



THE BUFFALO NEWS

Children of Poverty

Day Two: One family's struggle on the East Side

Keyshawna Williams and her three children seek to rise above poverty

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Life for seventh-grader Davon Johnson seems to run in threes.

He was suspended three weeks into school. It was his third suspension in three years.

He has been in special education since the third grade.

And he's also the oldest of his mother's three children, whose three fathers don't support them.

Davon's father, who has five children with four different women, lives 20 miles away but hasn't seen Davon since last winter. Davon, he says, can always call.

Like so many kids in Buffalo who live in poverty, Davon – who has a wide smile that can light up a room – has only known a single-parent household.

Davon goes to Batavia sometimes to see relatives. He has seen Canada from this side of Niagara Falls, when he visited his father.

And, memorably, he saw the Big Dipper once. He still looks for it.

“After two years, I never saw stars no more,” he says.

Mostly though, Davon sees life from a Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority complex on the East Side. It's a part of town where dreams are buried under run-down houses, litter and vacant storefronts.

What the future holds for Davon may not be very different than for many other African-American boys

growing up in poverty. He could drop out of school, maybe succumb to a thuggish lifestyle that's in vogue.

Or he could go from searching for stars to reaching for them.

The school situation

Davon, at 180 pounds, is a big 12-year-old who's polite and easy-going away from school. He says he doesn't instigate fights, that they happen because kids call him names or tease him about his weight. But after two altercations, and nearly a third, the principal at Houghton Academy School 69 told Davon's mom that his teacher could no longer be expected to restrain him.

His mother, Keyshawna Williams, cried and fumed over the four full days it took the district to transfer him to Lorraine Academy School 72 in South Buffalo.

Davon has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, which makes it hard to concentrate and settle down and causes impulsiveness. Still, teachers say Davon is a good student. It's his anger that has his mother worried.

She's talked to him. She's tried counseling at Child Adolescent Treatment Services.

She's at a loss over what to do, but not over what's behind it.

His father's absence and unreliability – doing things like promising to visit and not showing up – have left a void in his heart filled by feelings of rejection.

"I think he [craves] a father figure," Williams said.

On a recent day, Davon was a chatterbox while excitedly talking about "Spider-Man 3." When the subject turned to his father, his smile dimmed and his eyes lowered.

"I don't see him a lot," the boy said. "He always be out all the time."

Staying alive

Keyshawna Williams, who is 28, supports her family on the \$12.86 an hour she makes as a nursing assistant. Each workday she boards a bus that takes her to Alden.

She was raised in Batavia by her father, a retired Army officer and counselor at Genesee Community College. She's one of 12 children – six, including her, from her father's first marriage, two from his second, two who were adopted and two stepbrothers.

Her mother was addicted to crack cocaine and in and out of her life – mostly out – as she grew older.

"She always tried to protect us from that environment, but at a certain age, you know, you see things even if you don't think you see it," Williams said.

Davon was born when Williams was five days shy of turning 16. She stayed in school, graduated from Batavia High School and even held down a part-time job at her father's urging. After getting her diploma, Williams moved to Buffalo. Her daughter, Ja'Maicia McFollins, was born three years later.

She was the result of a four-year relationship that ended when Williams was six months' pregnant.

Ja'Maicia, 9, is the most integrated of the children in their father's lives. Happy and confident, the well-adjusted fourth-grader at Stanley Makowski School 99 is lovingly embraced by aunts, uncles and grandparents, whom she sees regularly along with her dad.

"She's spoiled by the family. I call her "The Diva," " Williams laughed. "She is not as needy [as Davon]. She has another world."

Energizer Bunny Kae'Sean, 3, who attends Head Start at the Martha Mitchell Community Center, was the offspring of a brief courtship, which ended when Williams was five months' pregnant. His father, Fulquan Fields, was sentenced in March 2007 to 36 years in state prison for slashing the face of his estranged wife, witness intimidation and other charges.

The toddler will be 39 when his father is scheduled to walk out of prison.

The never-ending day

Some say the poor just don't want to work, that they're always working the system. Williams has heard that and learned to ignore it.

She works a stressful and physically demanding job in the Erie County Home caring for people who have dementia, Alzheimer's and brain injuries.

Once home, there is food to get on the stove, homework to help with, outside play to monitor and bedtime stories to read. Sometimes housework and laundry have to wait.

Often, she's so wiped out she goes to sleep with the kids. That's one kind of stress. Living paycheck to paycheck is another.

Williams long ago gave up trying to collect child support from the fathers of her children. The men always claim they're not working, she said.

So she looks to cut corners. Taking the kids to a movie means hitting the discount theaters. Eating out – even ordering a pizza – is a "luxury."

"I always have a notebook, planning something out – winter coats, school supplies. After my paycheck, I may have \$10 for myself," Williams said.

She took advantage of a free book-bag giveaway before school started, saving more than \$100. Davon didn't complain but confided later he wished his had a character – his preference is Superman – like a lot of other kids have.

Williams couldn't get by without the help of close female family members – a sister, a cousin, an aunt.

One will occasionally ask what the kids need and go buy it or offer to share the grocery bill. Another takes the kids out to eat or drives them to a park.

At an age when other women in their 20s are coming into their own, Williams views her own life as if peering into a rearview mirror. She attended Bryant Stratton several years ago while working full time.

But she quit after a year of feeling sleep-deprived and guilt-ridden for not seeing her children more.

At the same time she can't remember the last time she went out with a girlfriend. Dating? Even the idea of it is too stressful.

The danger outside

The Williams family moved into their small, three-bedroom apartment on Hempstead Avenue last December. They spent the previous two years living with Williams' sister LeEtta on Sattler Street.

Williams wishes she could raise the children in a safer environment, recalling two gunshot incidents in the summer. But the \$506 she pays for rent, including utilities, makes that unlikely any time soon.

So, Williams keeps to herself and shelters her children. She won't let them use the playground, where kids tend to gather, and where the swings are missing and there's always glass on the ground.

Instead, she restricts the children to playing near the apartment's front or back doors. Davon, who shares a bedroom with Kae'Sean, sometimes asks to play video games at a 14-year-old's house, but his mother refuses. There's no parental supervision, she says.

"It's best you don't find someone to play with over here. It's not safe," Williams told him. "I don't know their parents, and the other parents don't seem to have a need to know."

Blight that spreads across inner-city streets like a virus – from junkyard cars to boarded-up houses and shuttered businesses long closed – bothers Davon. He asks her why it has to be all the time.

Unlike kids in the suburbs, Davon isn't on a sports team, doesn't take music lessons or belong to an after-school club. Watching the animated "Avatar: The Last Airbender" on TV, with its 6- to 11-year-old demographic, is a highlight of his afternoons.

When Davon asks if he can play baseball sometime, his mother wonders where on the East Side there's even a league. Then she wonders how she'd get him there if there was.

As Davon adjusts to the third school he's been assigned to early in this school year – the second had no room for him – it remains to be seen whether 3 will be his lucky number.

Luck, however, can be in short supply for kids like Davon.

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