

On Steadier Ground, and Striving to Regain Independence



Angela Jimenez for The New York Times

Simone Williams, 38, outside her apartment in Brooklyn. She received a new pair of orthopedic shoes to help ease the symptoms of diabetes.

By KARI HASKELL

Simone Williams could not hide the grimace on her face. With her feet throbbing, each step felt as if the smooth concrete on the street had bubbled into cobblestones.

By the time she arrived for a job interview at a community service agency, her legs were swollen and she was in so much pain that she could not concentrate on the questions.

Ms. Williams, 38, who is slightly overweight, was suffering from the symptoms of diabetic neuropathy.

"I couldn't focus," she said recently in her two-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn, which she shares with a roommate. "All I wanted to do was go home and go to bed."

With 10 years of experience in social work, she knew she was qualified for the job. Two weeks passed, however, and no one called for a follow-up interview.

"I was uncomfortable," she said. "It must have showed."

At the time of the interview last spring, she had not worked as a welfare service provider since November 2004, when she received a diagnosis of depression. A job was to be the next stage in her recovery. But without proper shoes, foot pain was keeping her from securing a job and possibly leading her back to a situation she feared — being homeless.

Six weeks before that job interview, she was in an East New York shelter operated by Transitional Living Community, which is managed by the Brooklyn Bureau

of Community Service. The bureau is one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund.

The journey from the shelter to her own apartment has been a long, emotional one, she said.

Ms. Williams said that ignoring her depression had been easy as long as she was working. "I was a workaholic," she said.

Her last full-time position was as a program director at the Black Veterans for Social Justice, after receiving a master's degree in public administration from Long Island University in 2001. That was when she first noticed symptoms of depression, which was not diagnosed until she saw a doctor about her diabetes.

"Depression is for whiners, crazy people; I didn't have time to be depressed," she said, recalling her reaction at the time.

She said she tried to shake it off by visiting Knoxville College in Tennessee, where she had received a bachelor's degree.

"It was where I felt good," she said, recalling her time as an undergraduate.

Her break from New York soon seemed set to become permanent. She was to take a job as director for a youth ministries program at the college, but in November 2004, she learned that there was not enough money to pay her salary.

She fell further into depression thinking about what she had left behind — her job and her life in New York.

In April 2005, she returned to her

older sister's home in Harlem.

"The Simone that left for Knoxville and one that emerged from there were two completely different people," she said.

When she left Knoxville, in many ways, she left behind her identity, she said. Her possessions — the most valuable of which is a picture of her mother, she says — are still in storage because she cannot pay the fees.

Back in New York, Ms. Williams was silent and withdrawn, prompting her sister Phillipa Taylor to take her to Lenox Hill Hospital, she said. She stayed there for three weeks and then went to the homeless shelter in May 2005. Her sister died last September.

"It's been a long haul," she said with a sigh. "I am finally piecing my life back together."

She has received counseling through the Lenox Hill mental health outpatient program, and has learned to manage her illness and understand what causes it. She is also working through scars from childhood: her mother's alcoholism and untimely death, the abandonment by her father and her disassociation with her five older siblings. She takes Effexor, an antidepressant, to regulate her mood swings.

"I was a case manager; you would think I could manage my own self," she said. "But there comes a time when you need to ask for someone else's help."

"Depression is stronger than you."

Asking for help was a step toward making positive strides in her life. After a job search on the Internet in June, she started looking for more comfortable shoes and found a pair with a wider toe box made for people with diabetes. They cost \$54, which she could not afford.

Public assistance covers \$215 of her \$1,200 rent; the rest is subsidized by a state housing program. She receives Medicaid and \$68.50 every two weeks from welfare.

And with her share of the utilities, she has little money left over.

She called Susan Buchanan, an assistant director of Adult Rehabilitation Services at Brooklyn Bureau. By the end of June, she learned The Neediest Cases Fund would provide the money for the shoes, which arrived in the first week of July.

"These shoes have taken me to interviews," she said, looking down at her feet and wiggling her ankle, then added, "These shoes have taken me back to work again."