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Looking forward, holding back - Enrika Smith wants to move beyond her poverty-stricken upbringing, but she can't leave her mother behind

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She's looking for someone.

The young woman steers her 1990 Buick Skylark onto Singleton Boulevard. She maneuvers through a neighborhood of auto repair shops, abandoned warehouses, and cafes with peeling signs and broken porches. She turns right, past the corner taqueria, past two boarded-up shacks, where a group of frail men and women sits on a cement porch, staring.

She slows down. Enrika Smith, 31, doesn't seem to belong here, in West Dallas, with her tiny pearl earrings, French-manicured fingers and elegant blouse. She arches her neck, turns her shapely brown face framed by a classic bob, and carefully traces the figures on the porch. She eyes a particularly gaunt woman.

"No, that ain't her," she whispers.

Enrika (pronounced Erika) parks near the buildings, next to a vacant, grassy lot. She knows every inch of this street. She grew up here. She walks past a pile of debris onto the lot, where a discolored cushion from a chaise longue balances atop a broken chair frame, next to a shopping cart full of plastic bags.

"This is where she sleeps," Enrika says, then makes for the back of the lot, where three people rest under the shade of trees.

"There's my mama!" she cries out. "Hi, Mama! I been missing you!" A woman wearing an oversized NBA World Champions T-shirt springs up from an overturned milk crate. She wobbles a few steps in grimy pink slippers and locks Enrika in a hug.

"G.G., how you doing?" she mumbles, calling her daughter by her family nickname.

As the two embrace, a grin softens the mother's slightly crooked jaw, revealing missing front teeth. Cynthia Smith, 48, has been living on this vacant lot with a dozen other people since January, when she was released from prison. Her daughter, Enrika, is struggling to evade her family's poverty and escape this inherited lifestyle. Although she lives in a homeless shelter with her two daughters, Enrika is looking for a way to move into an apartment.

But she cannot fathom leaving Cynthia behind.

"I brought you some clothes in the car, Mama," Enrika says. It hurts to see her mother living on this lot. But at least, she reminds herself, her mother is sober.

"Mama, I wanted to tell you something," Enrika lowers her voice. "I got financial aid at school and I have some of the money left over, so I'm gonna be able to get you into a room."

Cynthia responds with silence as they walk toward the car. Finally, she asks her daughter for some food and ice from the grocery store.

More than a year ago, Enrika abandoned the lifestyle that kept her cycling from apartment to apartment, from man to man; that clenched her in an abusive relationship and allowed child protective services to take away her two daughters when she was without a job and using drugs. (They were returned to her a year and a half later.)

It's the same cycle that keeps her mother homeless, her brothers and uncles in prison.

Several roadblocks lie in her way to a new life. Enrika owes money to former landlords and on old student loans; she depends on public aid for food, housing and medical services; and the grandmother who raised her and was a powerful presence in her life died in December.

Enrika, though, has a strong desire to change. She has been clean for 18 months, and recently returned to El Centro College after dropping out a decade earlier. She started a part-time job as prep cook at American Airlines Center. She found God.

Her counselor at the shelter says motivation is what will lead to success. But how should she make her mother part of her new life?

This dilemma is still on Enrika's mind when she returns to the vacant lot. Her mother saunters toward the car, black trash bags dragging behind.

"Here, Mama," Enrika hands her groceries over the passenger seat - several bags of potato chips, cheese, cold cuts, crackers and a bag of ice. Cynthia leans inside, and the women kiss. The mother slams the door without a word and starts back toward the lot.

"Mama!" Enrika calls out, voice muffled inside the car. She rolls down her window. "Mama, pray!"

Her mother turns around, flashes a toothless smile, and waves. Enrika pulls away.

Choosing life

Enrika says Cynthia only occasionally cared for her - mostly her mother lived with various boyfriends. Enrika didn't know her father, because he was in prison most of her life and died after he was released. Her beloved grandmother, Mercied Smith, in whose bed Enrika slept as a child, raised her in a house that sometimes lacked food, running water and electricity. Mercied used a whip to discipline her.

At 14, Enrika moved out, throwing herself into a whirlwind of men and apartments, three children (one was placed with the father's family) and two miscarriages.

She finished South Oak Cliff High School in 1993 and briefly attended El Centro, then held a few jobs and even completed a one-year medical assistant training program at a private trade school. But everything seemed brittle, temporary.

"I dated men to survive. I laid with them, so they would pay my rent and buy me things," she says. "I even used my own family. I didn't love or care for nobody; I didn't love myself. And I was mean. I was always fighting, cursing, destroying things. Everything I touched was dirty. Nothing around me was peaceful."

Then came drugs and alcohol. Enrika smoked marijuana and crack cocaine, often in the presence of her two daughters. She tried to quit several times, but was not successful.

In a fit, she threw her mother out of her apartment. She spent one day in jail for giving a false name to a police officer.

"When I looked in the mirror, I didn't know who I was," she recalls. "And I looked in the mirror every day."

In February 2004, she went with a friend to see *The Passion of the Christ*. The letter she wrote in her tattered diary that day begins: "I'm so tired of being alone. I thought alone was good. I had gotten used to it."

A month later, she sat in a friend's car, high on drugs, her daughters sleeping in the back seat.

"Everything turned dark. I looked at the road ahead of me, and I was afraid," she recalls. "For the first time in my life

I was afraid. And I was angry. I felt like I had gotten to the worst point in my life, like everything I was doing was destructive. And a question came to me: Do you want to choose life or death?"

Enrika takes a deep breath.

"I realized if I don't change my life, I'm going to die and my children are going to die. Or, my children will continue to be what I am, just like I continue to be what my mother is," she resumes.

"Then I just kept saying, 'Give me life, give me life.'"

Dolls with careers

She eventually took refuge in a Salvation Army shelter. Since August, Enrika has shared a room with her daughters, Cynthia Wallace, 10, and Katrina Hobbs, 8, at the Family Gateway shelter in downtown Dallas.

The room is cramped, but clean. Three mattresses are piled with neatly arranged heaps of dolls and stuffed animals. Hand-made posters ("Jesus Saves"), drawings and family photos decorate the walls; a letter written by Enrika's mother from prison, where she was incarcerated for drug possession, is pinned up in the center.

Family Gateway is a rent-free, all-meals-provided program for homeless families. More than 80 percent of the parents here are, like Enrika, single mothers.

"The change is not all about me. It's about my daughters, too," Enrika says. "I was not a good parent. I was destroying their lives. In the past, when they were playing with dolls, they were beating their dolls. Now, their dolls have careers."

Enrika, too, has started to aspire for a better future.

In 10 years, she sees herself as a college graduate using her degrees ("in social work, teaching and counseling") to start an organization to help the homeless.

She imagines her older daughter attending a university, her younger receiving college acceptance letters. She predicts that she will be married, living with her mother and three children, including her son whom she placed with his father's family at birth. She even inquired at the bank about loans for first-time homeowners.

Sometimes, however, her daughters challenge her dreams. One morning, as they were getting dressed for school, Cynthia asked: "Mama, do you still want to get a house?"

Yes, said Enrika.

"But Mama, do you remember when you gave up?" Katrina pitched in. The sisters now talked simultaneously.

"You always give up. Don't give up this time, Mama, we're gonna get a house." Enrika fell quiet.

A warning

Enrika's caseworker at Family Gateway, Katrena Dawson, says her client has been doing remarkably well. She has been clean, she continues to work, and is earning an associate's degree in applied science. She attends a variety of churches.

Ms. Dawson says Enrika simply needed encouragement and support; she needed "the mother figure she never had."

She adds a warning. "Sometimes, people need to stay away from negative influences and outside forces," Ms. Dawson says. "Sometimes it may mean staying away from mom."

Enrika can't.

On a windy Saturday morning, she drives again to West Dallas to see Cynthia. This time, she's determined to find her, pick her up and check her into a hotel room, maybe Budget Suites.

But her mother is adamant; she refuses to go. She says she has work to do. She tells Enrika to save her money for when she gets a house.

A few hours later, Enrika's voice is still shaking. "I'm disappointed," she says. "I don't understand. I don't know why Mama don't wanna leave."

The following week, Enrika wakes up feeling depressed. She cries and prays all morning, well after her children have left for school. Her room is in complete disarray, and she skips her classes at El Centro College.

She wraps herself in a throw and crouches on the edge of the bed. Her eyes fill with tears.

"I'm afraid I might not make it," she says. "I'm afraid I might fail. I just don't know how to proceed right now. I feel so alone."

But a week later, Enrika goes to see her teachers and adviser to find out how she can make up for lost work. Then comes the good news. The board of Family Gateway approves her to move into Gateway Apartments, a subsidized housing program.

Enrika is almost giddy - but her joy is short-lived.

She quickly realizes her mother cannot live with her. The apartments are open only to former shelter residents. Her mother's life on the streets will continue to gnaw at Enrika.

"I want to be in a place that's near her," she says, sadness in her voice. "I need to know that my mother is off the streets and in a safe place. Only then I will be able to relax. Only then can I focus on school and on my children."

A recurring dream

Cynthia Smith, Enrika's mother, is standing alone in a parking lot, near the lot where she sleeps, crunching ice cubes from a plastic cup. She is wearing clean clothing, and her hair is slicked back into a tiny bun.

She is remembering her mother's house, several blocks away, where Enrika grew up.

"I would stay at her house a lot," she recalls. "Oh how my mama used to cook, I never got tired of it," she says.

"Her biscuits be so FLUUUFFY!" her voice rises to a high pitch, becoming singsong as she draws out the last word. Her mother died when she was still in jail.

Cynthia says she was not a bad mother to Enrika, even though it's Mercied who raised her daughter. Cynthia says she attended PTA meetings, washed Enrika's clothes, and "was there when she needed me."

Cynthia says she is ready to move forward. She has forgiven Enrika for putting her out. She wants to live with her daughter and grandchildren in the future. Yet she can't explain why she chooses to stay on the streets.

She believes her daughter can do what she cannot - break the cycle.

"I know it takes time and all that, but I know 'Rika's gonna find a house and her dreams are gonna come true," she says. "We'll be a happy family and stuff."

But when she talks about her own dream, her voice shrivels to a whisper; her eyes focus on something very distant:

"My mother," she murmurs. "I'd like my own mother back."

Epilogue

As of this month, Enrika is still living at the Family Gateway shelter with her two daughters. She is still in school and still working. A doctor just told her she has uterine tumors; they are probably not cancerous, but he recommended a hysterectomy. She's seeking a second opinion and still plans to move into her new apartment by Christmas. Her mother remains homeless, living on the streets.

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Find additional information about homelessness in America, including a link to the Family Gateway organization.

Caption: PHOTO(S): (1-4. JOHN DAVID EMMETT/Special Contributor) 1. Enrika Smith walks with her daughters, Katrina Hobbs (left), 7, and Cynthia Wallace, 10, in her childhood neighborhood in West Dallas. 2. Enrika brushes dirt from her mother's hair while sitting on her aunt's porch in West Dallas. Cynthia Smith, 48, is homeless and has been battling drug addiction for years. 3. In their room at the Salvation Army shelter, Cynthia washes her Sunday school dress as Enrika styles Katrina's hair. 4. ON THE COVER: Enrika Smith embraces her daughters, Katrina Hobbs (left) and Cynthia Wallace. (5-7. COURTNEY PERRY/Special Contributor) 5. A classmate, Brian Carter, asks Enrika (standing) when she will get around to starting a poetry club at El Centro. 6. "I realized if I don't change my life, I'm going to die and my children are going to die," says Enrika, pictured during a recent service at The Potter's House. She had just learned a few days earlier that she may need to have a hysterectomy. 7. El Centro math instructor Tim Ngo gives Enrika some one-on-one help with her coursework between classes.

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