

# The New York Times

THE NEEDIEST CASES

## Putting Sobriety and Work Above Drugs and Crime

By Jennifer Mascia

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*Kirsten Luce for The New York Times*

Larry Waldo, who works at a residence for ex-convicts, received aid from the Neediest Cases Fund for rent and clothing.



*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.*

Larry Waldo's family is so large that annual reunions involve a printed program 50 pages thick, with updates on family members and a four-day itinerary. Though Mr. Waldo, 59, has spent most of his adult life in prison, he said he was treated no differently from the lawyers, military personnel and politicians in his family, which is from South Carolina.

"I don't hide it," he said of his criminal record. "And my family is grateful I can share the message with them."

When he was 17, Mr. Waldo, who spent his teenage years in Jamaica, Queens, was arrested for riding in a stolen car and released only because his grandmother worked for a State Supreme Court justice. Other arrests followed, and his family connection kept him out of prison — until he was 19, when he began serving 18 months at the Coxsackie Correctional Facility for stealing cars.

After his release, he fenced car parts and developed a cocaine habit. A two-year prison stint followed, then a 10-year term, followed by another two-year imprisonment and another 10-year term. Not for armed robbery, he is quick to point out, but strong-arm robbery. And he never robbed places, like stores.

“You have to have a gun to rob places,” he said. “I never took to the dark side.”

Mr. Waldo’s crimes were nonetheless terrifying: he would lie in wait on the streets of Jamaica, and if he saw someone nicely dressed, he would put the person in a headlock and steal his or her money. Cocaine made it easier. In prison, getting drugs was no problem, and his habit consumed him.

Between sentences, he had two sons: Leland, 36, works at a law firm, and Lamont, 35, is a Navy lieutenant. Though Mr. Waldo was largely absent during their childhoods, they often visited him in jail.

“They know I did what I did,” he said, “and I don’t do that anymore.”

After the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Lamont and his commanding officer wrote letters to the parole board on Mr. Waldo’s behalf, and he was released.

He entered an 18-month drug rehabilitation program. Upon his release, he got a job at the [Federal Emergency Management Agency](#) and moved to Washington. But in 2005, when FEMA was absorbed by the [Department of Homeland Security](#), felons were expelled. He moved back to Queens and relapsed, a slip-up that cost him a job as a technician at Dish Network and landed him in [Rikers Island](#) for 30 days.

Afterward, Mr. Waldo returned to the same rehabilitation center, “and this time, they gave it to me like you wouldn’t believe,” he recalled.

“I’m an older guy, so they paid real, real close attention to me,” he said. “When they didn’t give me chores, they gave me beef.”

This time, relapse was not an option.

“I don’t think I could recover again,” Mr. Waldo said.

Sober since Aug. 8, 2008, he said, he calls his sponsor whenever temptation strikes. Mr. Waldo works for the Fortune Society as a house manager at Castle Gardens, a residence for ex-convicts in Harlem, making \$13.73 an hour.

The Fortune Society is a beneficiary of the Community Service Society of New York, one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund. When Mr. Waldo needed to provide a deposit for a one-room apartment in Jamaica, he was granted \$1,000 from the fund. The bathroom and the kitchen are in the hallway, and Mr. Waldo is behind on the rent, but he is proud of what he has.

“I love my little place,” he said. “When you’re using, you don’t have a TV. You don’t have money. This apartment isn’t much, but it’s mine.”

He also needed clothes for work and was given an additional \$300 for shirts, slacks and shoes.

“This is the longest I’ve been out of prison since I’ve been an adult,” he said.

Sobriety is not easy, but Mr. Waldo sticks with it, knowing that his living circumstances now are better than confinement to prison or a rehabilitation program.

“I’d rather be here,” he said, “than there.”