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CHILDREN WHOSE PARENTS ABUSE DRUGS LIVE DAILY WITH FEAR, NEGLECT AND HELPLESSNESS.
SOME DON'T SURVIVE; FOR THOSE WHO DO, THE INNER DAMAGE CAN LAST A LIFETIME.

BYLINE: SONIA NAZARIO, TIMES URBAN AFFAIRS WRITER

BODY:

Ashley Bryan lies down on the dirty carpet of her dad's bedroom where she usually sleeps. The 10-year-old girl closes her eyes, clasps her hands and raises them to her lips. Firmly, fervently, she prays.

She wishes not for a bike or Barbie like most kids her age, or to become a doctor or firefighter some day.

Every night, Ashley asks for something she believes only God can deliver. She prays for a new father. Someone kind, someone whose life--and thus hers--is not ruled by the demons of drug addiction and alcoholism.

"Just once, give me something good," she whispers in the darkness. "Please, make life get better."

It could not get much worse.

Her clothes, along with those of 8-year-old brother Kevin Bryan, are filthy. The two go weeks without a bath. They eat once a day, usually rice. Neglect is the norm.

Their father, Calvin Holloman, drinks Miller High Life beer for breakfast, sometimes until he blacks out. The kitchen of their one-bedroom Long Beach apartment is used mostly for cooking or mixing the heroin and speed he and his friends inject into their veins.

Mom has been gone for years now, Calvin says, disappearing with a man who could finance her ravenous appetite for speed. At the age of 6, Ashley ran away from home after her father punched her in the face. But with no place to go, she was forced to return for more misery.

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The conditions that have led Ashley to her nightly prayer ritual are, sadly, too common in the United States, which has a higher rate of drug abuse than any other industrialized nation.

Federal surveys show at least one in five children will spend some part of their youth being raised by a parent who is an alcoholic or drug addict. In Los Angeles County, 80% to 90% of child welfare cases involve substance abuse, rates higher than virtually any other major U.S. urban area.

By some estimates, at least a quarter of all children in Los Angeles County deal at some time with an addicted parent.

It is here, inside millions of homes, where society's most entrenched problems are born, where victimized children grow up to victimize others--a generational cycle costing taxpayers nearly \$ 200 billion annually in criminal justice costs, health care and social programs.

Blame does not rest only with the homeless crackhead or corner prostitute. Many of America's addicts hold steady jobs, secretly stirring speed into their morning coffee, shooting up at lunchtime in office bathroom stalls, downing six-packs as they watch TV after work.

But no matter what their position in life, the offspring of junkies and alcoholics are bound by a brutal reality: To their parents, they often rank below a shot of vodka or a rock of cocaine.

These are children who live in daily dread, compiling memories of abuse and deceit they carry into adulthood. Memories of closed bathroom doors from which parents emerge in a stupor, of days-long binges that accompany every payday, of searching for mom or dad in alleys while watching other children make their way to school.

Some never really experience childhood at all, becoming caretakers at the tender age of 3 or 4 for stoned parents and needy siblings. They change diapers and mix bottles for infants crying in the middle of the night when no one else is around. They learn to cook for the family while standing on a chair by the stove.

Once in a great while, the plight of such a life makes headlines--perhaps when a baby starves to death after being left home alone for days by a mother on a drug run.

But for every one of those cases there are a multitude unnoticed, a vast underground of children too ashamed to come forward or too intimidated by parental threats to reveal the family's secret.

Although there are laws requiring a slew of professionals--including teachers, police, doctors, even photo lab technicians--to report suspected child abuse or neglect, many don't, wrongly assuming they must have definitive proof.

What's more, studies show many people shy away from involvement because they distrust the agencies that may ultimately gain control of the children.

"Clearly, the majority of these children are flying under the radar and are never detected by government," says Nancy K. Young, who heads the research group Children and Family Futures.

Most, like Ashley, suffer silently, praying for deliverance in the night.

A Swath of Destruction Through a Neighborhood

Addiction stalks not only families but entire neighborhoods, wherever opportunity and hope have been pushed aside by poverty and instability.

The lower westside of Long Beach is such a place, just minutes from trendy Belmont Shore, the Queen Mary and a downtown newly invigorated with upscale restaurants and theaters.

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Ashley's home in Long Beach's ethnically mixed westside, which also abuts a gritty industrial area, is a lively hub of small apartment buildings filled with families and children. Battered by losses in the aerospace and shipbuilding industries in the early 1990s, the area has rebounded considerably. Still, according to neighborhood drug counselors and educators, at least a quarter of the area's residents are addicted to alcohol or drugs.

Telltale signs abound. Children as young as 2 or 3 wander the streets alone. Kindergartners sometimes panhandle for food money outside grocery stores. Mother-daughter prostitute teams walk on nearby Pacific Coast Highway. Rehab centers dot the community's streets.

This is the world Tamika Triggs has known for three years, her entire life.

On a summer afternoon, her mother, Theodora, runs into a friend at a Long Beach gas station who offers to share her drugs. Theodora and her daughter follow the woman into the drenching heat of a clapboard shed.

Tamika, her sweet face framed by golden ringlets of hair, sits silently in a wicker chair watching her 34-year-old mother prepare for her daily sustenance.

Her mother's friend, Dorene McDonald, picks several rocks of cocaine out of her belly button, then positions a milky white pebble in a pipe. As the women alternately take hits off the small glass tube, crack smoke envelops Tamika, who blinks sleepily in her mother's arms.

Dorene, her neck raw with needle marks, hunches over a tin plate, warming a mixture of heroin and water in a spoon. Theodora, who is HIV-positive, slams the solution into an arm marbled with track marks. Then, intent on smoking the last crumbs of crack, she gently lowers her girl onto a mattress moist with urine and semen. As mom inhales, Tamika sleeps, her pink and white sundress absorbing the fluids of unknown grown-ups.

Theodora insists she loves her daughter. She holds her hand when they cross a street. She rushes her to the emergency room when Tamika gets sick. When they sleep in near-strangers' homes, or with a new boyfriend, she slings her leg over her little girl so no one can molest her.

But love for Tamika arrives in brief moments, when her mother is not zoned out or so consumed by her body's convulsive cry for heroin that she can think of nothing else.

"When I'm using, I'm chasing my drug. I'm not paying attention to her," Theodora tearfully confesses. "I hate myself every day. It's a disgusting habit. It's a disease."

Theodora--who used to be a nurse's aide and waitress but now subsists on welfare and food stamps--assuages her guilt by pointing to children worse off than her own. "I see drug addict moms who make me sick," she says, referring to a friend who beat her son's head on a porcelain sink when he accidentally spilled a spoon of heroin.

While not physically abused, Tamika, like most children of addicts, is emotionally starved. Often, she is left alone in an apartment shared by her mother's boyfriend of the moment, Johnny, and a changing cast of other addicts.

One afternoon, while jumping on the bed in a filthy nightgown, Tamika suddenly realizes her mother--and everyone else--has left. Flinging open the front door, she cries, "Mommy! Mommy!" There is no answer. Without so much as a goodbye, Theodora and Johnny have gone to score drugs with food stamps he was paid with for doing some mechanical work.

Tamika passes the time alone spinning the spokes of a bicycle in the kitchen, where she steps on shards from a broken jar. The toddler hobbles to the sofa, sits down and digs two pieces of glass from her bleeding feet. Not a tear is shed.

Sitting by the apartment's front gate, Tamika finally sees her mother, shuffling by in pink fuzzy slippers. After

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helping a friend inject heroin into his arm, she is delivering drugs for him in exchange for her own small hit.

"My dad's in prison," Tamika says as she waits patiently by the gate. "And my mom is sad."

When Theodora disappears like this, Tamika fears she will be gone forever, a fear compounded by her roustabout life. Tamika has lived in at least nine places this year alone, including a crack den, the home of an ex-boyfriend's mother, a garage, a hotel and the apartment of a druggie who talks incessantly about putting a bullet in his brain.

"I want my own house," she tells her mother, who harbors her own fantasy of kicking drugs and settling down. For now, it is only a pipe dream.

Late on a Sunday afternoon, Tamika hasn't eaten for 24 hours. Theodora, pacing the apartment, is focused on her own hunger--and her empty pockets.

"I gotta get some dope," she mutters, growing irritated by her daughter's repeated pleas for food. "Tamika! Hush! God you're driving me nuts today," she yells. "Go play!"

Signs of withdrawal have risen to the surface. Theodora's pockmarked face is pale and sweaty. Her nose and eyes run. Her stomach churns. Desperate, she grabs Tamika and heads to the Lovitt Hotel, where the two stayed earlier when she was living with another man. Theodora scours Room 20 for money.

Lit by a bare fluorescent bulb, the room is filled with flies. There is a sink, but no toilet. A plate of chicken leftovers and an empty can of Magnum malt liquor are on the floor. Tamika's cotton panties are still strung along a rope on one wall, alongside a pair of men's boxer shorts.

The closet is empty, save for a syringe and spoon stored on a tiny ledge. Tamika begins to scribble on the sheets with a marker. Theodora, her patience now wafer-thin, smacks her hard, then tells her to stop crying and wash her face.

They leave as poor as they came.

Downstairs, at the neighboring La Colonial Market, an employee barbecues chicken in a black kettle on the sidewalk. Tamika devours the feast with her eyes. A trip earlier that week to a medical clinic for several infected spider bites revealed that the girl had lost 10% of her weight in a week, dropping to 36 pounds.

Theodora sees Johnny up the street, bums a little change, then heads to a nearby liquor store. Inside, Tamika presses her nose against the pastry case. Her mother reaches in, grabbing two pieces of sweet bread at 25 cents each.

Standing barefoot in the liquor store's parking lot at 5 p.m., Tamika eats her first meal of the day. Her mother leans against a wall, complaining of weakness.

"I really don't know what I'm doing today," she says. "It sucks."

Tamika, happy to have something in her stomach, begs: "Hold my hand, mama!"

"I don't want to hold your hand," Theodora snaps. "Leave me alone!"

As always, Tamika takes the rejection in stride, using the store's hand railing as a monkey bar to play on. On the way home, she holds Johnny's hand instead.

Johnny has spent more than half his 44 years in prison. After getting out of Lompoc federal prison a few days ago, he has stayed up for three days on speed, obsessively picking at his body. Bloody sores the size of dimes cover much of his heavily tattooed arms, chest and face.

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Tamika doesn't mind. His arms may be raw, but they often are the only ones to reach out and hug her.

Tamika has adapted to living in a world devoid of lasting affection and friendship. She has become her own best playmate.

One afternoon, her mother runs into a prostitute named Pumpkin on Long Beach Boulevard. "You got any black heroin?" Pumpkin asks, hugging Theodora, who shakes her head. Pumpkin, who has flowing blond hair and bad teeth, flags down a customer, promising to return with cash.

As Theodora paces, waiting for Pumpkin's return, Tamika stands on a blue bus bench and plays patty-cake with herself. "Miss Mary Mack Mack," the girl sings, patting her hands against the air. "All dressed in black, black, black."

Sometimes, the 3-year-old becomes a mere prop for others to duck the law or hustle small change.

At 8 one morning, another prostitute, wearing very tight jeans, white stiletto heels and days-old makeup, arrives at the apartment. She gives Tamika a big hug.

Theodora met her at the Lovitt Hotel. The woman, who confesses that she is pregnant with her ninth child, offers to watch Tamika. Theodora declines. She later explains that the last time the woman baby-sat, she took Tamika onto the streets with her so police wouldn't suspect she was looking for tricks.

Later that same week, however, Theodora exploits Tamika's charms herself. At an hour when most kids are getting into bed, she takes her daughter's hand, grabs a child-sized plastic chair and heads for the Arco gas station.

"I don't want to go, mama," Tamika says, crying.

"I need you," her mother responds.

Theodora once again is broke, and panhandling with an adorable kid like Tamika always works better than going it alone.

Tamika is well-rehearsed and practiced. She perches herself on the tiny pink chair near the gas pumps, making sure customers can see her. Each time her mother shuffles up to a car, Tamika--loud enough for all to hear--asks: "Did he say yes, Mommy?"

A man in a blue van drives up. "Hi there!" Theodora says in an overly cheerful voice. "Can I pump your gas for some change?" All he gives her is the brushoff.

Another customer pulls in. "Mama! Ask him!" Tamika coaches. Eyeing the youngster, he hands over a few coins.

Between customers, Tamika sings songs or plays peek-a-boo with herself using a church handout she found on the pavement. By 9:10 p.m., with \$ 1.56 in hand, Theodora buys a few loose cigarettes and some cookies for Tamika.

The girl's sad predicament is not lost on neighbors, who sometimes try to help. But they don't call the police--unwilling to get involved or fearful that she might end up in an abusive foster home.

Sandra, the apartment manager where Tamika lives, notices how filthy and alone the girl is one day. Holding out one of her own daughter's new pink Aladdin outfits, she offers: "Wanna get all pretty and clean?" The last bathtub Tamika was in had black mold, spiders and cold water.

"Is the bathtub dirty?" Tamika asks.

Sandra assures her it is not and says that if Tamika wades in, she will get a very special surprise. Sandra displays an

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unopened pack of tiny underwear. Within minutes, Tamika, squeaky clean for the first time in days, is proudly pulling the clothing on.

If only such touching gestures were not so fleeting. For Tamika is about to lose the hint of stability she had found in the past few weeks: Theodora and Johnny are splitting up.

Untethered, Theodora leaves Tamika with Johnny's neighbor, Irma Molina, whom she has known for only two weeks. Promising to be back soon, Theodora goes on a drug run. By the second day of her absence, Tamika begins to call Irma "Mommy."

When Theodora returns a week later, she dumps her daughter with the mother of an old boyfriend and disappears again.

At her new home, Tamika sits in a playroom aglow with morning light filtered through pink lace curtains. There is a blackboard; stuffed bears and monkeys crowd the top of a dresser. Although some in the house use crack and heroin, it is the best place Tamika has been for months. Her 70-year-old caretaker, who does not use drugs, says she is intent on protecting the girl from the "child stealers" and "baby snatchers"--terms she uses to describe social welfare workers--hoping against hope that Theodora will clean herself up.

"She promises me she will do better," says the woman with a curly blond wig and watery eyes, puffing on budget menthol cigarettes.

As a reporter rises to leave, Tamika stands. Looking up, she asks simply: "Are you taking me with you?"

Chaotic Childhoods Inflict Lasting Damage

Even for children exposed to drugs in utero, often born with smaller heads or shaking uncontrollably from withdrawal symptoms, many researchers now believe that the greatest damage occurs not in the womb but from spending years growing up in chaotic homes with parents who remain addicted.

Sometimes, the children don't make it to adulthood. Almost all of the 2,000 cases of children who die each year in the United States from child abuse involve drug or alcohol abuse by parents or guardians, according to Deanne Tilton Durfee, chairwoman of the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect.

More typically, the children are emotionally scarred, feeling abandoned, neglected, unloved and helpless as they watch those dearest to them self-destruct. Too often, the children blame themselves.

"You think: If your mom and dad don't love you, why would someone else love you?" says Yvette Ruiz, rehabilitation program director at Tom Redgate Memorial Recovery Center in Long Beach. "If you can't trust your parents, why would you trust anyone else?"

The psychological gashes are usually deepest when children are sexually or physically abused by relatives, boyfriends or others who prey on unsupervised children--an all too common occurrence.

"Drug dealers say, 'I don't want you, but I want your daughter,' " says Ruiz.

At Long Beach's Woman to Woman Recovery Center, children offer testimony to the painful images forged in their minds.

Mary Harris' 11-year-old son, Juan "Johnnie" Ortega, vividly remembers that awful night a few years ago when he was shot in the face with a BB gun on a Long Beach street corner. He ran home, blood trickling down his left cheek. His mother, smoking crack, wouldn't take him to the hospital. "I was waiting for my connection," says Mary, who is now in recovery.

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At age 7, Johnnie would escape to the downtown Long Beach Plaza mall. Walking along the shiny marble aisles, he would dream about living in the White House, or just a better home. He would pluck coins from the mall fountain for food money and steal shoes from Payless Shoe Source.

"I dreamed that my mom was nice, not on drugs," Johnnie says, "that she would go to the bank and pull out money and we'd buy stuff."

Now in the seventh grade, Johnnie says he was too ashamed to share his anguish. "I didn't want my friends to know about it. I was afraid. I thought they wouldn't like me anymore."

Such fear is a constant companion for children who watch the people entrusted with their protection--those whom they love most--spin out of control.

Fear, for example, kept Brian W., a skinny, studious boy, sitting for hours each day at the top of the stairs of his house, right outside the door of the bathroom where his mother would shoot up 6 to 10 times a day. Each night, Brian kept his lonely vigil, doing homework and listening intently to what was going on behind the door. Once, when his mother's heart stopped, he dragged her downstairs, where a friend helped get her to the hospital.

Several times, he faked falling down the stairs to interrupt her drug sessions. "I was really scared for her," Brian says. "I'd do anything to get her out of there."

The anxiety is amped up even higher when a child not only has to worry about a parent but has to be one, too--a burden so great that drug counselors say it has turned grade-schoolers into junkies.

Guillermo "Willy" Parra, 7, is the man of the apartment. While his mother shoots speed, he plays father to his 5-year-old brother and 7-month-old sister, making sure they are fed and safe. "I'd rather play," Willy says. "I do it because I have to."

Willy says his most terrifying moments are in the middle of the night when he awakens to find that his mother is gone and that he is alone with his brother and baby sister.

"I'm scared somebody could steal us," he says. "Someone could kill us."

In very young children, such as Tamika, the psychological devastation of living in substance-abusing families is not overtly evident. For the most part, they still see the world as a playground, the hard truth cushioned by their innocence.

But as these children grow older, the cumulative abuse and neglect begin to soak in, saturating their psyches. They begin to seethe with anger that manifests in inappropriate and destructive behavior. Lying, cheating and stealing become more common. Some simply withdraw into an impenetrable depression.

Ten-year-old Ashley and her brother Kevin, 8, are an example of how steep the slide can be--and its implications for the future.

Learning Violence, Anger at an Early Age

Ashley and Kevin are opposites.

He is aggressive, belligerent, always in trouble. She is sullen, a peacemaker pushed to tears when the yelling inevitably starts. In their own ways, they are coping with the same problem: Calvin, their father, a raging speed addict and alcoholic.

Ashley and Kevin live in a one-bedroom apartment on Long Beach's lower westside with their dad, his girlfriend, Rita Green, and an ever-changing crew of addicts. Rita, whose 4-year-old son was placed in foster care last year, says

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she does not have a drug problem, but she frequently snorts speed.

The apartment's bathroom walls are peppered with black mold. The toilet leaks, leaving the floor awash in slime. The tub brims with dirty clothes alive with fleas--one reason Kevin and Ashley go weeks without bathing.

The visiting addicts--"the bad people," Kevin calls them--sleep on the kitchen floor, which has become more spacious since the stove and refrigerator were sold for drug money.

By mid-June, Ashley and Kevin have missed the last four months of school. Calvin pulled them out when he was thinking about moving from Long Beach. Re-enrolling them, he worried, might bring too much attention to them--and to him--from campus officials.

Sometimes, Ashley walks to a nearby elementary school so she can watch the children spill out onto the playground.

"I just want to go to learn," says the would-be fifth-grader. "What's 3 times 3? I don't know." Students with whom she used to attend school already have mastered long division. "I wish I were them," she says. "I'm so behind."

So is her brother.

"OK, what's 2 plus 2?" one of Calvin's friends quizzes the boy one night. Kevin, staring hard at the ground, responds in a voice marred by a speech impediment, "I don't know how to do that." The friend then holds up one finger on each hand. "What's one plus one?" Kevin grabs his head. "A hundred!" he blurts out.

Spell "cat"? Kevin's face clouds with frustration.

Calvin describes his young son as violent and angry--a description that suits him just as well. In kindergarten, Kevin poked a girl in the eye with his pencil. Later that year, he was suspended twice for biting his teacher on the ankle. Kevin says he likes being unsupervised. "I can hurt people," he explains.

Calvin usually responds to his son's destructive high jinks by yelling: "Boy! You're on your way to prison!" No one disagrees when he says it. Calvin also calls his son "bag of bones" or just "retard." Other times, the father hauls back and lets his hand fly.

Kevin, pointing to his head, says his dad "beats me all the time. He don't give me no toys."

"I don't want to be like him. He's nasty. He'd be nice if he didn't use drugs." Asked if he loves his father, Kevin hesitates, then says, "A little bit."

Kevin's soft spot is his sister.

One day, he overhears Ashley pine for some new clothes; she has been wearing the same dirty pants for a week. Kevin runs outside into the alley, crawls into a metal dumpster and madly tears open bags of rotting food. Flies swarm around him. Finally, he fishes out a pair of canvas tennis shoes. Proudly, he presents them to his sister but they are too small. A familiar look of disappointment crosses her face.

Once, years ago, there was money in the family, before drugs stole it all. For 18 years, Calvin worked as a welder, even had his own shop.

His second wife introduced him to speed, which, Calvin says, she started using to lose weight. Calvin says he started dropping some into his morning coffee. Over time, it became an \$ 800-a-week habit, costing him a lucrative welding job, his home, the Cutlass, the boat. After his wife left him, Calvin says, he consoled himself with heroin. Kevin became his emotional punching bag.

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At 10 a.m. one day, Calvin rises from his platform bed, reprimanding Kevin for hitting a neighbor's boy. "Get over here, you asshole!" Calvin screams. "Let's see how you screw up today." Later, when Kevin disobeys an order to keep a speed addict out of the apartment, Calvin whacks the boy.

"You're mean to me! I want my mom!" Kevin sobs. Calvin yells back: "Your mom's a tramp! I'm all you got. You're my worst nightmare. You don't think I'd get rid of you if I could?"

Kevin covers his head with a filthy sofa pillow, cups his hands over his ears and bawls.

Violence and abuse are not the only traits Calvin has imparted to his young son.

One day, the two hop on a Metro Blue Line train without paying and head for the mall in downtown Long Beach. After buying Kevin a cheap pair of shoes, they go to Carl's Jr. for a hamburger--and a lesson in larceny.

As father and son make their way to a table, Calvin swings by the salad bar, for which he has not paid, and swipes some hot peppers. He goes back for some cantaloupe.

"Daddy, should I take that?" Kevin asks, looking for his father's approval. "Quickly!" his dad instructs.

With that, Kevin darts to the salad bar and dips his grubby fingers into the crouton jar. Calvin, beaming at his son's prowess, instructs him to get some cantaloupe. Before long, Kevin has made more than a half-dozen brazen trips, finally catching the eye of a Carl's Jr. worker. "Now we have to throw the whole thing out!" she yells at the boy with dirty hands, who slinks back to his seat.

"Shut up, bitch," Calvin mutters to her. Then, in the lecturing tone of a father sharing pearls of wisdom, Calvin tells Kevin: "It's all right to steal, son, just don't get busted!" When Calvin, who spent four years in prison for burglary, gets up to leave, he takes the salt and pepper shakers with him.

It's no wonder Kevin turns to outsiders--such as Pastor Bill Thomas of the nearby Long Beach Rescue Mission--for comfort. Thomas offered food to Kevin after noticing the skinny boy scavenging in the mission's dumpsters earlier this year.

"Will you take me home?" Kevin began asking. "Will you make me your son? They don't feed me."

Pastor Thomas, who says Kevin is "a child crying out for love and attention" through aggression, worries about the boy wandering the streets alone because pedophiles sometimes hang around the mission.

"It's a matter of time," Thomas predicts, "until something will happen."

At 5 p.m. one night, while Calvin drinks beer on the apartment sofa, the children complain of hunger. "It's a never-ending problem of being a parent," Calvin grouses. "Food." He tells Kevin to go to the mission.

Ashley, wearing a "D.A.R.E. to Keep Kids Off Drugs" T-shirt, is not allowed to go with him because of the danger of sexual predators. She will go to bed hungry.

Calvin, for his part, doesn't miss a sip. "Ha! I'm getting a buzz. Feeling better!" he says, kicking back.

But four hours later, an irritating crimp ruins his high: One of Calvin's friends realizes that the boy has not returned from the mission. It is the same week a 7-year-old girl, left unattended in a Nevada casino, was found raped and dead in a toilet stall.

"Shit, where could he be?" Calvin says, clearly annoyed. Prodded by his friend, Calvin heads outside, finding his son blocks away. The time is 9:40 p.m. "Kevin, get your butt over here!" his father screams. "Where are you going,

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stupid!"

Ashley, unlike her brother, is more depressed than hostile. Quiet and well-behaved, she fantasizes about a stomach filled with candy or taking a trip to Target to buy a Bugs Bunny T-shirt.

Asked about her father's drug habit, the girl with willowy limbs wrinkles her nose. "He goes crazy," she says. "He gets mad, even when we don't do nothing."

To survive her stormy life, Ashley has glommed onto her father's girlfriend as an anchor. Rita's shrill, loud, berating voice is a test of anyone's patience, but to Ashley it is music.

"I loooooove Rita," Ashley says several times a day, practically swooning. "She's a good mom. She makes sure there is dinner for us. Sometimes, my dad don't remember to do that," says Ashley, whose real mother hardly ever visits. "She just took off," Ashley says harshly.

Fearful that Rita will do the same, Ashley becomes near-frantic when her father and his girlfriend fight about drugs or money, which is constantly.

"Hey bitch!" Calvin yells as Rita arrives at 6:30 one evening. He is peeved that she has spent some of her welfare check on speed, food for herself and on a motel room to shower. "Get the hell out of here!" demands Calvin, who earlier that day had grabbed her by the neck and slammed her against the apartment wall.

Ashley breaks into tears, trailing Rita out the door. Calvin threatens to beat his daughter with a belt when she returns.

The next day, the squall has passed and Rita is back, cooking over a hot plate on the floor. Ashley, squatting alongside her, whispers into Rita's ear. "If he keeps drinking, you'll take me away, huh?" Rita smiles, enjoying the power that comes with knowing that Calvin's own daughter would rather be with her.

All Ashley knows is that Rita seems to care.

The youngster opens a small cardboard box and removes a hospital bracelet, a treasured keepsake, reminding her of the day she was rescued by Rita.

Although she was vomiting and could barely walk earlier this year, she says her father wouldn't take her to the emergency room.

He recently had gone there with Kevin to find out why his neck sometimes twitches from side to side. Social workers questioned Calvin after noticing bruises and scratches on the boy. They later visited the house at least three times, neighbors and others say, but allowed the children to remain.

Although Calvin did not want to risk a repeat, Rita insisted on taking Ashley to the emergency room. "If Rita wasn't there," Ashley says, "I'd be dead already."

The five days Ashley spent in the hospital with pneumonia, she says, were the best of her life.

"I had my own bedroom, an IV in my arm. My own bed. A TV. I could play. Put my clothes in a bathroom."

When it was time to leave, Ashley cried. "I wanted to go back," the girl says. "It was my home."

And now she and her brother must adjust to yet another one. Calvin and Rita, facing eviction after paying no rent for half a year, have decided to leave for Bakersfield, 140 miles away. There, Rita says, she will take parenting classes to get her son back from foster care.

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She and Calvin say they will leave behind their problems with drug addiction. "We need to change our environment. No one knows you. No low-life friends. It's so easy," Calvin says, waving his hand. In *Alcoholics Anonymous*, this type of denial is so common it has a name: "doing a geographic."

After shooting up speed in the bathroom, Calvin packs the family's few remaining possessions for the bus ride they will all take that night.

Ashley, cynical beyond her 10 years, is resigned to more disappointment.

"He says we'll leave and he'll stop doing drugs," she says, sitting on her apartment stoop. "But I don't believe him."

In School, a Brief Taste of Normal Life

Given the choice, many schoolchildren would prefer watching TV or playing with a prized toy at home. But for the vast majority of youngsters whose parents are full-blown alcoholics or addicts, classrooms are their refuge--their only connection to a normal life, a sense of blending in, getting at least one meal a day. They try their best, as if their lives depended on it, to show up.

In the process, however, they pose special challenges--and problems--for teachers and classmates alike. These children, despite their earnestness, too often are warming the seat more than learning. The extra attention they require robs other students of learning time.

At Washington Middle School in Long Beach--where a purple banner proclaims "Be Drug Free"--seventh-grade health teacher Ann Rector estimates that nearly a third of her 185 students live in substance-abusing families.

"They are so behind the other kids," Rector says. "They get frustrated and angry because they feel stupid."

Some come to class with their jackets reeking of crack. Others talk about how they put to bed passed-out parents and about fathers who get drunk and mean.

Without alarm clocks or anyone to wake them up, the children often wander into class late. Once there, many drift off.

Rector remembers the time two girls from the same home fell asleep because they had been up until 5 a.m. taking care of a baby sibling while their mother, Rector believes, was on a drug binge. When the mother arrived to retrieve her girls--after being summoned by the school--she promptly pummeled them to the sidewalk with her fists.

Such experiences understandably make children distrustful of adults, including teachers, further complicating the educational mission.

Ritchie Eriksen, program facilitator for safe and drug-free schools for the Long Beach Unified School District, remembers a picture one 5-year-old girl drew of her father. "This is my dad and he likes to drink beer and smoke pot," she wrote on the top.

One hot morning, Eriksen noticed the girl was wearing a blue turtleneck. Eriksen pulled up the girl's sleeves and found a bruise in the shape of a belt buckle. Further inspection revealed that she was black and blue from her waist to her knees. Eriksen says she called the police, who summoned child welfare authorities. Counseling was ordered for the father, Eriksen says, but the girl was allowed to remain in the home.

A more subtle sign that youngsters may be living in substance-abusing homes is their attendance record.

Recovering addict Valerie Gipson, a counselor at Long Beach's Woman to Woman Recovery Center, says her two school-aged children missed half of every week for an entire year. If the school called, she would claim the children

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were sick. She coached her children to stick with the same story, threatening that if the truth got out, "we'd all be in trouble."

Since 1991, in an effort to prevent a similar fate for other children, the Los Angeles County district attorney's office has joined forces with a number of schools to put a scare into parents.

The district attorney notifies them by letter to attend a meeting at the school auditorium. There, a deputy district attorney lays down the law: Parents with chronically truant youngsters can be fined \$ 2,500 and spend up to one year in jail.

If things do not improve, then parents are summoned to a private meeting with school and district attorney officials. They are warned that the next step is prosecution.

Still, while school is crucial, it takes a special kind of determination for these neglected children to overcome their circumstances. Amazingly, many do.

"The shame drives them to be perfect," says Van Nuys substance abuse counselor Hillary Treadwell. "They have to prove to themselves and to the rest of the world that they are OK."

That's what Tina Moraga is doing. Her past and present offer hope for little girls like Tamika.

Tina, 27, is sitting on a velour couch in her Long Beach apartment. Alongside her is her mother, Rosario Moraga, the woman who two decades ago had turned her daughter into an orphan of addiction.

Tina remembers being left alone for long stretches, or with a relative who regularly forced her to give him oral sex. Tina says her mother's drug friends used to feel her up. Often, in fights during drug crazes, Tina says, her mother would call her "rape baby." Tina says she called herself "the shield" because her mother often used her as a buffer against drug dealers bent on beating her up.

When Tina was 7 and Rosario was turning tricks, the youngster accompanied her mother and a customer into the Ho-Hum Motel. There, Rosario lay Tina down next to her on the bed and covered her daughter's eyes with one hand. Through the cracks between her mother's fingers, Tina watched the encounter in a ceiling mirror.

As Tina recounts the story of her formative years, her mother mostly remains quiet, sometimes shrugging her shoulders and offering a few words about how she was oblivious to much of the damage she was causing.

Today, at 46, Rosario says she no longer sniffs paint, and she stopped shooting heroin when the veins in her fingers and toes collapsed from overuse. She is on methadone and still smokes crack, but only outside the apartment--under orders from her daughter, now head of a household with strict rules and everyday routines.

Tina managed to veer from her mother's twisted path, finding her way to higher ground, with a simple but sure vow as a child: to never use drugs or alcohol. Although her journey into maturity has been bumpy--her four daughters have three dads--Tina has remained resolute.

Each morning, she rises at 4 a.m. to drive a big yellow school bus. Smiling pictures of her daughters, immaculately dressed and coiffed, line the apartment walls, along with track medals won mostly by her oldest, Brandi, 10, who has qualified to race in national competitions.

Tina attributes her resiliency to the power of her memories. "I always remember that drugs tore my family apart," she says.

Although her children are young, Tina is planning and saving money for each of her four girls' Sweet 16 birthday parties.

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"I'm trying to make their life like I wish my life would have been."

About This Series

Times urban affairs writer Sonia Nazario and staff photographer Clarence Williams spent five months chronicling the tortured lives of children living with drug addicts and alcoholics. Nazario and Williams spent day and night with many of these families during the summer months--a snapshot in time intended to show the kind of existence such youngsters confront throughout their formative years.

While today's story focuses on the personal tragedies and obstacles faced by substance-abusing families, Monday's piece offers an inspiring look at a treatment program that has given families a fresh start.

On the Web

The complete series, including additional photos and a discussion area, will be available on The Times' Web site Monday. Go to <http://www.latimes.com/orphans/>

GRAPHIC: PHOTO: Theodora Triggs, 33, cradles daughter Tamika, 3, after shooting heroin. PHOTOGRAPHER: CLARENCE WILLIAMS / Los Angeles Times PHOTO: Tamika Triggs, 3, dozes on a filthy mattress in a shed in Long Beach while her mother, Theodora, right, and a friend, Dorene McDonald, get high on crack cocaine and heroin. PHOTOGRAPHER: CLARENCE WILLIAMS / Los Angeles Times PHOTO: Tamika looks out a bus window. Her life revolves around her mother's drug abuse. This year, Tamika has lived in at least nine places, including a crack den, the home of an ex-boyfriend's mother, a garage and a hotel. PHOTOGRAPHER: CLARENCE WILLIAMS / Los Angeles Times PHOTO: With her back to her daughter, Theodora Triggs shoots heroin. She insists that she loves Tamika and says she knows other children of addicts who are worse off, but admits, "When I'm using, I'm chasing my drug. I'm not paying attention to her." PHOTOGRAPHER: CLARENCE WILLIAMS / Los Angeles Times PHOTO: Theodora Triggs caresses daughter Tamika as the child falls asleep. When her mother vanishes for hours or days in search of drugs, Tamika fears she will never come back. PHOTOGRAPHER: CLARENCE WILLIAMS / Los Angeles Times PHOTO: With a child's spontaneous joy, Tamika smiles as she runs past her mother and Johnny, a man they lived with briefly. "My dad's in prison," Tamika explained recently. "And my mom is sad." PHOTOGRAPHER: CLARENCE WILLIAMS / Los Angeles Times PHOTO: Johnny brushes Tamika's teeth with a toothbrush she is sharing this day with Theodora, who is HIV-positive. After noticing that her own gums were bleeding, Theodora asked him to clean Tamika's teeth first. PHOTOGRAPHER: CLARENCE WILLIAMS / Los Angeles Times PHOTO: Tamika wanders behind shed where her mother and a friend got high earlier. PHOTOGRAPHER: CLARENCE WILLIAMS / Los Angeles Times PHOTO: Kevin Bryan, 8, covers his ears and turns away as his father's girlfriend, Rita Green, screams at him in their Long Beach apartment, which is a hangout for numerous addicts. PHOTOGRAPHER: CLARENCE WILLIAMS / Los Angeles Times PHOTO: In foreground at left, Kevin watches as his father, Calvin Holloman, a speed addict and alcoholic, tosses back a beer. Kevin calls the addicts who frequent the small apartment "the bad people." PHOTOGRAPHER: CLARENCE WILLIAMS / Los Angeles Times PHOTO: Calvin Holloman, above, smokes crack in his bedroom shortly after telling a friend, "Hurry up, I don't want the kids to see me." PHOTOGRAPHER: CLARENCE WILLIAMS / Los Angeles Times PHOTO: Son Kevin, right, digs through garbage in a dumpster, hoping to find clothes for his 10-year-old sister; he finds a pair of shoes, but they are too small. PHOTOGRAPHER: CLARENCE WILLIAMS / Los Angeles Times PHOTO: Kevin Bryan settles down for the night on the sofa in his living room, looking into the kitchen where his father's addict friends sleep on the floor; the refrigerator and stove have been sold for drug money. At 8, Kevin, whose mother abandoned the family years ago, is angry and violent. PHOTOGRAPHER: CLARENCE WILLIAMS / Los Angeles Times PHOTO: Before going to sleep, Ashley Bryan says her usual prayer: "Just once, give me something Good. Please, make life get better." Neglect is the norm for Ashley and her brother, who go weeks without a bath, and are often hungry. PHOTOGRAPHER: CLARENCE WILLIAMS / Los Angeles Times PHOTO: Ashley Bryan, 10, stares into space as her father, Calvin Holloman, lies on a mattress in the living room of their apartment. Unlike her brother, Kevin, Ashley is well-behaved, quiet--and depressed. She speaks sadly of lagging far behind others her age in academic skills: "What's 3 times 3? I don't know." She and her brother

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missed four months of the last school year after their father withdrew them from classes. PHOTOGRAPHER: CLARENCE WILLIAMS / Los Angeles Times

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