



## THE BUFFALO NEWS



### Trying to fill the emptiness day in and day out

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For kids growing up today in Buffalo, poverty means hunger. Hunger for a parent at the front door after school.

Hunger to know a father. Hunger for attention from teachers and other adults who care – for good examples to balance out all the bad ones.

Hand in hand with these emotional hungers comes another one: The raw, physical kind.

Standing on the brink of futures that, for many of them, will be as devoid of possibility as the present, these children crave the sensation of being filled up with two things: Food, and hope.

With that, in three scenes, a picture of children living in poverty – and hunger – in Buffalo today.

#### Scene One: The Eisensmith family

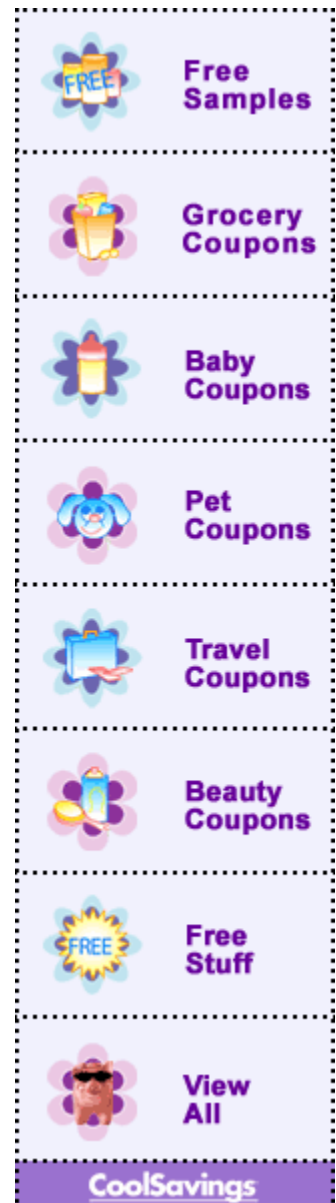
Slight and bird-like, Ashley Eisensmith doesn't yet look her 13 years. Bent over a book in her sixth-grade classroom in Hillery Park Elementary School in South Buffalo, her chin tucked down in quiet determination, she seems far more a delicate child than a young woman-to-be.

And yet, this is a pivotal age for girls like Ashley.

"I call it the turning point," said Hillery Park Principal Margaret M. Boorady.

That's because sixth grade is the year little girls become adolescents. And when you're poor, growing into a teenager is harder than ever.

"She's getting up in age, and she wants name brands now," Ashley's mom, Rosie, said. "I try to tell her it's real hard right now."



In her classroom, Ashley whispers to her seatmate in the back row, where she sits with other students who are considered learning disabled. This is Ashley's second year in sixth grade.

After school is out, Ashley will go home and see her mom, same as always. Rosie will fix dinner for her in the tidy kitchen of their Spaulding Street apartment, as well as for Richie, 67, a brother with mental impairments. Rosie has taken care of him for 22 years. They'll eat in the dining room, on a table covered by a pastel plastic tablecloth, under a portrait of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

And, like always, the Eisensmiths will make do with what they have – which means less than \$50 a week in food stamps, plus tuna, spaghetti sauce, noodles and canned vegetables from the South Buffalo Food Pantry.

"I try to make real meals for her, mashed potatoes and corn, pork chops, or chicken – mostly chicken, 'cause it's cheap," said Rosie, 50, a

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widow who used to waitress and clean for a living before a car accident in 2005 hurt her back and put her on limited disability income.

Tough as it is to stretch bags of charity food far enough to feed a family of three, sometimes hunger seems like the easiest of the Eisensmiths' problems.

The family lost their car last Thanksgiving, then their house to foreclosure a few weeks later. At Christmas, Rosie and Ashley had to push frozen shopping carts filled with bags of their belongings through snowbanks and down the icy street to a rented apartment.

"My mommy needed my help," said Ashley, whose tiny bedroom contains a closet fashioned from a sheet hung over a cubbyhole, a crucifix on the wall, and two stuffed bears named Jacob and Amanda. "I felt upset because my mom was having a hard time. She told me to go to school, but I wanted to help her here."

Ashley missed a lot of school last winter, when her family was having problems. Rosie admits she should have forced Ashley to go to school but says she didn't have the heart for anything right then. Since winter, though, Ashley's attendance has rebounded, school support workers said, and her academic work is improving.

But the things that bother a teenage girl still matter.

Soon Ashley won't have her own bedroom anymore. A few more relatives are moving in to the apartment; her bedroom will go to an older sister. And there will be even more mouths to feed.

## **Scene Two: The Militello family**

It's 5 p.m. on a weeknight, and Mattie Morrison is making himself dinner.

He arranges a hot dog and a small scoop of mac-and-cheese – both leftovers he found in the fridge – on a plate. He microwaves it, and eats standing up in the kitchen of his mom's apartment on Hertel Avenue near Shoshone Park.

His older brother, Jeremy, might eat something later, after he's done playing "Grand Theft Auto – San Andreas" in his bedroom on his PlayStation II.

"It's my favorite game," said Jeremy, who is considered a shy kid at school.

This is a typical school night for the brothers. Mattie is 10, Jeremy 13.

Their mom, Doris Militello, said she tries to do what she can to feed them at night, but because of chronic ill health – she said she takes 10 Xanax a day for anxiety and depression, plus five other pills for a sleep problem – late afternoons often find Doris on the couch, in physical or mental pain, unable to budge.

"I do cook them dinner, just not as often as I should," said Doris, 36, a petite blonde who has lived in this neighborhood her whole life. "Mattie can make Ramen for himself; he likes that a lot. Or Spaghetti's. I have a hard time fixing dinner for them, but I know they can get something if they're hungry."

Doris does not work. Some days, she said, it's a challenge for her to even get out of bed, or out of the house. She stopped working 13 years ago, when she was pregnant for the first time by a man she was in a long-term relationship with and planned to marry in August 1997. But she called that wedding off; she said it was one of the best decisions she ever made.

"My social worker said, 'I wouldn't do that if I were you.' Because I would lose my Medicaid," Doris said. "I knew [my boyfriend] wasn't responsible enough. I told him, 'We're not getting married.' Through Medicaid, I knew steady money would be coming in. The rent would be paid. Through him – I couldn't rely on that money."

Nowadays, the boys' father pays between \$28 and \$50 a month in child support; the boys do not see him.

And so Doris, who dropped out of Bennett High School after freshman year and went to work fulltime in a dart store on Hertel at 16, cares for her family on a budget of welfare money, Medicaid coverage, temporary disability money from Social Security and food stamps. Her \$400 rent payment is covered fully by government programs. For food, she makes supplemental trips to a church pantry.

Her extra money goes toward nice things for her growing boys: video games, computer equipment, Internet access, a good TV and DVD player, a cell phone for Jeremy's 13th birthday.

"I make sure I have everything for my kids," said Doris, who takes pride in keeping up her landlady's house by cutting the grass and painting the porch. "We have every cable channel. They have a lot – too much."

Doris, who finished her GED not long ago, said she treats her sons this way because she feels her illnesses mean she can't take them places and do things with them a healthier mom could.

"I'm always tired. I never have energy. I never have money, I can never take the kids anywhere," she said. "I feel like I've really gotten a bad deal in life."

### **Scene Three: The Dulski kids**

Carrie Fischer, 9, likes the barbecue chicken best.

Of all the dinners she eats at the T.J. Dulski Community Center on Buffalo's East Side – and that's every night of the week, usually – the chicken is her favorite. But even better than the meals are the friends she eats with, and the nice grownups – like Linda Hansen, the director – who take the time to talk to her about her day.

“It's really fun,” said Carrie, a student at Waterfront Elementary, who said her parents don't work. “There's a lot of activities you can do. I come here to hang out with my friends, and I eat dinner here. It's better here.”

Kids like Carrie are fed two ways at the bustling, lively Lewis Street center: with hot food, and with a sense of family.

One recent weekday, the center filled up starting at 3:30 p.m., as poor children from nearby homes streamed in after school. Hansen moved among them, talking and laughing, asking them about their schoolwork. Another staffer offered apples as a snack. Homework help was available; other kids were talking about a play they're staging.

“You get to make new friends here,” said Kaitlyn Fountaine, 8, who was wearing a polka-dotted shirt she had taken from the bin of free clothing kept on hand for kids in need.

“They're nice here,” said Crystal Rosie, 8, who with her sister Brittany, 9, was munching a plate of pork chops and potatoes. Until recently homeless, according to center directors, the Rosie girls are doing better now that they are living with relatives.

The Dulski Center is a place of stability and hope for Carrie, who said three of her five siblings are in foster homes. She's the youngest.

“They don't even know I'm alive,” she said, of her siblings. “I think they must be having fun. Maybe they're going to Fantasy Island.”

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