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## THE NEEDIEST CASES

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### Joining His Father, but Carving Out His Own Path

By Ann Farmer



*Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times*

Before Francis Stephen arrived in Queens, he struggled with a British-style educational system.

When Francis Stephen arrived in the United States from Bangladesh two years ago, his father already had a career plan in mind for him, he said.

“The first day I came to New York,” Mr. Stephen, 24, recalled, “he said, ‘Look for a job.’” His father thought he should become a home health worker, maybe a nurse, he said.

“He told me that if I graduate from nursing, I’ll get a job faster,” Mr. Stephen said. “But I don’t want to become a nurse.”

It was the blood that he did not think he could handle, as well as the other demands of the profession. But more important, Mr. Stephen said, he wanted to carve his own path.

In Bangladesh, Mr. Stephen, who says he speaks several languages, had struggled with the British-style educational system that is prevalent in that country. Although he did well in some subjects, doing poorly in others left him feeling so humiliated that he dropped out in the 10th grade, he said. He had great hope that the United States would provide the education that had eluded him.

“I always wanted to come here,” Mr. Stephen said on a recent chilly morning, bundled up in winter clothing and drinking hot coffee in a White Castle in Astoria, Queens, near his home. “I love the American education system,” he added, almost tripping over his words in his rush to express himself.

Mr. Stephen's father had immigrated to New York decades earlier, when Mr. Stephen was a baby. His mother had not wanted to leave Bangladesh, he said, so she and his father divorced. His father, who is deaf, remarried.

When Mr. Stephen turned 21, his father sponsored him to come to America, and he jumped at the chance. He now lives in a one-bedroom apartment with his father, in Long Island City.

His first order of business was to get his high school equivalency diploma. He picked up the phone and dialed 311, and was told about a free G.E.D. study program at the Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement House. While taking courses there, he volunteered to help with the 2010 census. His responsibilities included explaining to other South Asian immigrants, who often spoke only Bengali or Hindi, the importance of being counted even if they were undocumented, he said.

Mr. Stephen also volunteered as a tutor for other G.E.D. students, teaching them mathematical concepts and providing support and encouragement.

As he cast about for his next step in life, his counselor at the Settlement House steered him to the nonprofit East River Development Alliance in Long Island City in September 2010. There he attended a job-readiness workshop, where he learned office etiquette and how to finesse his résumé, among other things. He also sought further career counseling.

"When he came to us," said Shanna Castillo, the workforce development coordinator at the alliance, "he was confused or conflicted over whether his focus should be on school or work."

Mr. Stephen did not want to enter a field simply because others thought he should. He told his counselors that he wanted a career that fulfilled him and gave him a degree of personal satisfaction.

"He made the decision to go to school," Ms. Castillo said. "We supported that."

In January 2011, Mr. Stephen passed his G.E.D. tests with high marks, and his confidence grew. Working closely with a career counselor, he registered at LaGuardia Community College in March. His tuition was covered by a Pell grant, but he needed help to buy textbooks and school supplies.

The alliance referred him to the [Community Service Society of New York](#), one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, and he received \$566.56 to pay for a calculator and textbooks.

Now, one of his biggest challenges is staying true to himself. He changed his major from nursing to criminal justice, and then back to nursing, he said, to please his father. But he is determined to seize the reins of his academic future. Next semester, he said, he will take a range of liberal arts, social sciences and humanities courses.

Mr. Stephen said he wanted to prove to anyone who might have had doubts about him that they were wrong.

"I want to prove to them that I can do something," he said. "That is my goal."