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THE NEEDIEST CASES

Charting a Winding Job Path, With a Smile

By Clyde Haberman

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Every year since 1911, The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund has provided direct assistance to children, families and the elderly in New York. Articles will appear daily through Jan. 30, illustrating the difference that even a modest amount of money can make in easing the struggles of the poor.

Last year, 10,428 donors contributed \$6,280,242, which was distributed to those in need through seven New York charities.



Eric Michael Johnson for The New York Times
Katawba Battersbee, 36, who prides herself on her upbeat attitude, has a résumé that includes stints as a model, an extra on a movie set, an Amtrak employee and a New York City bus driver.

When a woman responsible for hiring at [Amtrak](#) asked her what sort of work she could do, Katawba Battersbee had an answer ready. “Well,” she said, “I’m personable.”

That she is, with a ready smile and a conversational style that does not stray from upbeat. But a flash of teeth and engaging patter are not foolproof headlamps for illuminating one’s path in life. Ms. Battersbee, 36, has had to learn that lesson more than once, along a path with more than its share of dead ends — some, she acknowledged, of her own creation.

Her experience at Amtrak a decade ago is an example.

Where to put a personable young woman? Behind the counter of a train’s dining car. That was what the woman in charge of hiring figured, anyway. But “after a year of microwaving pizza,” Ms. Battersbee said, “I was done with that.”

She moved on to become a block operator at Amtrak, then a yardmaster, neither a position traditionally associated with young women. “There was constant culture clash,” and some improper behavior by her superiors, Ms. Battersbee said, without providing specifics. She spoke her mind, though she now concedes that perhaps she did so too often and too sharply. “I was no longer wanted,” she said, and was ordered to leave.

To describe Ms. Battersbee’s life since she left her happy childhood home in Ozone Park, Queens, is to chart a course that is anything but linear, and anything but dull. Besides Amtrak, her résumé includes stints as a model, as an extra on a movie set, as a video pitchwoman for the organization Dress for Success and as a bus driver for [New York City Transit](#).

She drove a night route in South Jamaica, Queens, but did not make it past the probation period. The transit agency’s decision to drop her made sense, she said. Operating a bus is a job with “an extreme amount of pressure.” It was not for her.

“The driver gets beat up,” Ms. Battersbee said. “You get sexual innuendo. People just curse you out because they had a rough day. There’s a lack of human element when it comes to thinking about the people who transport us every day.”

In letting her go, in December 2008, her superior at the agency told her, “This is not a punishment,” Ms. Battersbee said. “And it really wasn’t,” she said. “It was a blessing, because I was able to go to school full time.”

Her pursuit of an education has followed its own winding path, through several colleges in New York and Savannah, Ga. “I know my story is, like, all over the place,” Ms. Battersbee said.

Last spring Ms. Battersbee earned a bachelor’s degree from [City College of New York](#). Her focus now is on a graduate degree, with an eye toward working in human resources or labor relations. She has matured a lot, she said, and “can recognize some of the things that I’ve gone through, and help others.”

In the meantime, though, there is the matter of earning a living.

After the bus-driver career did not work out, she lived off her savings for a while. But the money ran out. By late 2009, she was four months behind in the \$864-a-month rent on her one-bedroom apartment at the Riverton Houses in Harlem. Facing possible eviction, she turned to the Community Service Society of New York, one of seven beneficiary agencies of The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund. A \$1,849 grant from the society helped her pay back what she owed.

She had managed in 2010 to get a paid internship at New York City Transit, in its human resources department, but that ended a few weeks ago. So, yet once more, she needs to find a job. But her real goal is acquiring that advanced degree.

“I want to finish my education, and solidify a career,” Ms. Battersbee said. Starting a family will have to wait.

“I don’t want to do it backwards,” she said. “I see so many women who have children, and they’re not ready mentally or financially. It’s building an attic down. If you don’t lay a foundation, it’s going to crumble.”