future. She said that she was committed to creating a culture of innovation and that she was determined to transform the company’s culture and improve its performance.

“I am excited about the opportunity to lead G.M. into the future,” Mr. Barra said. “I am committed to creating a culture of innovation and to transforming the company’s culture and improving its performance.”

Mr. Barra will be the first woman to lead G.M., and she will be the first woman to lead a major auto company. She succeeds Alan N. Mulally, who retired last year after serving as CEO for eight years.

Mr. Barra was born in Lebanon, where her father was a carpenter, and she grew up in a small town in the state of Ohio. She said that she was inspired to enter the auto industry by her father, who worked in the industry as a child.

A chart tracks their paths.

## The Stodgy Corporate Culture

The G.M. culture is stodgy and conservative, and Mr. Barra has been working to transform it. She has been pushing for changes in the company’s culture, including improvements in the way the company manages its employees and its customers.

“I am committed to creating a culture of innovation and to transforming the company’s culture and improving its performance,” Mr. Barra said. “I am excited about the opportunity to lead G.M. into the future.”

Mr. Barra has been pushing for changes in the company’s culture, including improvements in the way the company manages its employees and its customers. She has been working to create a more open and collaborative culture, where employees are encouraged to share ideas and to take risks.

“I am committed to creating a culture of innovation and to transforming the company’s culture and improving its performance,” Mr. Barra said. “I am excited about the opportunity to lead G.M. into the future.”

Mr. Barra was born in Lebanon, where her father was a carpenter, and she grew up in a small town in the state of Ohio. She said that she was inspired to enter the auto industry by her father, who worked in the industry as a child.

A chart tracks their paths.

## The Stodgy Corporate Culture

The G.M. culture is stodgy and conservative, and Mr. Barra has been working to transform it. She has been pushing for changes in the company’s culture, including improvements in the way the company manages its employees and its customers.

“I am committed to creating a culture of innovation and to transforming the company’s culture and improving its performance,” Mr. Barra said. “I am excited about the opportunity to lead G.M. into the future.”

Mr. Barra has been pushing for changes in the company’s culture, including improvements in the way the company manages its employees and its customers. She has been working to create a more open and collaborative culture, where employees are encouraged to share ideas and to take risks.

“I am committed to creating a culture of innovation and to transforming the company’s culture and improving its performance,” Mr. Barra said. “I am excited about the opportunity to lead G.M. into the future.”

Mr. Barra was born in Lebanon, where her father was a carpenter, and she grew up in a small town in the state of Ohio. She said that she was inspired to enter the auto industry by her father, who worked in the industry as a child.

A chart tracks their paths.

## The Stodgy Corporate Culture

The G.M. culture is stodgy and conservative, and Mr. Barra has been working to transform it. She has been pushing for changes in the company’s culture, including improvements in the way the company manages its employees and its customers.

“I am committed to creating a culture of innovation and to transforming the company’s culture and improving its performance,” Mr. Barra said. “I am excited about the opportunity to lead G.M. into the future.”

Mr. Barra has been pushing for changes in the company’s culture, including improvements in the way the company manages its employees and its customers. She has been working to create a more open and collaborative culture, where employees are encouraged to share ideas and to take risks.
A Profound Divide
As a Neighborhood Is Transformed

Dasani was born on May 26 at Brooklyn Hospital, where she was brought because she was premature. Supreme had caught a cold and felt bad. He had a cold and knew she was going to be born. Supreme was 9 again, losing his arm. He was a regular in the crack dens of Bed-Stuy, who had proudly kept his job as a sanitation worker. Joanie's urn occupied a place of honor in the living room. She had died of a heart attack at 49, and Supreme had been her caretaker.

Supreme's chair at the barbershop, they saw a pair of plastic bags, and Supreme was away. They found out that he had died of a heart attack at 49, and Supreme had been her caretaker.

Investigators for Child Protective Services got clean and joined a welfare-to-work program, finding work as a barber. Six years later, his wife — pregnant with their third child — was a regular in the crack dens of Bed-Stuy, who had kept her job as a sanitation worker. Joanie's urn occupied a place of honor in the living room. She had died of a heart attack at 49, and Supreme had been her caretaker.

Supreme was 9 again, losing his arm. He never talked about it. He was a regular in the crack dens of Bed-Stuy, who had kept his job as a sanitation worker. Joanie's urn occupied a place of honor in the living room. She had died of a heart attack at 49, and Supreme had been her caretaker.

Supreme is tough, tough. He never talks about it. He never talks about it. He never talks about it.
A Neighborhood's Profound Divide

Visits to the Department of Homeless Services, where Chanel, a 14-year-old single mother, visits her kids daily. Chanel says, "I believe they're still my children."

When a claim is disputed, the consumer has the right to file a complaint with the Department of Homeless Services. The claim is reviewed by an independent third party, who decides whether the consumer is entitled to receive the services claimed. If the consumer is entitled to the services, the Department will make arrangements to provide them.

When the claim is disputed, the consumer has the right to file a complaint with the Department of Homeless Services. The claim is reviewed by an independent third party, who decides whether the consumer is entitled to receive the services claimed. If the consumer is entitled to the services, the Department will make arrangements to provide them.

When a claim is disputed, the consumer has the right to file a complaint with the Department of Homeless Services. The claim is reviewed by an independent third party, who decides whether the consumer is entitled to receive the services claimed. If the consumer is entitled to the services, the Department will make arrangements to provide them.

When a claim is disputed, the consumer has the right to file a complaint with the Department of Homeless Services. The claim is reviewed by an independent third party, who decides whether the consumer is entitled to receive the services claimed. If the consumer is entitled to the services, the Department will make arrangements to provide them.

When a claim is disputed, the consumer has the right to file a complaint with the Department of Homeless Services. The claim is reviewed by an independent third party, who decides whether the consumer is entitled to receive the services claimed. If the consumer is entitled to the services, the Department will make arrangements to provide them.

When a claim is disputed, the consumer has the right to file a complaint with the Department of Homeless Services. The claim is reviewed by an independent third party, who decides whether the consumer is entitled to receive the services claimed. If the consumer is entitled to the services, the Department will make arrangements to provide them.

When a claim is disputed, the consumer has the right to file a complaint with the Department of Homeless Services. The claim is reviewed by an independent third party, who decides whether the consumer is entitled to receive the services claimed. If the consumer is entitled to the services, the Department will make arrangements to provide them.
A Profound Divide in a Neighborhood Transformed

By ANDREA ELLIOTT

On the Brooklyn block that is Dasani’s dominion, shoppers can buy a $3 malt liquor in an airless deli where food stamps are traded for cigarettes. Or they can cross the street for a $740 bottle of chardonnay at an industrial wine shop accentuated with modern art.

It is a sign outside that locale, Gnarly Vines, that catches Dasani’s notice one spring afternoon: “Wine Tasting Tonight 5-8.”

Dasani is hardly conversant in the subject of libations, but this much she knows: A little drink will take off her mother’s edge. Without further ado, Chanel heads into the wine shop on Myrtle Avenue, trailed by four of her eight children. They are lugging two greasy boxes of pizza and a jumbo pack of diapers from Target.

The cashier pauses. The sommelier smiles. “Wanna try a little rosé?” she asks brightly, pouring from a 2012 bottle of Mas de Gourgonnier. “I would describe it as definitely fruit forward at the beginning.”

Chanel polishes it. “But really crisp, dry, refreshing ——”

“Not refreshing,” Chanel says. “I just think ... dry.”

“No, it’s very dry,” says the sommelier, a peppy blonde in wire-rim glasses. “It’s high acid, a little citrusy.”

Chanel sticks out her tongue. She finds the woman’s choice of words unappetizing. To the
side of the wine display is a large, silver vase that recalls the family urn, prompting Chanel’s son Khaliq to ask if it contains the ashes of a dead person.

“Oh my gosh, for cremation?” the sommelier asks, shaking her head. “We just use it for spitting in.”

“For spitting?” Chanel says with horror.

“Yeah, it’s got rejected wine in it,” the sommelier says.

Chanel scoffs. She might not like the wine, but she sees no reason to spit it out. She moves on to a Tuscan sangiovese.

Ignoring the spectacle, Dasani scans the room, frowning at a sign on the wall: Liqueur. “They got liquor spelled wrong,” she yelps victoriously.

Actually, the sommelier interjects, that is the French word for the delicate, liquid spirits derived from fruits such as pomegranates and raspberries. “But you’re very right,” she offers sweetly. “That is not how you spell liquor.”

“Not the hood liquor,” Chanel says.

Dasani’s neighborhood is one of the most unequal pockets of New York City, the most unequal metropolis in America.

Fort Greene occupies less than one square mile. On the map, its boundaries form the shape of a pitcher tilting at the northwestern edge of Brooklyn.

Just north of Fort Greene Park are the projects and, among them, the homeless shelter where Dasani lives.

Just south of the park are some of Brooklyn’s finest townhouses and cultural gems, including the Brooklyn Academy of Music, where theatergoers were lining up to see “Julius Caesar” on the day that Dasani led her mother to the wine shop.

If one thing distinguishes Dasani’s New York from that of her antecedents, it is a striking proximity to the wealth that eludes her.

She routinely walks past a boho-chic boutique on Lafayette Avenue where calfskin boots command $845. Heading north, she passes French bulldogs on leashes and infants riding like elevated genies in Uppababy strollers with shock-absorbing wheels. Three blocks away is an ice cream parlor where $6 buys two salted-caramel scoops.

Like most children, Dasani is oblivious to the precise cost of such extravagances. She only knows that they are beyond her reach.

Nor can this 11-year-old girl be expected to grasp the subtle gradations of Fort Greene’s elite, whose creative class feels pushed out of a neighborhood it once considered more gritty than tony.

Dasani sees the chasms of Fort Greene more plainly, reasoning that wealth belongs to “the whites” because “they save their money and don’t spend it on drinking and smoking.”

Such perceptions are fed by the contrasts of this neighborhood, where the top 5 percent of residents earn 76 times as much as the bottom quintile. Dasani spots addicts gathering outside a food pantry a block from $2 million brownstones. She notes that few people in the projects use the Citi Bikes stationed nearby. The celebrated bike sharing program, unveiled this year, requires a credit or debit card for a $101 security deposit.

Dasani also knows that not everyone in the projects is poor. Her Uncle Waverly, who lives in the Walt Whitman Houses across from her shelter, the Auburn Family Residence, works as a supervisor for the parks department and has a Lexus S.U.V. When he drives past Dasani and her siblings, he pretends not to know them.

Dasani charts the patterns of Fort Greene Park by skin color. The basketball courts are closest to the projects, drawing black children to that northwestern corner. On the rare occasion when Dasani ventures to the opposite quadrant, she sees white women sunbathing in bikinis or playing tennis near a water fountain outfitted for dogs.

She never finds those women at the nearby Bravo Supermarket for Values, where thieves are photographed in Polaroids that fill the store’s “Wall of Shame.” Wearing naked expressions, they are forced to pose with their stolen items — things like Goya beans and Kraft cheese. A woman named Mary holds a can of tuna in a photograph titled “Catch of the Day.”

Dasani is more likely to encounter shoppers of another stratum at the local Target, where they can save on items that for her family represent a splurge.

Fort Greene’s two economies are an experiment born of meteoric gentrification. In the last decade, the neighborhood has been remade, with the portion of white residents jumping by
80 percent as real estate prices more than doubled despite the recession.

Just the word “gentrification” is remarkably divisive. It derives from the Middle English word “gentrise,” which means “of noble descent.” The word has become shorthand for an urban neighborhood where muggings are down and espresso is roasted — a place that has been “discovered,” as though no one had been living there.

Dasani’s Fort Greene reaches deep into the last century. Her grandmother Joanie grew up in the Raymond V. Ingersoll Houses, next to the Walt Whitman Houses. Both projects opened in 1944, an era of New Deal reforms that gave rise to white flight and urban decay. Fort Greene, like other black areas, was redlined, allowing banks to disinvest and property values to plummet.

The neighborhood’s prospects started to change in 1978, after the city declared part of Fort Greene a historic district. By the time Dasani was born there in 2001, a billionaire was preparing to run for mayor. A year after taking office, Michael R. Bloomberg announced an ambitious redevelopment plan for Downtown Brooklyn.

Fort Greene’s transformation came swiftly. Through aggressive rezoning and generous subsidies, the city drew developers who, in the span of three years, built 19 luxury buildings in the surrounding area that catered — across racial lines — to the educated elite.

Dasani and her siblings routinely pass the Toren, a glistening, 38-story glass tower on Myrtle Avenue offering a 24-hour concierge, gymnasium, pool and movie theater. In June, a condominium there sold for $1.4 million.

Just blocks away stand the Ingersoll and Whitman projects, which engulf Dasani’s shelter and, like Auburn, have fallen into disrepair.

It is the juxtaposition of these neglected time capsules to Fort Greene’s luxury towers that seems to mock the neighborhood’s effort at ascension. For the arriviste investor, the projects present a rude visual interruption, an inconvenient thing to walk around, but never through.

For Dasani, these faded buildings hold a legacy so intricate and rich it could fill volumes were it ever told.

The homeless shelter where she lives is the very building where Grandma Joanie had been born, back when it was Cumberland Hospital. Just across the way is the fifth-story apartment where Joanie grew up, helping her own mother raise seven other children in the clasp of poverty.

Three generations later, little has changed. Even as the fortunes of this neighborhood rose,
Dasani’s matrilineal line, from her great-grandmother to her mother, has followed a trajectory of teenage pregnancy, addiction and violence.

Fort Greene is now a marker. For one set of people, arriving signals triumph. For another, remaining means defeat.

Dasani will do better, she tells herself. “People don’t go nowhere in Brooklyn,” she says. Chanel promises they will move this spring, after the tax refunds arrive.

Yet as Dasani walks through her grandmother’s streets, it is not with the sense of imminent departure so much as melancholic return.

CHANEL was 8 when she found her mother’s crack pipe in a jewelry box. She held it up to the light and showed it to her brother.

“We gonna toss it,” he said.

They opened the window and watched as the brown glass vial soared through the air, crashing onto the sidewalk.

It was the mid-1980s, and crack had swept the streets of Brownsville, Brooklyn, where Chanel’s mother, Joanie, now lived. Chanel visited on weekends. The rest of the time, she stayed with her godmother, Sherry, who had been the common-law wife of Chanel’s father. Chanel’s mother was his lover.

Stranger things had happened in Brownsville, and now that Chanel’s father was dead, the two women made peace, despite their differences. Joanie relied on welfare to support her habit. Sherry ran a day care center and shunned drugs.

“It was like two different people trying to raise one kid,” Chanel says.

At Sherry’s rowhouse in East New York, Brooklyn, Chanel minded her chores and did her homework. At Joanie’s, the child watched dance parties meld into a predawn haze.

Worried that Joanie would unduly influence Chanel, Sherry sent the 10-year-old girl to live with a relative in Pittsburgh and attend Catholic school. But Chanel longed for her birth mother and began to act out. Within a few years, she returned to New York and moved in with Joanie. They soon wound up in a shelter in Queens, where both were exposed to tuberculosis.

Over the next few years, they drifted apart.

Joanie turned her life around after President Bill Clinton signed legislation in 1996 to end “welfare as we know it,” placing time limits and work restrictions on recipients of government aid. She got clean and joined a welfare-to-work program, landing a $22,000-a-year job cleaning subway cars for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

“This is the happiest day of my life,” she told Chanel.

By then, Chanel had dropped out of high school and was addicted to crack. She had joined a sect of the violent Bloods gang, tattooing her street name, Lady Red, in curly letters across her right arm. She was a regular in the crack dens of Bedford-Stuyvesant.

Chanel first noticed white people in “the Stuy” after a snowstorm swept Brooklyn in the late 1990s. Out of nowhere, two cross-country skiers appeared along Franklin Avenue like “a pair of aliens.” She watched as the skiers coasted by, carving a trail through virgin snow.

She sensed that Brooklyn was on the cusp of change. But she could not have imagined that just five blocks from that spot, people would one day line up to buy blood orange and hibiscus doughnuts at an artisanal shop called Dough.

The first commercial signs of Brooklyn’s transition were simpler. In 2001, Chanel spotted a new brand of bottled water — Dasani — on the shelves of her corner store. She was pregnant again, but unlike the miscarriages of her teens,
this baby was surviving. Chanel needed a name.

For a 23-year-old Brooklyn native who had spent summers cooling in the gush of hydrants, the name “Dasani” held a certain appeal. It sounded as special as Chanel’s name had sounded to her own mother, when she saw the perfume advertised in a magazine. It grasped at something better.

Dasani was born on May 26 at Brooklyn Hospital Center in Fort Greene. The doll-faced infant weighed only 5 pounds 6 ounces. She was strikingly alert and had, the nurse noted, a “vigorous cry.” Three days later, Chanel left her with Joanie and took off.

Even as a baby, Dasani was awake to the world. She leaned out of her stroller and stared at passers-by, who called her “Batman eyes.” She was tiny, but never frail, and began walking at only 8 months.

Chanel would surface from time to time, but Dasani latched on to Joanie. A year later, Chanel had a second daughter by the same man, naming her Avianna, inspired by the more expensive brand of Evian water.

Joanie had hit her limit, so Chanel turned to the city’s shelter system. With both babies, she reported to the Department of Homeless Services intake office in the Bronx. They were sent to 30 Hamilton Place, a family shelter in Harlem.

Down the hall, a single father had moved in with his own two children. He called himself Supreme. He had sad, knowing eyes that made him look older than his 26 years. He never talked about the past.

SUPREME was born to heroin addicts in the Cypress Hills projects of East New York. By age 7, he knew how to shop with his mother’s food stamps and cook grits for his four younger siblings. When the pantry was empty, he made sugar sandwiches.

He was 9 when he came upon the lifeless body of his baby sister. She had been left near the entrance of the projects, wrapped in a blanket. Supreme stroked her head and kept saying her name, Precious. “She didn’t wake up,” he says.

Investigators for Child Protective Services thought the 2-year-old girl had swallowed sleeping pills, though the medical examiner concluded that she had died of sudden infant death syndrome. The father had left Precious alone when she died. When her mother found her, Supreme recalled, she panicked, leaving the girl’s body outside as she ran for help.

Later that day, the agency’s workers removed Supreme and his siblings from the home. For the next three years, Supreme bounced from foster care to group homes. He soon dropped out of school and left for North Carolina to join the crack trade. By 17, Supreme had a felony drug conviction and was serving time at a maximum-security prison in Walpole, Mass.

It was there that he discovered the Five Percent Nation, a growing movement whose followers believe they are the chosen “5 percent” of humanity. The Five Percenters were shaping urban culture and music, while spreading the word that the black man is God.

That message, that God was within him, filled Supreme with a sense of power over his destiny, one that until now had been steered by outsiders.

Supreme left prison in 1997 with a high school equivalency diploma. He married and
moved to Washington, finding work as a barber. Six years later, his wife — pregnant with their third child — had a heart attack and fell down a flight of stairs to her death.

Chanel took pity on this solemn widower, who came to the shelter a few months after his wife’s passing. Dasani and Avianna were the exact same ages as his children. He seemed different from the other men. He was always reading, and had a way with words.

“I fell in love with his brains,” Chanel says.

Two incomplete families soon became one.

Chanel embraced the Five Percent, wrapping her head in a scarf and vowing to stay off drugs. They married at the city clerk’s office on Feb. 4, 2004.

For Chanel, it was a moment of triumph. Women in her family almost never married.

“We were the product of split-up families,” she says. “We always wanted a big family. One family. One full family.”

But Supreme and Chanel had a temperamental love. Their biggest fights led to brief separations, even as three more children were born. Chanel could not stay off drugs for long.

When she gave birth to Papa in 2007, the hospital detected marijuana in his blood.

In an instant, everything changed.

Chanel and Supreme were summoned to the Administration for Children’s Services office in Bedford-Stuyvesant — the same brick building where Supreme had been escorted as a child.

Standing there, in the lobby, the memory came rushing back. Supreme was 9 again, losing his sister, then his parents, then his other siblings, all in the course of a day.

Soon his own children became accustomed to knocks at the door as the agency’s caseworkers, responding to a handful of complaints about possible neglect, began to monitor the family. They inspected the children from head to toe, searching for signs of abuse.

Dasani learned to spot a social worker on the street by the person’s bag (large enough to hold files). She became expert at the complex psychic task of managing strangers — of reading facial expressions and interpreting intonations, of knowing when to say the right thing or to avoid the wrong one.

“They can use that in a court of law against
the parent,” she says, back in the voice of “Criminal Minds.”

She pauses.

“I love my parents. They’re tough, but I should not be taken away from them.”

Dasani remained tethered to Grandma Joanie, who had proudly kept her job as a sanitation worker. She now lived in a cozy apartment in Bedford-Stuyvesant. On weekends, Joanie would fix the children B.L.T. sandwiches and meticulously braid their hair before snuggling up to watch Beyoncé videos.

Dasani was Joanie’s favorite. With this child, Joanie could finally be a mother. With Joanie, Dasani could be a child.

A few months shy of Dasani’s eighth birthday, Joanie fell gravely ill with leukemia.

On March 7, 2008, she died in the same hospital where Dasani had been born. She was 55.

“Why she had to go away so quickly?” Dasani asks.

At the funeral, mourners gasped as the tiny girl flung herself on the open coffin. Dasani kicked and wailed as Chanel tore her away.

J OANIE was cremated and her ashes placed in a black and silver urn that remained with Dasani’s family, accompanying them like a talisman.

Her death brought a rebirth. Chanel inherited $49,000 of Joanie’s pension savings.

At the time, the family had been renting a small apartment in East New York through a city program offering time-limited subsidies to the homeless.

That month, the family’s subsidy expired. Chanel’s inheritance saved them from homelessness. Months later, the city began a new rent subsidy program called Advantage. With its help, Chanel leased a duplex on Staten Island, and in summer 2008, boarded the Staten Island Ferry with Supreme and the children. It was their first time on a boat. They raced to the back and leaned into the salty mist.

Staten Island was quiet and green. In their new apartment on North Burgher Avenue, the children rolled around on the wall-to-wall carpet. There they lay, pressed together, that first night.

It was their first real home. The children’s euphoria steadily rose with that of their parents.

“When they’re happy, I’m happy,” Dasani says. “When they’re sad, I’m sad. It’s like I have a connection, like I’m stuck to them like glue.”

Chanel and Supreme talked giddily of starting a youth center that would teach the Five Percent ethos known as the “Five P’s”: proper planning prevents poor performance.

Supreme landed a job at Heavenly Cuts, a barbershop a few blocks away. Chanel bought a used, cherry-red Dodge Durango and a rolling kitchen island at Home Depot. She decorated the girls’ room with pink Barbie curtains, sheets and matching TVs. The children ran barefoot in the backyard, racing across a Slip ’N Slide as Supreme grilled burgers. Joanie’s urn occupied a place of honor in the living room.

This was, without question, the high point of their collective life.

It would take years for Chanel to understand why things so quickly fell apart. It was not obvious, in that blinding moment, that money could be useful only if they knew how to spend it. To think it would bring salvation was as quixotic as expecting a set of keys to drive a car.

Money was not going to heal a father who had never been a child. When customers took a
seat in Supreme's chair at the barbershop, they saw a pair of hands expertly at work. They did not see the boy who, at age 7, had learned that very skill by cutting his brothers' hair while his parents were strung out on heroin.

What money brought was a quick escape from all that. Over the next two years, Supreme and Chanel bobbed and wove through a fog of addiction. Supreme started doing heroin. Chanel became hooked on painkillers during an extended stay at Staten Island Hospital, where she was being treated for a recurrence of the tuberculosis she contracted in a shelter.

Children’s Services hovered over the family, ensuring that Chanel and Supreme submit to random drug tests. Eventually, Supreme and Chanel stopped working.

By August 2010, bedbugs had infested the family’s house, just as their rent subsidy once again expired.

The city’s shelters were filling with former Advantage recipients — families who had been homeless before taking the rent subsidy, only to become homeless again.

On Aug. 20, Dasani’s family boarded the ferry to Manhattan, where they headed to the Department of Homeless Services’ intake office in the South Bronx.

As Dasani’s family approached the entrance, Chanel spotted two abandoned baby turtles in a cardboard box. She stuffed them in her pockets.

Six days later, the family arrived at Auburn, along with its two forbidden pet turtles and Joanie’s urn.

CHILDREN are said to be adaptable. On outward appearances, Dasani and her siblings became inured to the dehumanizing ways of Auburn — the security checks at the entrance, the grimy bathrooms, the long waits for rancid food.

Yet nothing prepared them for what happened on Sept. 7, 2011, a year after they arrived.

Chanel and the children had been “logged out” of Auburn, the official description of what happens when residents who have been absent for more than 48 hours are sent to the Bronx intake office to fill out forms and answer questions. The entire family must make this onerous trip, even on school days.

That evening, tired and hungry, they re-
Services police told the children to get dressed.

The Administration for Children’s Services had known for months that Chanel was getting high on opiates, but had been trying to keep the family together. After her arrest, a family judge ordered new drug tests for both parents, revealing that Supreme had also been smoking marijuana.

With that, the agency went to court to have the children removed. In a hearing on Sept. 20, the children’s lawyer objected, arguing that to divide them among foster homes “who knows where in the city” would “present a greater imminent risk to the children than remaining where they are.”

The judge struck a compromise: Both parents needed to comply with a drug treatment program. The children were to remain with Supreme, but Chanel temporarily lost custody.

She had suffered all kinds of losses, but nothing compared with this. Who was she if not a mother? She had always tried to be there, rarely missing a school play or a parent-teacher conference. On Sunday afternoons she would braid hair until her fingers turned numb. At bedtime each night, she flipped through the family dictionary to teach her children a new “word of the day.”

Now, Chanel would be living with Sherry, only seeing the children on supervised visits. She broke the news to the children on a park bench.

“Take care of your siblings,” she instructed Dasani.

Dasani was silent.

Supreme ruled by fear. If the children laughed too loud, he only had to yell “Shut up!” and they froze, a silent dread passing among them. He had an old-fashioned approach to child rearing: Break the rules and you get the belt. Chanel’s presence had tempered him.

When she left, Supreme wrote two words on the wall in black marker: “King Me!”

Under the agency’s supervision, both Chanel and Supreme made steady progress in a treatment program that required taking daily doses of methadone, a synthetic drug meant to control addiction.

Nearly a year later, on Aug. 2, 2012, the judge allowed Chanel to return to her family at Auburn under supervision from the Administration for Children’s Services. She came with
a promise: They would save enough money to leave.

**C**HANEL spreads the cash across her bed, all $2,800. The children stare in awe.

“I don’t know why I feel so happy,” Avianna says.

Chanel quickly stashes it, announcing no intention of spending her long-awaited tax refund, which arrived Feb. 13.

“Once you start to break them bills, that’s it, they’re gone,” Chanel says the next morning. She is walking through the projects, the money bulging from her pocket. She does not know where to put it, so she holds onto it and, more than anything, the feeling of having it.

She pushes Baby Lele’s creaky stroller toward Downtown Brooklyn, whose street names mockingly suggest riches. Gold. Tillary. Bond. She takes an inventory of all the things she could — but won’t — buy: a new stroller, sneakers, a hair-braiding session for the girls.

Chanel knows that unless she finds a way to save her money, and persuades Supreme not to spend his own tax refund, they will never leave Auburn.

And yet, planning has never been their way. “To plan something is to plan to fail,” she says. “My plan is to do some goddamn laundry.”

Tax season brings a sudden reprieve for a family that, with food stamps, has about $75 a day to spend. This amounts to $7.50 per person in a city where three subway trips cost as much. They survive because they live rent-free and have access to three meals a day.

Chanel is reminded of this when she stops to look at listings in the window of a real estate office near her methadone clinic. A one-bedroom in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, is going for $1,300 a month.

She sees no option but to leave New York. In a show of commitment, Chanel gives $800 of her tax refund to Grandma Sherry in exchange for a used Chevrolet minivan, which is sitting in the driveway with no permit.

Now they must wait for Supreme’s tax refund. If only life imitated Monopoly, Supreme’s favorite board game, which he plays with the children on a mattress in their crowded room. “I like building up property and collecting rent,” he says.

But becoming a real renter, he finds, is far more challenging than claiming Park Place on a cardboard square.

Auburn no longer has a housing specialist on staff — the last one died four years ago and was never replaced. Supreme has learned to navigate the web on his prepaid Android from Boost Mobile, but the phone is often disconnected. Chanel feels like a fumbling fool on the shelter’s computers.

And then there is the problem of Baby Lele. Investigators have repeatedly cited Auburn for providing no on-site child care, which hinders residents from searching for jobs or housing. Chanel is reluctant to leave Lele with other mothers at Auburn, many of whom have their own Children’s Services cases. If anything were to happen, Chanel’s custody could be in jeopardy.

Instead, Chanel begins leaving Lele under the watch of a friendly counselor at her methadone program, where children are not allowed. The counselor stands outside with Lele as Chanel darts in to swallow her orange liquid dose.

When a clinic supervisor discovers the arrangement, Chanel is exposed. If she keeps leaving Lele with acquaintances on the street,
INVISIBLE CHILD
Third in a series.

Dasani is one of more than 22,000 homeless children in New York City. The New York Times began following her in September 2012, when she was 11 years old and living at the Auburn Family Residence in Brooklyn. This series is based on interviews, official records and video taken by The Times and Dasani’s family. Her last name is being withheld to protect her identity.

ONLINE: Sourcing for this article, as well as video and additional photographs:
nytimes.com/invisiblechild

Children’s Services might find out. So Chanel stops going, and the clinic alerts the agency that she has fallen out of treatment. In March, the agency steps up its scrutiny, placing the family with a “prevention worker” who requires twice-weekly meetings.

By now, Supreme has learned that his tax refund was seized by the government for child support owed to two other children he had before meeting Chanel.

Dasani knows before her mother says a word.

They will not be leaving.

Dasani has learned to let disappointments pass in silence. Objecting does nothing to change the facts. But she reveals herself through the questions she asks.

“Mommy, if these projects was your only choice, would you take it?” she asks Chanel one day in March as they are out walking. Chanel nods reluctantly.

Dasani lets it go. She knows not to push.

Spring has brought a new set of worries. For the wealthier children in Fort Greene, it is a season to show off new wardrobes. For Dasani’s family, it is a time of scrambling. Appearances are more easily kept when the same coat is all that people see.

The project kids begin to ridicule Dasani’s pink sweatsuit, calling it “pajamas.” On March 19, she agrees to fight a girl from school at nearby Commodore Barry Park. A crowd gathers as they establish the rules: No one can film it or tell a parent. They pull back their hair and Dasani punches her rival as they tumble to the ground. A man walking his dog pulls them apart.

That evening, Chanel inspects the cut on Dasani’s lip. Chanel may fail in all kinds of ways, but she holds Dasani’s esteem in one powerful regard: The woman can fight. Dasani has grown up hearing her mother’s stories of street-battle glory, and watching her in the throes of countless slug matches with anyone who crosses her, including the owner of a local laundromat.

Chanel dismisses Dasani’s tussles at school as “kitty-cat fighting.” Back in her day, girls cracked one another over the head with bottles. No one wasted time pulling back their hair.

“You gotta keep your hood credit up,” she tells Dasani. “You take the biggest, baddest one down first and the rest of ’em will back up off of you. That’s just how it works.”

The next day, Chanel and Dasani wander up their favorite block of Myrtle Avenue, passing the Red Lantern, a bike repair shop that sells vegan cookies. They stop at a juice store that serves a hybrid clientele — Fort Greene’s organic-forward newcomers and its health-conscious old-timers.

There, Chanel spots an old flame. He wears a long leather jacket and dark shades. She wonders if he is still dealing.

“Whassup, Red?” he says.

Dasani eyes him closely.

“That was her name from back when she was in the hood,” she says, forever cataloging the details of her mother’s past, even as Chanel tries to part with it.

“I’m good now, see?” Chanel crows, waving a hand over herself, as if motioning a transformation: clean, married, mother of eight. She

Reporting was contributed by Rebecca R. Ruiz and Joseph Goldstein, and research by Ms. Ruiz, Joseph Burgess, Alain Delaquérière and Ramsey Merritt.
nods proudly at her children.

It is Dasani’s belief that she and her siblings are the cause of her mother’s ruin. It never occurs to her that, for Chanel, the children represent her only accomplishment.

The next day, Chanel escorts Dasani to school. In the hallway, she spots the girl Dasani fought in the park. “You can fight my kid,” she says hotly, taking the girl by surprise. “I’m with that.”

Minutes later, the principal, Paula Holmes, sits Dasani down. “I believe you can change, but you’re not showing me that,” she says.

Dasani returns to class feeling jaunty. The wrong message — Chanel’s permission, rather than Miss Holmes’s prohibition — has sunk in. “I’m a fight you,” she tells another girl. “My mother said she’ll let me fight.”

With that, Dasani is suspended.

Miss Holmes knows it is a risky move, but nothing else has worked. The girl needs to be shocked out of her behavior. The alternative is to fail in school and beyond.

“Get your things and leave,” Miss Holmes tells her.

Dasani will be out of school for a whole week. She cannot speak.

To be suspended is to be truly homeless.

---

**SOURCE NOTES**

*Shoppers can buy a $740 bottle of chardonnay at Gnarly Vines — Gnarly Vines website*

*Dasani’s neighborhood is one of the most unequal pockets of Fort Greene, in the most unequal metropolis in America — According to an analysis of census data by Andrew Beveridge and Susan Weber-Stoger of the Queens College sociology department.*

*Fort Greene’s creative class feels pushed out of a neighborhood once considered more gritty — “My Brooklyn,” a documentary by Kelly Anderson and Allison Lirish Dean.*

*This neighborhood, where the top 5 percent of residents earn 76 times as much as the bottom quintile — Analysis by Mr. Beveridge and Ms. Weber-Stoger.*

*In the last decade, the neighborhood has been remade, with the portion of white residents jumping by 80 percent as real estate prices more than doubled despite the recession — Analysis by Mr. Beveridge and Ms. Weber-Stoger. Real estate change provided by Miller Samuel Inc. and Douglas Elliman.*

*Through aggressive rezoning and generous subsidies, the city drew developers who in three years built 19 luxury buildings — “My Brooklyn.”*

*In June, a condominium there sold for $1.4 million — Charles A. Fritschler of Brown Harris Stevens.*

*Where Grandma Joanie had been born, back when it was Cumberland Hospital — New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.*

*Chanel was 8 when she found her mother’s crack pipe — This biographical section is based on interviews with Chanel, her brothers, Sherry and other relatives.*

*Joanie landed a $22,000 job cleaning subway cars for the Metropolitan Transportation Association — Human Resources Administration and Metropolitan Transportation Authority.*

*Dasani was born May 26 at Brooklyn Hospital and had, the nurse noted, a “vigorous cry” — Family’s hospital records.*

*Chanel and the babies were sent to 30 Hamilton Place, a family shelter in Harlem, where Supreme was also placed with his two children — Department of Homeless Services.*
Supreme was born to heroin addicts — This biographical section is based on interviews with Supreme, his childhood records with the Administration for Children's Services, as well as medical examiner’s and court records.

When she gave birth to Papa in 2007, the hospital detected marijuana in his blood — Family court records.

The family’s rent subsidy expired the month Joanie died; months later the family joined a new rent subsidy program called Advantage — Department of Homeless Services.

Chanel became hooked on painkillers during an extended stay at Staten Island Hospital — Chanel’s hospital records show that she stayed at the hospital for three weeks in May 2009, during which time she was given Percocet and Dilaudid.

Children's Services hovered over the family — Family court records.

By August 2010, bedbugs infested the family’s house — Interviews with Chanel and Supreme. (The couple originally said the house burned in a fire because they were afraid of the stigma attached to bedbugs.)

Yet nothing prepared them for what happened on Sept. 7, 2011 — Interviews with Chanel and Dasani; complaints filed by Chanel and two other residents regarding the circumstances surrounding the vanished urn. The Department of Homeless Services notes that the family had been logged out for eight consecutive days and that after seven days, “the shelter may dispose of their belongings.”

A man approached her on Myrtle Avenue, asking where he could buy drugs; she was arrested — Records from Kings County Criminal Court and interview with Chanel.

Children's Services had known for months that Chanel was getting high on opiates, but was trying to keep the family together — According to court records and an interview with the children’s lawyer, Martin Feinman, of the Legal Aid Society.

Tax season brings a sudden reprieve for a family that, with food stamps, has about $75 a day to spend — This amount is an average based on the family’s food stamps and survivor’s benefits. The average varied later in the year, depending on the family’s changing allotment in food stamps and other benefits. In June, the family began receiving $258.67 per month in assistance for Nijai's disability.

Auburn no longer has a housing specialist on staff, after the last one died four years ago — Fort Greene Strategic Neighborhood Action Partnership and state inspection reports.

In March, Children's Services steps up its scrutiny — Interviews with Chanel and city officials.

Graphic that accompanies this article — Data for the animated map showing areas of disparate income in New York City are from the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey, five-year estimates for 2007-2011. Data shown is in 2013 dollars.
Finding Safety and Strength In the Bonds of Her Siblings

By ANDREA ELLIOTT

CHILDREN are not the face of New York’s homelessness. They rarely figure among the people seen living on the sidewalks, in parks or under bridges. Yet their presence is felt, and their stories are important. They are the invisible children, the children of homelessness, the children of people who are without a home. And they are a reminder that homelessness is not just a problem of adults, but of children as well.

Daniash, 9, lives in aanghai with her family. Her mother, a single mother, is trying to make ends meet. They live in a small apartment, and Daniash shares a room with her two younger brothers. The family moved from their previous home because they couldn’t afford the rent anymore. Daniash’s father is in prison, and he hasn’t contributed to the family’s income.

Daniash works to keep her home-lessness hidden. She has spent years of her childhood in the puny. And now she is attending school, but she is often tired and sick.

One day, Daniash’s mother took her to a shelter for children in need. Daniash has never been in a shelter before, and she was afraid. But the people there were kind and helped her feel safe. They gave her a warm bed to sleep in and food to eat.

Daniash dreamed of a world where children don’t have to suffer like this. She wants to be a doctor and help poor children.

Daniash’s story is just one of the many stories of children who are homeless. They are invisible, but their struggles are real. It’s important to remember that they are children, and they deserve a safe and healthy childhood.

Daniash’s story continues on Page A3.
Finding Safety and Strength
In the Bonds of Her Siblings

Dasani is one of more than 22,000 homeless children in New York City. The New York Times began following her life, but the next day, he asks for $5 back. She waits in the hallway, keeping an eye on the children. She has grown so attached to her principal, Hester, that she expected a measure of trust. But in July, she was hit by a school van. To trust is to be caught off guard.

“Look,” she tries more softly. “It’s not right to give away your things.” He does not try to snatch the backpack this time. The girl glares at Dasani.

As Dasani turns toward the Whitman Ward, a Children’s Services worker, she notices that Dash is not right. He begins to flail, mouthing off fiercely at Sunita — who is known to have been beaten. “We have a right to make things right,” he says, his voice reverberating through the hall. Dasani is hushed. Dasani tries to breathe.

She has lost the simplest things that for other children are a given, such as being able to cut a cake. Her mother is ill and often in and out of hospital. Her siblings have been removed from the family. She has always been the odd orchid in this bunch of children. She has had no one to help her.


Children’s Services has stepped up its scrutiny of families in which children are homeless. They are not unusual. The organization is reconsidering many cases involving such families. Sometimes they can help, sometimes they cannot.

“With the documentation we can move forward,” the official says. “With the documentation we can move forward with the family.”

Social workers frequently make note of it. “I don’t dream at all,” she says. “Even when I say it, I don’t.”


“Look,” she tries more softly. “It’s not right to give away your things.”

“Look,” she tries more softly. “It’s not right to give away your things.” Dasani is a habitual offender.

She lingers in the hallway, keeping an eye on the children. She knows what they are saying. She tells them to wait for her.

“Gotta get to class!” one of them says.

“Yeah!”

“Oh, it was good. I’m staying out of trouble!”

“We are all happy.”

“But it’s not like that,” she says. “It’s not like that.”

And she’s not backing down.

“Look,” she says. “You are.”

“Why? You are,” he says.

But she knows she can fly away. She has already pressed her mother too many times.

“He began leafing through hundreds of pages of notes, documents and correspondence.”

Two years ago, Chanel and Supreme began to worry about their children. Dasani, 7, was acting differently, and they didn’t regret it. Faith, 9, started skipping school. The girl glares at Dasani.

“With the documentation we can move forward.”

But she knows she can fly away. She has already pressed her mother too many times.

“Look,” she says. “You are.”

“Why? You are,” he says.

But she knows she can fly away. She has already pressed her mother too many times.

“She has grown so attached to her principal, Hester, that she expected a measure of trust.”

“She has grown so attached to her principal, Hester, that she expected a measure of trust.”

To trust is to be caught off guard.

Fourth in a series.

Finding Safety and Strength
In the Bonds of Her Siblings

Dasani is one of more than 22,000 homeless children in New York City. The New York Times began following her life, but the next day, he asks for $5 back. She waits in the hallway, keeping an eye on the children. She has grown so attached to her principal, Hester, that she expected a measure of trust. But in July, she was hit by a school van. To trust is to be caught off guard.


Children’s Services has stepped up its scrutiny of families in which children are homeless. They are not unusual. The organization is reconsidering many cases involving such families. Sometimes they can help, sometimes they cannot.

“She has lost the simplest things that for other children are a given, such as being able to cut a cake. Her mother is ill and often in and out of hospital. Her siblings have been removed from the family. She has always been the odd orchid in this bunch of children. She has had no one to help her.”

“Look,” she says. “You are.”

“Why? You are,” he says.

But she knows she can fly away. She has already pressed her mother too many times.

“Look,” she says. “You are.”

“But it’s not like that,” she says. “It’s not like that.”

And she’s not backing down.

“She has grown so attached to her principal, Hester, that she expected a measure of trust.”

“She has grown so attached to her principal, Hester, that she expected a measure of trust.”

To trust is to be caught off guard.

Fourth in a series.

Finding Safety and Strength
In the Bonds of Her Siblings

Dasani is one of more than 22,000 homeless children in New York City. The New York Times began following her life, but the next day, he asks for $5 back. She waits in the hallway, keeping an eye on the children. She has grown so attached to her principal, Hester, that she expected a measure of trust. But in July, she was hit by a school van. To trust is to be caught off guard.

“She has lost the simplest things that for other children are a given, such as being able to cut a cake. Her mother is ill and often in and out of hospital. Her siblings have been removed from the family. She has always been the odd orchid in this bunch of children. She has had no one to help her.”

“Look,” she says. “You are.”

“Why? You are,” he says.

But she knows she can fly away. She has already pressed her mother too many times.

“Look,” she says. “You are.”

“But it’s not like that,” she says. “It’s not like that.”

And she’s not backing down.

“She has grown so attached to her principal, Hester, that she expected a measure of trust.”

“She has grown so attached to her principal, Hester, that she expected a measure of trust.”

To trust is to be caught off guard.
Finding Safety and Strength
In the Bonds of Her Siblings

By ANDREA ELLIOTT

CHILDREN are not the face of New York’s homeless. They rarely figure among the panhandlers and bag ladies, war vets and untreated schizophrenics who have long been stock characters in this city of contrasts.

Their homelessness is hidden. They spend their days in school, their nights in shelters. They are seen only in glimpses — pulling overstuffed suitcases in the shadow of a tired parent, passing for tourists rather than residents without a home.

Yet it is the adult population that drives debates on poverty and homelessness, with city officials and others citing “personal responsibility” as the central culprit. Children are bystanders in this discourse, no more to blame for their homelessness than for their existence.

Dasani works to keep her homelessness hidden. She has spent years of her childhood in the punishing confines of the Auburn shelter in Brooklyn, where to be homeless is to be powerless. She and her seven siblings are at the mercy of forces beyond their control: parents who cannot provide, agencies that fall short, a metropolis rived by inequality and indifference.

The experience has left Dasani internally adrift, for the losses of the homeless child only begin with the home itself. She has had to part with privacy and space — the kind of quiet that nurtures the mind. She has lost the dignity that comes with living free of vermin and chronic illness. She has fallen behind in school, despite her crackling intelligence.

She has lost the simplest things that for other children are given: the freedom of riding a bicycle, the safety of a bathroom not shared with strangers, the ease of being in school without stigma. And from all of these losses has come the departure of faith itself.

God “is somewhere around,” she says. “We just can’t find him.”

To trust is to be caught off guard.

Dasani is unmoored by her recent suspension from the Susan S. McKinney Secondary School of the Arts. For months, this new school was her only haven. She had grown so attached to her principal, Paula Holmes, that she expected a measure of tolerance despite her outbursts, the kind of forgiveness she never gets at home.

Her forced departure from school overlaps with spring break, plunging Dasani further into the morass of her family’s troubles. Her parents’ resolve to leave Auburn has vanished now that their savings plan fell apart, yet the shel-
ter is pressing the family to leave while offering no assistance in finding a home. Meanwhile, the Administration for Children’s Services has stepped up its scrutiny of Dasani’s parents, who are increasingly despondent.

As pressure mounts from all sides, Dasani braces herself. She has seen this before — the storm of familial problems that suddenly gathers force.

“It’s a tsunami, just spinning around, nothing going right,” she says. “And I’m like, ‘Put my life back together!’ and it doesn’t happen. Your life doesn’t go the way you want it to go.”

On April 3, Dasani climbs up the steps of McKinney wearing her best cardigan. She lingers in the hallway, keeping an eye on Principal Holmes’s door. She is eager to try out the script her mother has drilled into her.

How was your spring break, Miss Holmes? (Pause, wait for Miss Holmes to ask the same question.)

Oh, it was good. I’m staying out of trouble! (Wait for Miss Holmes to laugh and then head for the door, showing new determination.)

Gotta get to class!

Instead, Dasani hangs back. Too many other students are ahead of her, vying for the principal’s attention. In class, she is quiet and focused. “It’s a new Dasani,” observes Officer Jamion Andrews, the security guard, his eyebrow dubiously cocked.

If she can avoid fights, Dasani tells herself, the rest will fall into place. It is the taunts that she cannot resist. Her body gets “hyped.” She loses control. And that is precisely the behavior that Roxanne, her counselor at school, is trying to disrupt.

In those moments, Dasani must learn to breathe in for 10 seconds through her nose and then breathe out for 10 seconds through her mouth. Roxanne demonstrates.

Dasani practices on her walk home from school.

The two blocks of sidewalk between McKinney and the shelter can be a minefield. This week, one of Dasani’s classmates, Sunita, begins to stalk her along the way. Sunita is a foot taller than Dasani and easily twice her 70 pounds. Their rivalry dates back three years to fourth grade, when Sunita, who lives in the projects, began teasing Dasani about living at Auburn, prompting Dasani, then 9, to throw her first punch.

For days, rumors have been flying that the two will fight again.

As school lets out on April 9, Dasani steps onto the sidewalk and is surrounded by a sea of girls.

“You gonna fight her?” one of them asks breathlessly.

“No!” Dasani yells loud enough for Sunita to hear. “Miss Holmes says if I get in another fight I get suspended.”

Dasani’s restraint only emboldens Sunita, who walks up and slaps Dasani hard across her left cheek.

The crowd is hushed. Dasani tries to breathe.

“You think that hurt? I eat those,” Dasani says, using one of her mother’s put-downs. The girl glares at Dasani.

Breathe in 10 seconds.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, Dasani’s 10-year-old sister Avianna jumps between them. “You better back up off my sister’s face before I hurt you,” Avianna yells.

The girls might as well be twins. They share the same pillow, the same dresser, the same absent, biological father. It is usually Dasani who comes to Avianna’s rescue, carrying her up four flights of stairs to their room when her asthma strikes.

But today, Avianna rises to the occasion, mouthing off fiercely at Sunita as the crowd disperses.

Dasani is soon surrounded by all of her siblings, a familial force field. Their bond presents itself physically. When they walk, ride the bus, switch trains, climb steps, jump puddles, cross highways and file into Auburn, they move as a single being. In all things, they are one.

The sheer size of the family draws the notice of strangers, who shoot looks of recrimination at the mother, Chanel.

Yet she sees fortitude in this small army of siblings, something she and her husband, Supreme, never had growing up. “That’s why the street became our family,” she says. “I didn’t want the street to become their family, too.”

The children’s solidarity is striking enough that social workers frequently make note of it. “Family close knit,” reads one social worker’s report in March.
They live in dread of the Administration for Children’s Services. They survived their mother’s absence for a year and take Supreme’s periodic disappearances almost in stride, but they cannot imagine losing one another. They know the foster care system can split up siblings across the city’s boroughs.

Dasani is haunted by the thought of losing her baby sister, Lele, who just turned 1 and sometimes calls her Mommy. All the children dote on Lele, but Dasani speaks her language, discerning hunger or a wet diaper in the baby’s cries. The 11-year-old girl responds with the instinct of a mother but not the training. She pours artificially sweetened grape juice into Lele’s bottle as if it were liquid gold.

What would happen to Lele in the hands of strangers?

“Some people don’t know how to take care of babies,” she says.

The children have heard their father’s story — how Supreme was torn from his siblings and years passed before he was reunited with them in the Marcy projects, in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. Supreme soon left home to join the crack trade.

By then, another child of the Marcy projects had also escaped. She chose an alternate path.

“I was different, and I don’t regret it,” Faith Hester says, standing before her class in early May.

She is not one to dwell on the past. But today, a student prompts Miss Hester to talk about her education. She was only 16 and living in the Marcy projects when she won a scholarship to SUNY Cortland.

She packed a large orange suitcase. Her mother refused to take her to the train station. Girls married their way out of the projects. Going to college, the neighbors sneered, was trying to “be white.”

So Miss Hester left alone that day, dragging her suitcase along Park Avenue. In college, she cleaned houses to help pay her way. Her mother did not speak to her for six months. “Sometimes you have to be alone,” she says, looking around the room.

“I don’t regret it for one second,” she says, slamming her hand down on a desk. “That was the path!”

The class is motionless.

“Do you understand what I’m saying?” Miss Hester continues, her voice trembling. “There are going to be some places in your life where you feel bizarre. You feel outstanding. And remain that way. Stay just as you are.”

Dasani stares at her teacher, mesmerized.

“It takes a lot of courage to be different,” Miss Hester says.

When Dasani looks into the future, she sees who she won’t be. She won’t be a dropout. She won’t do drugs or smoke or drink. She won’t get married, unless she finds “a gentle man, not a harsh man.”

She won’t have children unless she can support them. She won’t end up on the street.

“Spare some change?” she says, mocking a panhandler. “Nuh-uh. Not me.”

It is harder for Dasani to imagine who she might become. She has been told she must reach for college if she wants a life of choices, but who will pay? Her mother is quick to ask that question whenever Grandma Sherry tries to encourage Dasani with the shining example of a niece who graduated from Bates College in Maine on scholarship.

Other children talk of becoming rap stars or athletes, escaping their world with one good break. Dasani subscribes to the logic of those
fantasies. Her life is defined by extremes. In order to transcend extreme poverty, it follows that she must become extremely rich or extremely something. What exactly she cannot see. To dream is, after all, an act of faith.

“I don’t dream at all,” she says. “Even when I try.”

She believes in what she can see, and Miss Hester is real. Her lecture that day leaves Dasani feeling uplifted.

As she walks home with a classmate later that afternoon, they talk about a coming history project on ancient Egypt. Dasani does not see Sunita coming.

“I’m gonna fight you!” Sunita calls out from the underpass, shedding her sweatshirt.

Dasani pivots and starts walking against the traffic along Tillary Street. This time there are no siblings to come to her rescue.

Get back on school property, she tells herself. She crosses over toward McKinney as Sunita charges up behind her.

“Move before I punch you!” Dasani says. But Sunita grabs Dasani’s shirt and pulls as Dasani takes a roundhouse swing. They fall to the ground, biting and scratching.

Suddenly, another big girl piles on, kicking Dasani in the face and laughing while Sunita holds her down.

Somehow Dasani manages to throw Sunita off balance, scrambling on top and pummeling her face before they pull apart, bleeding and crying.

“I’m saying it right in front of your face,” Dasani yells, her chest heaving. “You wanna fight me some more ——”

“I’m ready!” Sunita yells.

“I will jump you in your face!”

“I want you to! I want you to!”

Sunita’s brother orders her to retreat. “Take your ass in the house!” he yells.

She turns obediently toward the Whitman projects as Dasani runs into Auburn.

Minutes later, Dasani emerges with Chanel, who heads to the projects ready to go. She will wait for Sunita’s mother all night if needed, and they can settle this themselves.

But as Chanel presses for details, she learns
that Dasani is hardly innocent: She had thrown Sunita’s book bag on the floor earlier that day and commented unfavorably on her “$2.99 sweater.”

Chanel cools down and decides to handle the matter at school. The next morning, the two mothers and their daughters meet with Karen Best, an assistant principal who cuts to the chase.

“Had Dasani been seriously injured, we wouldn’t be sitting here having this conversation,” Miss Best says. “And that’s what you need to understand: Children as young as you go to jail. O.K.? Real simple.”

The mothers nod. The girls stare at the floor.

“She could have had a concussion,” Miss Best says. “You want to do something? Prove how smart you are.”

“There you go,” Chanel says approvingly.

“Everyone knows the negativity,” Miss Best says, looking at both girls. “You got that down pat. Show the brains.”

BACK at Auburn, nothing is going well. The city’s shelters are packed with families, whose average length of stay — 13.5 months — is longer than ever.

Dasani’s family is among the outliers. It will soon be three years since they landed at Auburn. While the Department of Homeless Services cannot limit a family’s time in the shelter system, the agency can resort to punitive measures when residents are found to be uncooperative.

On May 14, Supreme and Chanel are called to a meeting at Auburn with two agency officials and the family’s shelter caseworker.

“I’m asking you: What have you been doing to move out?” one of the officials asks Chanel and Supreme in a recording they made of the meeting.

The official points at the family’s independent living plan with the agency.

“You both signed it, O.K.?” the official says. “It says, ‘This shelter is temporary housing.’ You must look for permanent housing for yourselves.”

Violating the plan enough times means a family can be given an “involuntary discharge,” barring them from returning to the city’s shelters for 30 days.

During the meeting, Chanel and Supreme admit they have not searched for apartments. They say there is no point, since they cannot afford city rents without the kind of subsidy that the department once offered. They complain that their room is miserable and ask if they can be transferred to a better shelter.

“It’s really hard,” one of the officials says. “Listen, you are not the only family in shelter.”


“Tens of thousands,” the official says.

“Right, well, I have a different question,” Supreme says. “Do y’all fall under the guidelines of the New York City Housing standards?”

“Excuse me?” one of the officials says.

A few weeks earlier, the family had been walking the elegant streets south of Fort Greene Park, searching “white folks’ trash” for discarded books and clothes. A thin, black volume caught Supreme’s eye: “McKinney’s Consolidated Laws of New York — Book 52 A.”

He began leafing through hundreds of pages of laws, noting the violations that his living arrangement presents: the lack of hygienic conditions, dividers for privacy and sufficient living space.

“I think it’s inhumane,” Supreme mumbles. “I think one of you all need to try it. Your husband, eight children, all in one room. No bathroom. I want to see how you all manage that for three years.”

He might as well be talking to himself.

“With the documentation we can move forward, O.K.?” one of the officials says.

Supreme seems not to hear her either.

“You never got no peace of mind. You and your husband can never have a moment because your children are always in your face. You’d go crazy!”

The meeting is wrapping up.

“Even now, they got the bathrooms closed, so where you gotta go? All the way to the next floor,” Supreme continues. “I got a child who is legally blind. I gotta monitor her every time she go to the bathroom. It’s, like, bananas. It’s really bananas.”

THE children’s birthdays come in a mad springtime rush: Lele’s in March, Avian’s in April, the remaining six in the span of three and a half weeks.

Expectations are calibrated based on where a birthday falls in the monthly cash flow. Those at the start of the month bring hope, while those at the end of the month are luckless. So it goes for Avian.
Supreme hands her $11, one for each year of her life, but the next day, he asks for $5 back. She waits for a cake. Days pass. Finally, the children give up and light two small candles. Like carolers, they hold them beneath Avianna’s face and sing.

Avianna savors everything. While her siblings inhale their food, she will linger over each French fry.

She spends her $6 slowly. A week later, she takes her last dollar bill and folds it delicately, like a Japanese fan. She then places it inside a homemade card that Chanel opens on Mother’s Day.

They pass that afternoon at the laundromat. There is only $190 left on Chanel’s debit card, the balance of a tax refund that was supposed to rescue them from the shelter.

In times like these, Chanel sees fit to steal groceries. She tells the children to wait for her at a store’s entrance. She hides the habit from them. They hide their knowings from her.

Except for Papa, a gap-toothed 5-year-old buzzing with energy.

“You stealin’!” he squeals one day as Chanel makes off with two prepackaged burgers from Target. “You crazy!”

“Shut up, man!” Chanel says, before composing herself.

“Look,” she tries more softly. “It’s not right to steal. But God knows when it’s for a good reason.”

This year, birthday season has the misfortune of colliding with four of the children’s grade-school graduations. They need new outfits, and money for class photos and parties. Chanel is accustomed to saying no when she has to, but she also recognizes the small luxuries that will separate her children from their peers.

By the time Dasani’s birthday arrives at the end of May, she knows better than to expect $1 for each of her 12 years.

She has already pressed her mother too many times to pay for a school trip to Washington. Dasani has never been farther than Pennsylvania. She will hold out for that and let the birthday pass quietly.

Chanel has no such intention. Dasani is her jewel.

Over the weekend, the family retreats to the rowhouse in East New York belonging to Grandmother Sherry. The mood is light. The children skip about as Supreme stands over the stove, tending to his honey-barbecue wings.

The time has come to sing. Chanel gently lifts a vanilla sheet cake out of its plastic casing as Dasani stares in wonder. The top of the cake is still blank, awaiting inscription. Her mother covers it with candles and dims the lights.

Dasani closes her eyes.

If I could grant you three wishes, what would they be? her school counselor once asked her.

A house of our own, a lot of money and three more wishes, was Dasani’s answer.

She blows out the candles as the children clap. Chanel fetches a long, serrated knife. “Let me show you how to cut a cake,” she says, gingerly placing her hand over Dasani’s.

Together, they move the knife through the buttercream frosting.

“Doesn’t have to be perfect,” Chanel says.

Dasani bestows a sugar-flowered slice on each of her siblings, taking a plain piece for herself. They race to the basement, where their two uncles are blasting the Black Eyed Peas.

Screaming in delight, Dasani and her sisters leap onto a rickety, wooden platform and dance beneath a disco ball to “I Gotta Feeling” as Papa bounces around them.

They barely register the hard-faced young men shuffling through the basement, exchanging elaborate handshakes, their heads hung low. Some play video games. Others mill about with girls in their teens wearing too much makeup and too little clothing.

One of these girls, a baby-faced Dominican who works at the supermarket across the street, hangs on Uncle Josh, flashing braces when she smiles. To curry favor, she hands Dasani a $20 bill as a birthday present.

Like other things in her life, Dasani could not have predicted such luck. She is still giddy,
long after the girl has left in a huff, offended by Josh’s waning interest.

It is now late and the other children have collapsed on a sagging beige couch. Dasani is dancing to Alicia Keys.

*She’s living in a world and it’s on fire
Filled with catastrophe
But she knows she can fly away*

Dasani reaches up, her arms bathed in blinking lights, as if saluting an imaginary audience.

*Oh, she got her head in the clouds
And she’s not backing down
This girl is on fire.*

Dasani has never had a better birthday. It feels like perfection.

It hardly matters that the cake was stolen from Pathmark.

THREE days later, it is raining as the children spill down Sherry’s steps. They are hungry and short on sleep.

In theory, they are heading to the thing they most need — psychotherapy. Chanel signed them up after learning that she can reap $10 per child in carfare through Medicaid, at a clinic in the Kensington section of Brooklyn.

Chanel needs the cash. She is still hoping to find a way to send Dasani on her school trip to Washington, and the $75 deposit is due tomorrow. So despite the pelting rain, Chanel instructs the children to meet her at a subway station.

Only Hada is wearing a raincoat. Papa’s hoodie slips off as he tips back to catch raindrops on his tongue. The children cross Lincoln Avenue holding hands.

Dasani is in a foul mood. There is no telling how her anger will reveal itself today. Sometimes it comes as a quiet kind of rage. She will stare at an indefinite point, her eyes blinking, her mouth set. Other times, it bursts like thunder.

“Move it!” she screams.

Nijai trails behind, her glasses fogging over. She has always been the odd orchid in this bunch of daisies, the most delicate and sensitive child, made more frail by her advancing blindness.

She can make out only vague shapes and colors. Soon she will have to use a cane, but for now she often rests a hand on Lele’s stroller to guide
Ramsey Merritt.

and Joseph Goldstein, and research by Ms.

mired in the problems that her mother cannot 

lem. You got a solution?”

negativity. You always talkin’ about the prob 

that’s one thing I don’t like about you — your 

nounces.

Chanel is unsure.

time the bus slows, she snaps awake.

is soon asleep. The little ones watch, thumbs in 

sit pressed together, newly reconciled. Dasani 

stomachs are full and the mood is lifted. Dasani 

bag of lukewarm Popeyes chicken, furnished by 

stranger.

By the time they get off at Jay Street, their 
stomachs are full and the mood is lifted. Dasani 
spots an umbrella on the ground. It still works, 
opening to reveal an intricate pattern of white 
and black flecks. She twirls it around and, when 
the 103 bus pulls up, carefully closes it.

Dasani and Nijai race to the back of the bus, 
where the motor keeps the seats warm. They 
sit pressed together, newly reconciled. Dasani 
is soon asleep. The little ones watch, thumbs in 
mouth, as their mother closes her eyes. Every 
time the bus slows, she snaps awake.

At Church Avenue, the children and their 
mother pile off. The street looks familiar, but 
Chanel is unsure.

“We got off at the wrong stop,” Dasani an-
nounces.

Chanel fixes her gaze on Dasani.

“Shut the fuck up,” she says. “You know, 
that’s one thing I don’t like about you — your 
negativity. You always talkin’ about the prob-
lem. You got a solution?”

Dasani carries a singular burden among her 
siblings. Chanel has vested enormous authority 
in Dasani. Her competence, agility and strength 
— the attributes that could rescue Dasani from 
er life’s miseries — also threaten to keep her 
mired in the problems that her mother cannot 
meet alone.

At times, Chanel seems taunted by her de-
pendence on her daughter, which reminds her 

INVISIBLE CHILD
Fourth in a series.

Dasani is one of more than 22,000 homeless children 
in New York City. The New York Times began fol-
lowing her in September 2012, when she was 11 
years old and living at the Auburn Family Resi-
dence in Brooklyn. This series is based on inter-
views, official records and video taken by The Times 
and Dasani’s family. Her last name is being with-
held to protect her identity.

ONLINE: Sourcing for this article, as well as 
video and additional photographs:
nytimes.com/invisiblechild

of her own failings.

They walk single file toward Coney Island 
Avenue.

Dasani tries to recover.

“It’s this way, Mommy,” she says, gesturing 
hopefully toward a florist shop. They take a few 
steps before Chanel turns on her heel, remem-
bering the way.

“If you want to go somewhere, don’t listen 
to Dasani,” she says.

Dasani freezes under her new umbrella.

Chanel unloads.

“I’m sick of your attitude,” she seethes.

“There’s only like 15 kids going on this trip be-
cause people can’t pay. And me, who got noth-
ing, is trying to send you and you gonna give 
me attitude?”

Dasani keeps walking.

Chanel’s fury mounts. She reaches for the 
same words every time, the kind that echo for 
days in Dasani’s head.

Dasani always gotta have the answer.
Shethink she special.
She think the some-fucking-body.
She nobody.

Dasani’s face remains frozen as the tears 
begins to fall, like rain on a statue.

“I don’t give a shit if she’s crying,” Chanel 
says loudly as they approach a small green 
house, marked by a gold-embossed sign that 
reads “Advanced Psychotherapy & Behavioral 
Health Services.”

“It’s only one goddamn chief,” Chanel says.
“I’m the only chief.”

Inside, the children file into their fourth
“group therapy” session with a woman who asks vague questions like, “What are your hobbies?” She sounds more like a distant aunt than a counselor.

Khaliq knows the difference. Earlier in the year, a Children’s Services caseworker had sent him to a therapist after he acted erratically in school. That therapist had asked questions like, “Do you want to kill yourself?” Those sessions felt like they never ended; these lasted only 20 minutes — roughly two and a half minutes per child.

At the door, Chanel collects her $80 in carfare and the children head back into the rain. The cash instantly settles the family, leaving the children calm and Chanel introspective.

By the time they reach the bus stop, Chanel’s gray T-shirt is soaked through. She is thinking about Supreme, whom she could not rouse from bed this morning.

“What gets me down is the responsibility,” she says. “They got shoes on but no socks. I come all this way, on the bus, in the rain, to get the money so she can go on her trip.”

She is shivering now.

“Those are the things you are supposed to provide,” she scolds her absent husband. “You are the man. You made this family, but you don’t provide.”

Dasani watches her mother silently. She wants to fix it.

She can only feel empty. The day’s weight has passed from her sister to herself and now to their mother, who is weeping in the rain.

---

**SOURCE NOTES**

*Numbers of homeless children have risen to a staggering 22,091 this month — December 2013 figures provided by the Department of Homeless Services.*

*If all of the city’s homeless children were to file into Madison Square Garden for a hockey game — For hockey games seating capacity is 17,200.*

*Dasani’s classmate Sunita begins to stalk her along the way — In order to protect the classmate’s identity, The Times is using her middle name, Sunita.*

*“Family close knit” reads one social worker’s report — Children’s Services records provided by the family.*

*The average length of stay for homeless families is 13.5 months — Department of Homeless Services.*

*She can reap $10 per child in carfare through Medicaid — The Advanced Psychotherapy and Behavioral Health Services clinic in Brooklyn issues $10 per person to patients covered by Medicaid and Health Plus or Medicaid and Health First. According to the state’s Health Department, cash reimbursements for transportation costs through Medicaid are illegal.*
December 13, 2013

The New York Times

VOL. CLXIII . . . No. 56,349
NEW YORK, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2013

$2.50

AID Repressed Hopes, Reasons to Dream
By ANDREA ELLIOTT

A MOB of spectators in process, trying to see the big ring. It's a Saturday.

F ºluid colors. The crowd cheers when

"Do The Salsa!" he shouts. She looks up at the sky and extends her fingers, but cannot reach

high enough to grasp the coin her. A powerful

sound echoes up by the raft. In an instant, she is another, rolling and

twisting ritualistically as the audience gasps at the sight of the coin-wielding hand.

"She's a giant," the man had ar-

nounced to the audience. "She's enormous. I'm telling you right now.

Dancers in red pants, looking at the smiling face. She cannot make some of the un-

realness that has brought her here to Harlem, on the sparkling July day, to make her 10-

year-old son the subject of an urban circus gauging
turned-up with Nicki.

But there was her moving mother, Chanel, her father, Supreme, and all those lifelong

friends, clapping and cheering as she

"I thought it was a dream — you know, like the thing happening," she says.

"You know, in movies, people pinch themselves.

The next day, she was midair, pulling and

swinging around the audience gasping at the sight of the coin-wielding hand.

It was only two months earlier that Dasi-

ni stood at the first step on her mother's leg.

The moment was fast approaching, a mom-

ent that, in this family, always brings change.

The markers of Dasi's life — her first words,

her first steps, her first foray into the real

world — are indelible in the family's memory.

Continued on Page A22

Said to Urge

N.S.A. Carbs

BY DAVID SANGER
WASHINGTON — A position-

ally, a campaignushed by the

National Security Agency has

concluded that a program to

codify and publicly announce

contents. According to officials

contented to increase privacy pro-

tions, according to officials

Continued on Page A22

December 13, 2013

Late Edition
radio, 10:45 p.m., and church, 11:45 p.m.,

tonight and every evening.

Tuesday through the weekend.

Democratic Call for Votes and G.O.P. Bennetns
Filibuster Change

SESSIONS GO ALL NIGHT

Barack Obama was in a cool button in the limped

headlines about Barack Obama

links of lobbying's blurry lines.

Links of a White House aide

In an instant, she is midair, pulling and

swinging around the audience gasping at the sight of the coin-wielding hand.

It was only two months earlier that Dasi-

ni stood at the first step on her mother's leg.

The moment was fast approaching, a mom-

ent that, in this family, always brings change.

The markers of Dasi's life — her first words,

her first steps, her first foray into the real

world — are indelible in the family's memory.

Continued on Page A22

Tobacco Industry Tactics Limit Poorer Nations' Smoking Laws

BY BETHANY KUDERER

Tobacco companies are pushing

back against world leaders who

are making a move to limit their

impact on global health.

They also say the rights they are

undertaking are the world's best,

against lessons in different parts of the world.

Continued on Page A22

An Execution in North Korea

North Korea said that it had executed

an American man, on Friday, who had been

charged in a plot to bring in Christianity.

Continued on Page A22

December 13, 2013

Early Edition

Washington, D.C., 6 a.m., and Los Angeles, 9 a.m.

Continued on Page A22

A Vote on Child Euthanasia

In an instant, she is midair, pulling and

swinging around the audience gasping at the sight of the coin-wielding hand.

It was only two months earlier that Dasi-

ni stood at the first step on her mother's leg.

The moment was fast approaching, a mom-

ent that, in this family, always brings change.

The markers of Dasi's life — her first words,

her first steps, her first foray into the real

world — are indelible in the family's memory.

Continued on Page A22

INTERNATIONAL

An Execution in North Korea

North Korea said that it had executed

an American man, on Friday, who had been

charged in a plot to bring in Christianity.

Continued on Page A22

A Child Euthanasia

In an instant, she is midair, pulling and

swinging around the audience gasping at the sight of the coin-wielding hand.

It was only two months earlier that Dasi-

ni stood at the first step on her mother's leg.

The moment was fast approaching, a mom-

ent that, in this family, always brings change.

The markers of Dasi's life — her first words,

her first steps, her first foray into the real

world — are indelible in the family's memory.

Continued on Page A22

Mexic0's Pride, Oil, May Be Opened to Outsiders

BY Raul A. RUBiN, with additional material by AARON ZEIBERG

Chilean Del Carril, Mexico — Even gas, not in Mexic0, is strapped with the pres-

sure and constraints of the international political system.

In rich countries. Industry officials say that there are only a few cases of severe depression, and that

the drug is illegal in the global trade.

Continued on Page A22

Poll Finds Hope Is Running High For Next Mayor

With Bill de Blasio’s inaugura-

tion less than a month away, New

Yorkers are highly... adviser, his career offers a

hint of lobbying’s blurry lines.

Links of a White House aide

In an instant, she is midair, pulling and

swinging around the audience gasping at the sight of the coin-wielding hand.

It was only two months earlier that Dasi-

ni stood at the first step on her mother's leg.

The moment was fast approaching, a mom-

ent that, in this family, always brings change.

The markers of Dasi's life — her first words,

her first steps, her first foray into the real

world — are indelible in the family's memory.

Continued on Page A22

An Immortal’s Artistic Touch

Michael C. Hall, the popular paintings,

prints, murals and interior of writer’s place at

Continued on Page A22

Biofuel and Biofuels

In an instant, she is midair, pulling and

swinging around the audience gasping at the sight of the coin-wielding hand.

It was only two months earlier that Dasi-

ni stood at the first step on her mother's leg.

The moment was fast approaching, a mom-

ent that, in this family, always brings change.

The markers of Dasi's life — her first words,

her first steps, her first foray into the real

world — are indelible in the family's memory.

Continued on Page A22

The New York Times
Amid a Life Of Curbed Hopes, Reasons to Dream

In Harlem, the pace of the game has never changed, much less its aim. The dreams change, of course. It’s a city where the sense of place and the memory of the past can be as real as the next move. But the streets are the same. They are always chosen with a purpose, even if the purpose is only to exist.

Dressed in bright-pink shorts and matching flip-flops, Dasani looks like a typical street kid. She is training on the fitness bars next to the basketball court in Fort Greene Park in Brooklyn. But she is also training for more than just a game. She is training for life.

Standing on a platform, she dives into a set of flawless push-ups. “I don’t care,” she says. “I’m going to do this.”

Chanel, her coach, isn’t sure. She has been doing this for years, and she knows what it means. “You’re not doing it right,” she tells Dasani. “You’re not doing it right.”

She is watching a group of kids who have been practicing for hours. They are the best in the city. They are the champions. But they are also the ones who have the most to lose.

“They’re not going to make it,” Chanel says. “They’re not going to make it.”

But Dasani is different. She has been with Chanel for a long time. She has seen her come back from the brink.

“I can’t sell this poster for $100?” she says. “I can’t sell this poster for $100?”

Chanel looks at her in disbelief. “You can’t sell this poster,” she says. “You can’t sell this poster.”

But Dasani is relentless. She is training — of any kind.

She is training for a reason. She is training for the future.

“O.K.,” Miss Hester says. “Now, let me ask you one more question. Have you ever had a chance to be O.K.?”

Dasani nods gamely as he calls out to his kids.”

But Chanel is not satisfied. She wants more. “You’re not doing it right,” she says. “You’re not doing it right.”

She is right. Dasani is not doing it right. She is not even thinking through the possibilities presented by this salt-and-pepper beard. He moves with the purloined.

“We have to do this,” Chanel says.

But Dasani is too late. She has already gone too far.

“Bud don’t make you wiser,” he observes, “not everybody has something to lose.”

Miss Hester is watching. She is already thinking about the next move.

“Do some diamonds!” Chanel calls out. Dasani connects her hands in the shape of a diamond as her coach yells. “Do some diamonds!”

She dives into a set of flawless push-ups.

“Like the water,” Chanel says.

“Water, Blaq Ninja, Salubrious and Mel Matrix. Giant rests his head incredulously. Next, they hit the floor where she knocks out a set of dips in good form, her hips moving like a pro.

“She’s got it,” Chanel says. “She’s got it.”

But Dasani is not ready. She is still training. She is still dreaming.

“I’ma hide in the truck,” 8-year-old Maya says.

She is training for a reason. She is training for the future. She is training for her family.

“Wait till they see you in three weeks,” he promises.

The boys smirks, saying, “You not staff.”

But Dasani is not staff. She is a proper tryout.

She is training for a reason. She is training for the future.

Meet me at the park next Saturday,” he says, “Meet me at the park next Saturday.”

But Chanel is not satisfied. She wants more. “You’re not doing it right,” she says. “You’re not doing it right.”

She is right. Dasani is not doing it right. She is not even thinking through the possibilities presented by this salt-and-pepper beard. He moves with the purloined.
Amid Repressed Hopes, Reasons to Dream

Friday, December 13, 2013

A doctor pronounces Casshanae dead at 8:10 a.m.

The next day, the Administration for Children's Services took custody of another three-year-old boy who had suffocated to death. A year after that death, another three-year-old boy was found dead in the same hotel.

The uncertainty of Dasani’s life is deepening. She is now in court, fighting for her home. A judge has ruled that Dasani’s family cannot stay in the shelter as new cribs are delivered to the room where temperatures reached 102 degrees.

The shelter has no certificate of occupancy. Its record-keeping is a mess. The registration cards of the 20 children living there were not filled out properly, which has made it impossible to determine the cause of death.

So look out for Dasani, man,” Chanel tells a reporter. She dives in first.

“Of course it’s a challenge,” Aisha says.

“Hey, I’m happy!” she says, her eyes sparkling.

Dasani is still in rehab. Her food stamps have run out. She now has $39, counting the money gleaned from a box of Froot Loops and Corn Flakes. And so it goes, until she returns.

She now has $39, counting the money gleaned from a box of Froot Loops and Corn Flakes. And so it goes, until she returns.

Dasani is still in rehab. Her food stamps have run out. She now has $39, counting the money gleaned from a box of Froot Loops and Corn Flakes. And so it goes, until she returns.

She now has $39, counting the money gleaned from a box of Froot Loops and Corn Flakes. And so it goes, until she returns.

She now has $39, counting the money gleaned from a box of Froot Loops and Corn Flakes. And so it goes, until she returns.

She now has $39, counting the money gleaned from a box of Froot Loops and Corn Flakes. And so it goes, until she returns.

She now has $39, counting the money gleaned from a box of Froot Loops and Corn Flakes. And so it goes, until she returns.
Amid Repressed Hopes, Reasons to Dream

By ANDREA ELLIOTT

A

MOB of spectators presses in, trying to see the tiny girl. Rap stars circle. The cameras roll. The crowd chants her name. “Da-Sa-Nee!”

Her heart is racing. She looks up at the sky and extends her fingers, but cannot reach high enough to grasp the metal bar. A powerful man hoists her up by the waist.

In an instant, she is midair, pulling and twisting acrobatically as the audience gasps at the might of this 12-year-old girl.

“She’s a giantess,” the man had announced to the audience. “She’s tomorrow’s success, I’m telling you right now.”

Dasani blinks, looking out at the smiling faces. She cannot make sense of the serendipity that has brought her here to Harlem, on this sparkling July day, to make her debut as a member of an urban fitness group teamed up with Nike.

But there is her beaming mother, Chanel; her father, Supreme; and all seven siblings. They are cheering and clapping as well.

“I thought it was a dream — make believe — like this wasn’t happening,” she says. “You know, like in movies, people pinch themselves
like this ain’t real.”

It was only two months earlier that Dasani stood at the bus stop as her mother wept in the rain. Summer was fast approaching, a season that, in this family, always brings change.

The markers of Dasani’s life — her first months in the care of Grandma Joanie, the day her family moved into their first real home, the loss of that home two years later, when they landed in the Auburn shelter — these all came in summertime.

There was no telling what this summer might bring. Dasani could no sooner predict landing a spot on the Harlem team than she could foretell the abrupt changes that still lay ahead.

Already, the court-mandated supervision of the family by child protection workers had run its course. Chanel’s nine-month trial period was suddenly over, leaving her custody secure, just as new problems came along.

School was winding down when the children learned that their only other refuge — Grandma Sherry’s rowhouse in East New York, Brooklyn — had gone into foreclosure. Sherry could end up homeless as well, at a time when New York’s shelter population had surpassed a historic 50,000.

As the days grew hotter, Dasani and her family remained stuck in the same miserable room at Auburn.

And yet summer, no matter how stifling, also carried a certain promise, the kind that comes of chance encounters on the street.

It is a muggy night in Harlem, but the children do not care. They savor any chance to visit.

This is the place where, a decade earlier, Chanel and Supreme fell in love. They have returned over the years, pulled by the Five Percent Nation, the movement spawned 50 years ago by a contemporary of Malcolm X who broke from the Nation of Islam.

Tonight, people swarm into the Harriet Tubman Learning Center on West 127th Street for the organization’s annual gathering, pushing past security guards and a vendor with pins that declare, “I ♥ being God.” Supreme mills about in the foyer, greeting old friends with tight hugs. Chanel trails him, her chin high, her daughters’ hair freshly braided.

It is a rare moment of belonging in a year of rootlessness.

As the sun sets, Dasani and her family step out for some air. A man brushes past them, walking along West 127th Street. His hooded sweatshirt is pulled low over his face, which is dusted by a salt-and-pepper beard. He moves with the purposeful air of a celebrity in hiding.

“I seen your videos,” Chanel says, stopping him in his tracks.

For years, Dasani’s family had been watching the DVDs of this former convict turned fitness guru who calls himself Giant. His team, Bartendaz, combines pull-up acrobatics on city playgrounds with a militaristic message of self-improvement, steering followers away from drugs and alcohol to “the bars of health.”

Giant looks Chanel up and down, noting the open beer she has sheathed in a brown paper bag.

“Bud don’t make you wiser,” he observes, flashing a smile that reveals a perfect row of teeth.

Chanel ignores the comment. She is already thinking through the possibilities presented by this accidental meeting. She steers Dasani to some empty pull-up bars at a nearby play-
“Show him what ya got!” she calls out.

Giant, whose name is Hassan Yasin-Bradley, accepts the impromptu audition the way a famous film director takes the waiter’s latest screenplay. While Giant remains on the fringe of prime-time America, he has his share of acolytes in Harlem.

Dasani springs to the bars and begins to knock out an impressive set of pull-ups, her shoulders popping with the muscles of an action figure.

Giant is still chatting with Chanel when he looks over and pauses.

“Whoa,” he says.

Chanel senses that she may be on to something. She explains that Dasani has been doing pull-ups in Fort Greene Park for years. She can also dance, do gymnastics, run track. All she lacks is training — of any kind.

Now it is Giant’s mind that races through the possibilities. The girl is uncommonly strong. She has a telegenic smile. She’s spunky.

“She seems like just the kind of girl we could use on our team,” he says, grinning at Dasani, who grins back.

Giant quickly explains how his team works: It has a limited partnership with Nike that will hopefully lead to bigger things. In the meantime, the team earns modest pay in exchange for holding training clinics, and performing at concerts and other events.

At the very least, he concludes, Dasani merits a proper tryout.

“Meet me at the park next Saturday,” he says, leaving his number before disappearing.

Dasani lies awake that night.

It is the first time in her life she can see a path to something else. What exactly, she is not sure. She has not even had her tryout. But for a girl who has spent her life tempering expectations, she cannot stop herself from dreaming just a little.

“I’ma save all my money so we can get a house,” she tells her mother.

“We’ll be O.K.”

“No,” Dasani insists. “I’ma save all my money.”

MONEY is especially tight. This might explain why, in Dasani’s words, Mommy goes “loco” during an inspection of the family’s room at Auburn.

There is a knock at the door. Chanel lets in the inspector, who promptly demands that she surrender the family’s forbidden microwave oven.

Chanel refuses. She cannot afford to buy a new one, nor can she fathom having to wait in line every night to reheat 10 dinner trays in one of the shelter’s two microwaves. The inspector leaves, and by the time two security officers with the Department of Homeless Services arrive to confiscate the microwave, Chanel has hidden it in a friend’s room.

As for the inspector, Chanel offers to “punch that bitch in the face.”

Dasani believes that her mother’s biggest problem is her mouth. She reflects on this as her home-room teacher, Faith Hester, delivers a lesson that week on personal responsibility.

“I don’t ever wanna hear, ‘Well, my mother told me to do this,’ unless you know that that’s the right thing,” Miss Hester tells the class.

The teacher has shim-
“I am telling you, as sure as I’m sitting here,” Miss Hester says, her arm resting across Dasani’s desk, “you’re gonna be held responsible for the choices you make.”

Hands shoot up in the air.

“Yes, Miss Dasani?”

Dasani recounts how her longtime rival, Sunita, began following her after school, and slapped her. “And so, my mom is a violent parent, so you can’t tell her anything about fights because then she gonna want to get a stick and tell you to knock the chick out.”

Miss Hester arches her brows.

“O.K.,” Miss Hester says. “Now, let me ask you: Do you think that was the right thing to do?”

The class erupts in chaos.

“O.K., O.K.!” Miss Hester yells. “I’m a tell you what I would have told my kid.”

They fall silent.

“Not everybody has something to lose,” Miss Hester says.

“You care about your life,” she continues. “There are people out there who are so hurt they don’t care about leaving here. They are looking for an opportunity to do something crazy and ridiculous. They have nothing to live for.”

Dasani ponders this.

“I am telling you to listen to your internal barometer,” Miss Hester says. “Think about your next move before you make your next move.”

Dasani is still in bed the next morning when her mother rises from a fitful sleep and heads to the corner store with her sister Avianna. All around, men are leaving the projects to report to early work shifts. Chanel stands in the cold, watching them. “Your father should be doing that,” she says.

“I am telling you to listen to your internal barometer,” Miss Hester says. “Think about your next move before you make your next move.”

Dasani is in bed the next morning when her mother rises from a fitful sleep and heads to the corner store with her sister Avianna. All around, men are leaving the projects to report to early work shifts. Chanel stands in the cold, watching them. “Your father should be doing that,” she says.

Just that week she had stopped a flag waver at a construction site. It seemed like a job that Chanel could perform beautifully. The woman told her about an organization that helps people with G.E.D’s find work.

For Chanel, words like “G.E.D.” end a conversation. It has been 20 years since she sat in a high school classroom. She can feel like a foreigner in her own country, unable to speak the language of bank accounts and loan applications. When filling out medical forms, she stops at the box requiring a work number, frozen by its blankness.

“I want my kids to be able to come see me at my job, pick up my paycheck,” she says that afternoon, standing with Dasani outside Au Bon Pain, where the day’s pastries will soon sell at a discount. “Just be reliant on my money, you know what I’m sayin’?”

Dasani stares at her mother anxiously.

“I’m tired of my kids seeing me dull,” Chanel says. “It’s my time to shine.”

“I don’t see you dull,” Dasani says quietly. “I see you shine.”

Dasani spends the week before her tryout for Bartendaz in focused preparation, training on the fitness bars next to the basketball court in Fort Greene Park in Brooklyn. At night, she replays the team’s DVDs over and over, studying the members closely.

At school, she tells no one.

This new dream is carried on practical terms. It is less about helping herself than about making her parents whole. In the meantime, Dasani worries about the most immediate challenge, which is to get to Harlem on time. Punctuality is a miracle in her family.

On Saturday morning, there is no sign of Dasani as the Bartendaz start to warm up at the playground at 144th Street and Lenox Avenue.

Soon they are causing a commotion that slows the traffic. One after another, they fly onto the bars, whipping through moves that seem to defy gravity. Some of them wear black T-shirts with the logo of a man bending a bar, his brain lit by a bulb.

“Salute that mind!” Giant calls out to his followers.

There is Cinderblock, Honey Bee, Sky, Earth, Water, Blaq Ninja, Salubrious and Mel Matrix. Giant’s second in command is Dr. Good Body, a self-described athletic alchemist (“the library is my alma mater”) who transforms the “base metal” of a person’s character into “gold.”

Giant orbits around his team, issuing commands in a lyrical code that is impenetrable to outsiders. He is especially fond of abbreviations. A favorite is “C.A.P.” — Character, Attitude and Personality. His nickname, Giant, stands for Growing Is a Noble Thing.

It is a bold name for a man who stands just 5-foot-7. Born Warren Hassan Bradley, he grew up in the Baruch projects on the Lower East
Side, where in his teens he became known as a D.J. and street fighter skilled at hiding razors in his mouth and spitting them out in combat. He started selling drugs, and was sent to prison in 1989 on two felony drug charges.

Like Dasani’s father, Giant left prison transformed. He had earned a high school equivalency diploma and devoted himself to Islam. (He looks askance at the teachings of the Five Percent.) He also found a way to capitalize on the pull-up bar routines that he taught himself in prison yards. By the time he started Bartendaz in 2003, he was already drawing crowds to Harlem’s playgrounds.

Dasani finally arrives, her mother and two siblings in tow, as the team’s practice winds down. Dressed in bright-pink shorts and matching flip-flops, she is a dwarf among titans.

“What’s your name again?” Giant says.

“Dasani.”

“Dasani with a D?”

“Like the water,” Chanel says. He turns to the group.

“Everyone say, ‘Peace, Queen.’”

“Peace, Queen!” they shout.

The tryout begins with a set of pull-ups, demonstrated by Blaq Ninja and Sky. Dasani coasts through the exercise.

“Damn!” a team member says as the others whistle. Giant remains cool to the newcomer, telling Dasani “stay there, breathe” as she pedals her feet in the air while holding her head level with the bar.

Her next test comes on the parallel bars, where she knocks out a set of dips in good form, and then pedals again as Giant counts aloud, shaking his head incredulously. Next, they hit the floor for push-ups.

“Do some diamonds!” Chanel calls out. Dasani connects her hands in the shape of a diamond as she dives into a set of flawless push-ups.

Then she goes for broke, clapping her hands behind her back, mid-push-up. Honey Bee captures the image on the team’s iPad before Dasani comes crashing to the ground, promptly dusting herself off.

“Look at this! Look at this!” Giant says, running over to show Dasani the iPad photo.

“You tellin’ me I can’t sell this poster for $100?”
He turns to Chanel: “She’s in.”
A young boy sidles up. The team has drawn spectators who live as far away as Norway and Japan. This one is a local.
“Excuse me,” he says to Dasani. “Can you do a pull-up again?”
She nods gamely as he calls out to his friends: “Yo! Come here! She about to do it!”

Giant smiles.
“Wait till they see you in three weeks,” he says.
The family is ecstatic.
Supreme runs to the corner store for a dozen roses. He hands them to Chanel.
“Dag, I love it here,” he says, looking at her tenderly.
“We should come back to Harlem.”

C
HANEL soon finds reason to be suspicious of Giant. He is charming, she thinks, but confusing on details like payment and a promised contract. Giant, too, can spot a hustler, and he seems wary of Chanel.

On the day of the tryout, he treats her children to lunch at a local bodega, joined by Malcolm X’s grandson Malik, a friend of the team.
Malik congratulates Dasani, handing her a bottle of peach-flavored Snapple. She carries the bottle with both hands, later writing “Malcolm X grandson” on the label before stashing it in her dresser at Auburn.

The next day, when Dasani’s siblings tag along to practice again, Giant senses that Chanel expects him to repeat the invitation.
He skips the meal, but reassures Chanel that her daughter, like his other team members, will be compensated for events. The first one is a training clinic this Thursday. All Chanel needs to do is bring Dasani. The rest is Dasani’s job.
“That’s why we got the word ‘responsibility,’ ” Giant tells Dasani in front of Chanel. “Response” — he holds up his right hand — “Ability” — then his left hand. “So respond to what? Your ability. Not your mom’s ability.”

On Thursday afternoon, Dasani asks if her mother has heard from Giant. Chanel is tired after a long day and cannot imagine taking Dasani all the way to Harlem.
“He never called,” Chanel tells Dasani.
Up in Harlem, Giant had been calling repeatedly. He checks his phone, looking for a response. He shakes his head.

Dasani goes to sleep feeling crushed.

She wakes at 5 a.m. for the long-awaited school trip to Washington. Still feeling glum, she boards the bus on an empty stomach, sitting alone with a thin blue blanket laid carefully across her legs. Five hours later, as they approach the Capitoll, Dasani presses her face to the window.

It looks different here. People walk slower. There is space everywhere — trees, monuments, water. She can see off into the distance, her view unobstructed by skyscrapers.

She is paying special attention, trying to record what she sees so she can describe it later to her sister Nijai.

Remember every single detail, Nijai had implored. It is not just that her blindness prevents her from seeing it herself. It is that Washington represents Nijai’s roots, the city where she was born and last saw her mother alive.

Every detail.

After a tour of the memorials, the bus stops near the White House. Dasani runs to the tall, wrought-iron gate and looks between the bars. On the sidewalk, a group of protesters wearing orange suits and black hoods are chanting foreign-sounding names.

“My baby’s not breathing!” she wails.

The agency declined to do so, even after Aisha gave repeated complaints when

Giant smiles.
“Wait till they see you in three weeks,” he says.

The family is ecstatic.

It looks different here. People walk slower. There is space everywhere — trees, monuments, water. She can see off into the distance, her view unobstructed by skyscrapers.

She is paying special attention, trying to record what she sees so she can describe it later to her sister Nijai.

Remember every single detail, Nijai had implored. It is not just that her blindness prevents her from seeing it herself. It is that Washington represents Nijai’s roots, the city where she was born and last saw her mother alive.

Every detail.

After a tour of the memorials, the bus stops near the White House. Dasani runs to the tall, wrought-iron gate and looks between the bars. On the sidewalk, a group of protesters wearing orange suits and black hoods are chanting foreign-sounding names.

“Obama, close Guantánamo!” they yell.

Dasani has never heard of Guantánamo. But she knows what a jail uniform looks like from visiting her Uncle Carnell. These people, she concludes, are supposed to be prisoners, and they want President Obama to close their jail. She shakes her head.

“I don’t know why they protesting in front of Obama’s house like he gonna be in here,” she says.

There is hardly a trace of the child who had once scoured Gracie Mansion for a glimpse of the mayor.
A WEEK has passed with no word from Giant. Dasani keeps doing her pull-ups. Tucked in the top drawer of her dresser is the empty Snapple bottle given to her by Malcolm X’s grandson.

“It’s all right,” Dasani tells her mother. “I didn’t get attached.”

Detachment is as much a rite of Dasani’s summers as sunbaked afternoons in the park. She bids farewell to Miss Hester and the principal, Paula Holmes, bracing herself for a 10-week absence from the Susan S. McKinney Secondary School of the Arts.

Summers also bring more regular visits to Grandma Sherry’s, where the children can ride up and down Lincoln Avenue on rusted bikes. But this year, Sherry has bad news. The bank is coming for her house. In another month, a court marshal will see her out the door if she is not gone.

Sherry has two bad choices: She can enter the shelter system or she can leave her children and grandchildren behind in New York and move in with her sister in Pittsburgh. If Sherry leaves, Chanel will have lost her only support, the woman who partly raised her.

Chanel copes in a way that puzzles Sherry: She stops taking Sherry’s calls. It is Chanel’s way of detaching, of leaving a relationship before it leaves her. Sherry finally decides to go to Pittsburgh. When she does get the children on the phone, she tells them that she is not sure when she is leaving, but that “the Lord will take care of you.”

In the midst of this, Dasani finds herself thinking about Bartendaz. A month after her tryout, she resolves to give it another chance: She will report to practice by herself, as if nothing has changed. But as she announces her departure one morning, Supreme stops her at the door.

“Not before this place is straightened up,” he says. By the time Dasani finishes, practice is over.

The next morning, she gets up feeling defiant. She looks at Supreme, who is still asleep. How you gonna take my destiny away from me? she thinks. Dasani turns to her mother, and Chanel waves at her to leave before he wakes.

Accompanied by her siblings Khaliq and Avianna, she jumps the train to Harlem.

“Long time no see,” Giant says by way of a greeting. He gives Dasani a stern lecture: “If you know you’re not gonna be consistent, then I need to know so I can invest in someone else.”

Dasani is confused. Her parents say that he never called. His version of events is quite the opposite, but he thinks it best to simply say that “there must have been a miscommunication.”

Dasani does not know what to believe, but she begins training with Giant every weekend, accompanied by her twin in all things, Avianna.

They are in Harlem on the day a moving truck pulls up to Sherry’s house. Alerted by phone, Chanel arrives moments before Sherry’s departure.

“I’m a hide in the truck,” 8-year-old Maya says.

Chanel walks through the house she has known since she was born. She pauses at the bathroom’s worn wooden door, which reminds her of her father.

He is there at that door, some flicker of a memory. Those are the things one loses with a house, not the shelter itself but the irretrievable belonging it brings.

On the stoop, Sherry and Chanel hold each other for a long time.

Dasani does not get to say goodbye.

The sadness of Sherry’s departure is eclipsed a week later when Dasani makes her big Bartendaz debut. Her routine is captured on video for the opening sequence of Giant’s forthcoming DVD, and Dasani receives her first earnings: $70.

She is too excited to think twice when Supreme asks if he can borrow some of it. He buys pizza for the children and keeps the rest. Dasani is distracted by the day’s other gifts — the cheering crowd, the chance to pose with the rappers Jadakiss and Styles P.

She is still floating two days later, when Giant summons her to a basketball clinic for boys. He wants her to “mentor” them. It seems like an odd request for a girl who was recently suspended from school. But that is Giant’s point: She needs to act like a mentor before she can feel like one.

She soon takes to the task, guiding boys several inches taller as they struggle into feeble pull-ups. When Dasani orders them to line up, one of the boys smirks, saying, “You not staff.”

“Oh yes I am,” Dasani shoots back.
SUMMER’S end marks the third anniversary of Dasani’s arrival at Auburn, on Aug. 26, 2010.

Three years — a quarter of her life — most of it spent in one room. She has gotten so used to the smallness of it that she can scarcely recall how to live with more space.

To Dasani, sometimes it seems like only tragedy brings change.

The next morning, on Aug. 27, she wakes to a high-pitched scream. It is her neighbor in Room 445, a single mother named Aisha. Her 3-month-old daughter, Casshanea, has turned blue.

“My baby’s not breathing!” she wails.

A petite 27-year-old from Pennsylvania, Aisha had come to Auburn in early May, seven months pregnant with Casshanea. She was born premature with respiratory distress syndrome and developed feeding problems, all of which was noted in the records that Auburn received.

The infant’s problems were serious enough that a hospital social worker asked the Department of Homeless Services to transfer the baby, Aisha and her 1-year-old son to another shelter.
equipped to handle medical needs. The agency declined to do so, even after Aisha filed a complaint that a male resident had sexually assaulted her in her room at Auburn on June 18.

Nor did the shelter’s staff members heed Aisha’s repeated complaints when they gave her a damaged metal crib for the infant, with a loosefitting sheet and a mattress permanently stuck in the lowest position.

But now she is screaming, and everyone hears her.

A security guard calls 911. None of the staff members try to resuscitate the baby, even though they are certified in CPR. Aisha fumbles to breathe air into her baby’s lungs as paramedics rush into the lobby.

They race to Brooklyn Hospital Center, where a doctor pronounces Casshanae dead at 8:10 a.m.

Later that morning, Aisha returns to the fourth floor to pack her things. Her screams rattle the shelter again.

As she leaves, Dasani lingers by the door. She hears a security guard telling a superior that Aisha left the children alone the previous night. The official asks the guard to file a report. Dasani shudders and closes the door. That will never happen to Baby Lele, she tells herself.

The next day, the Administration for Children’s Services takes custody of Aisha’s son pending the results of an investigation into the baby’s death. Soon after, Dasani sees inspectors walking through the shelter as new cribs are delivered to residents and crib-safety posters are slipped under doors.

Aisha is summoned back to Auburn by investigators from the medical examiner’s office. At their request, she re-enacts the morning of her baby’s death, when she says she found Casshanae lifeless in the crib. They take pictures of the crib, its sheet still crumpled. An autopsy was unable to determine the cause of death.

Dasani tries not to think about the dead baby.

Her room is sweltering. The children want nothing more than to get out and cool off. They put on their bathing suits. They have gone swimming only once this summer.

First, they stop into Chanel’s methadone clinic in Red Hook, Brooklyn, a dim brick build-
cards of 25 of its security guards are expired or missing. Black mold is spreading in the shelter’s bathrooms, many of which spew exhaust thick with dust and debris.

During one visit, inspectors see an asthmatic 3-year-old child coughing and vomiting so much that 911 is called. With no air-conditioning, the rooms reach dangerously high temperatures. A month before she died, Casshanae was living in a room where temperatures reached 102 degrees.

The state’s conclusion: No child with chronic breathing problems should be at the shelter, and no children under age 2 should live there at all “due to the lack of amenities for this young and vulnerable population.”

In other words, Dasani’s family — with a 1-year-old, two asthmatic children and another who is legally blind — should never have been living at Auburn in the first place.

In the early afternoon of Oct. 17, Chanel is summoned to the office of the shelter’s administrators.

They have stunning news: The family can finally leave Auburn. A space has opened at another shelter — an apartment with a kitchen. But they must go today. They have a few hours to pack. Other families are also moving, and the Department of Homeless Services has arranged for vans.

Chanel has longed for this moment. But now that it is here, she feels wholly unprepared.

Supreme is still in rehab. Her food stamps have been stolen. She has $9 in cash. How will she instantly produce three meals a day for eight children? She has no frying pans, dishes, utensils or toilet paper. She does not even have the address of this new shelter.

“I don’t know what to do,” Chanel says.

She returns to Room 449 and tells the children.

Dasani is in shock. Chanel rushes them off to therapy. Whatever happens, she needs the cash.

It is drizzling out, and Dasani’s head is spinning. All she can think about is her school. Just after willing her way back to McKinney, she is poised to lose it again.

It is strange, this feeling of heading toward an address they don’t yet have, while having to say goodbye — in the span of a few hours — to the place where they have lived for years.

After therapy, it is getting dark. The shelter’s lights blaze from within. Chanel orders the children to pack only the most essential things. Auburn has given them 20 clear plastic bags. That is the limit. They will have to come back for Turtle.

At 9:26 p.m., Chanel and her children board the last van just before it pulls away. An hour later, the van approaches their new residence.
They are in Harlem.

Of the 152 shelters where Dasani’s family could have landed, they have somehow wound up at a six-story brick building on West 145th Street.

It is one block from the Bartendaz base.

“I am right next to the park,” Dasani tells Giant on the phone, enunciating each word. “I’m here! I’m in Harlem!”

Chanel grabs the phone, eager to hear his reaction.

“You see?” Giant tells Chanel. “The Lord sent you right here next to me.”

The children wait on the front steps as Chanel fills out paperwork in the office.

It feels different here. The block is awash in streetlights and teeming with pedestrians. There are fewer trees. But in other ways, Harlem is like Fort Greene. Nearby is a new bistro called Mountain Bird that offers a foie gras soup and a shrimp-bisque mac and cheese.

One by one, the children peek in on their mother, anxious for updates. They will be living on the third floor, Avianna announces. She locates the silver button on the intercom, gently running her finger over it.

Finally, Chanel appears with the keys. They climb the stairs and step inside.

It is a real apartment, with clean, beige walls and hardwood floors. There are two bedrooms, a full bathroom and a kitchen joined to a living room. Metal blinds hang from the windows, and clean sheets are folded on the bunk beds.

Fresh, home-cooked meals again, Dasani thinks to herself as the children race about maniacally. Hada opens a closet to find a diaper on the floor. Chanel smells it, declares it clean and stashes it for Lele.

She inspects the mattresses, which are in good condition. She opens the refrigerator, looks at the stove and sink, and then turns toward the living room. She clasps her hands in front of her face, as if in prayer.

“Oh, man, I’m happy!” she says, her eyes shining. “I thank God for this. Thank you.”

CHANEL cannot sleep that first night.

She keeps checking the locks as her children lie deep in slumber. The five older girls share two bunk beds alongside Lele’s crib. The boys sleep in the living room. Chanel reserves one bedroom for herself and Supreme. It will be their first privacy in years, whenever he comes back.

Chanel is feeling more panicked than celebratory.

“I got to make sure I provide,” she says.

The move has plunged Chanel into the ice-cold waters of independence.

She now has $39, counting the money gleaned
from therapy. It will be more than two weeks before her next food-stamp allotment arrives.

When the children wake, Chanel drags a rolling cart onto the subway and returns to Auburn to retrieve more of their belongings. Thankfully, the room has still not been cleared. Chanel leaves with Turtle hidden in an empty baby-wipes container.

By the next morning, Supreme has left rehab and rejoined the family. Now they are almost broke. Chanel can think of only one solution. She heads downtown to Macy’s, where she tries to steal a stack of men’s Polo briefs and undershirts, planning to sell them on the street for quick cash.

A security guard intervenes, leading Chanel to the store’s private jail, along with Nijai, Avianna and Baby Lele, who toddles about the small, enclosed cell saying, “Out, out.” After Supreme collects the children, Chanel is arrested by the police and spends the night in jail.

When she comes home, Supreme declares that the stealing is over. If they have to, they can beg.

“Better to ask than take,” he says.

It doesn’t quite feel like “begging” to Dasani, the way she has seen it in the movies, with peasants holding out hands for coins. It is a little more dignified, how Supreme stands outside the local Pathmark, his children silently lined up next to him.

As shoppers enter the store, he asks them to buy a few extra groceries “so I can feed my babies.” Dasani runs in with a woman who pays for Froot Loops and Corn Flakes. And so it goes, until a particularly generous man tells them to just “get what you need,” and they fill up the cart.

Back in the apartment, the family’s spirits begin to lift. It is easy to forget they are still homeless as Supreme hovers at the stove, making corn bread from scratch, popcorn shrimp, honey-barbecue wings and glazed turkey bacon. He has joined a new methadone program in Harlem.

“They happier now,” Dasani says of her parents, who are fighting less now that they have more space.
used to be called “shelter boogies.”

See? Dasani thinks to herself. I’m gone and you are still in the projects.

Minutes later, they enter the warm corridors of McKinney.

“Hi, Miss Holmes,” Chanel squeaks to the woman who always makes her feel like a schoolgirl again, back in the principal’s office.

Dasani flies into Miss Holmes’s arms. She feels safe again, “like I was made to be there.”

The principal is shocked to see them. She did not think it would happen without the bus. As the girls are handed new backpacks and sent to class, Miss Holmes makes Chanel an offer: She can volunteer at the school during the day, whenever she needs shelter. She can even bring Baby Lele.

“We always need plenty of help,” Miss Holmes says.

“That will work out nice,” Chanel says.

“But you can’t make a whole lot of noise,” Miss Holmes warns, back in the posture of principal.

At the end of the day, the girls gather in Miss Holmes’s office to wait for their mother.

“You have come home,” Miss Holmes says. “Everybody here is fighting to get you girls back here. There are certain things you have to do. Homework.”

Soon, Chanel has arrived and is chiming in with the principal. No more bad behavior, she tells her daughters.

“We not gonna have that, you understand?” Chanel says. “Because soon I’m about to be volunteering here.”

The girls are silent.

“So it’s gonna be a totally different song this year,” Chanel says.

As they leave, Dasani turns and races back into Miss Holmes’s office. She leans in for another hug before darting out.

“Goodbye, Dasani,” Miss Holmes calls after her. “And do your homework.”

“Yes!” Dasani shouts over her shoulder.

The child skips down the hallway toward her mother and sisters. The front door swings open, bringing a rush of air. Together, they step out into the cold.

---

**SOURCE NOTES**

*To make her debut as a member of an urban fitness group teamed up with Nike — Nike Inc.*

*Chanel’s nine-month trial period was suddenly over, leaving her custody secure — Interviews with the children’s lawyer and court records.*

*Giant, the former convict turned fitness guru — Information on the team and Giant’s biography given through interviews with Giant, his team members, court records and videos.*

*As for the inspector, Chanel offers to “punch that bitch in the face” — Family’s Department of Homeless Services file.*

*The next morning, Dasani wakes to a high-pitched scream — Reporting on the baby’s death is based on interviews with Dasani, her family, the baby’s mother, Aisha, other Auburn residents, E.M.S. records, state officials and the state’s inspection report, which was prompted by the death.*

*The infant’s problems were serious enough that a social worker asked for the family to be transferred — Interview with Aisha.*

*Nor did the staff heed Aisha’s repeated complaints about the damaged crib — Aisha says she complained three times about the crib, which had a defective leg, a loose-fitting sheet and a mattress stuck in the lowest position, captured in photographs shared by Aisha with The Times. City officials declined to comment, citing confidentiality.*

*The next day, Children’s Services took custody of Aisha’s son — Interviews with city officials.*

*On Oct. I state inspectors inform the Department of Homeless Services of a litany of devastating violations — The state’s inspection report. The agency responded that the security guards’
registration cards had been on file at the time of inspection, but will make sure that for future inspections, the Auburn staff is aware of the location of these files.

*In other words, Dasani’s family should never have been at Auburn to begin with* — Interview with state officials.

*They have stunning news: The family can finally leave Auburn* — The Department of Homeless Services says that the family was moved “as part of an agency-wide initiative to ensure D.H.S. is using its capacity most efficiently.” Joshua Goldfein of the Legal Aid Society says the move came after he and the Coalition complained to the city and state about the family’s living arrangement and unmet medical needs as well as other conditions at Auburn.

*Her food stamps were stolen* — The police took an incident report from Chanel about the theft.

*She now has $39, counting the money gleaned from therapy* — The family’s cash reimbursement from therapy had decreased because the clinic began offering a MetroCard in place of some of the cash allotment.

*A Macy’s security guard leads Chanel and the children to a private cell* — Interview with Chanel and the children, and police records. Macy’s declined to comment.

*The bus approval for Dasani and her siblings* — The Education Department arranged for a bus to begin transporting all three sisters on Nov. 14.