

# The New York Times

Tuesday, December 1, 2009

## THE NEEDIEST CASES



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times  
Maria Cruz de Leon, 10, and Rosa Cruz at home in Washington Heights. Last summer, Maria got help to improve her reading.

## Lifting a Girl and Her Ailing Grandmother

By DANIEL E. SLOTNIK

The speakers behind the green sofa and love seat in the sunny living room of Rosa Cruz's Washington Heights apartment were silent as Ms. Cruz's 10-year-old granddaughter, Maria Cruz de Leon, shyly danced.

Maria said she loved dancing and singing, but she liked dancing more because "when I'm dancing, I just feel like I'm alone and everybody's watching me."

**She said she had learned many of her steps at Alvin Ailey Dance Camp, a Children's Aid Society summer camp that taught her "jazz, hip-hop, a lot of things I can't even remember."**

Ms. Cruz beamed at Maria's footwork, her smile belying the tough times they had shared.

Ms. Cruz, 53, said she first learned about Maria from a woman for whom she had baby-sat. Ms. Cruz's youngest son, then 20, had fathered a child with a 14-year-old-girl, but had never told his mother.

Ms. Cruz, who is not fluent in English, said through an interpreter that she first saw Maria as a newborn. About 15 days after the girl was born, she said, "they" — meaning the [Administration for Children's Services](#) — "gave her to me, because they found her positive for drugs in her system. So I was fighting back and forth for her, and in 2002 I was awarded full custody of my granddaughter."

Ms. Cruz had already raised three boys in her home in Washington Heights, almost entirely on her own. She moved to the United States with three of her four children in 1981, her oldest daughter having remained in the Dominican Republic.

She found a job at a doll factory in 1982, and soon married a United States citizen. Later that year, she took a second job, working nights at a hair salon.

In 1984, she said, her husband deserted her and her three boys. Ms. Cruz was left balancing two jobs and caring for her children with her mother's help. Her hectic schedule, she said, led to medical problems including arthritis, depression, diabetes, glaucoma and migraines.

She started receiving public assistance in 1989, and was so ill by 1990, she said, that she had to stop working and now lives on disability payments.

Despite those travails, Ms. Cruz believes that Maria keeps her ailments from becoming overwhelming.

“You know my eyes, and all the different illnesses that I have, I probably would not be able to leave the bed,” Ms. Cruz said. “But because I have her here, she motivates me.”

Maria hugged her grandmother. When asked if she loved her very much, Maria turned to Ms. Cruz and asked “Sí o no?”

“Very much,” Ms. Cruz said. “You have to love her forcefully, otherwise there will be no one else to love.”

Last spring, Ms. Cruz learned that Maria would have to attend summer school because she was failing her reading requirement. Ms. Cruz feared that summer school was insufficient for Maria’s needs, and found a [summer reading skills program at Fordham University](#). But at \$335, the program was out of range of Ms. Cruz’s precarious finances.

Ms. Cruz lives on a monthly income of \$1,180. After paying \$467.83 for rent, \$125 for utilities, \$110 for phone, cable and Internet, and \$307 for food, she is left with \$170.17 for other expenses.

Ms. Cruz said she usually skips paying the utility or cable bill to make ends meet.

“I’m always behind,” she said, adding that she always pays her rent first. “But the two I normally neglect are the light bill or the cable bill; I just take turns.”

Ms. Cruz shared her concerns about Maria’s test scores with Nyady Cruz (no relation), the parent coordinator at Public School 5, Maria’s school. Nyady Cruz, who works for Children’s Aid, one of the seven beneficiary agencies of The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, sought support through the fund, which paid for the reading program.

Maria scored a satisfactory 2 out of 4 on her English Language Arts test after completing the program, and entered fifth grade in September.

She said that the program “helped me in reading because I’m not that good in reading. Every day like they kept on pushing a little more to get to the top.”