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THE NEEDIEST CASES

With Training and Faith, Getting Closer to a Dream

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As he stood on a street corner in Jacksonville, Fla., and handed a \$10 bag of marijuana to an undercover police officer, Theorpia Eugene Carter did not see the heavens open up or hear choirs of angels sing. Yet he remembers it as the moment that God changed his life.



Richard Perry/The New York Times

In addition to holding a full-time job, Theorpia Eugene Carter works part time at the Center of Hope International in Long Island City, Queens.

“It’s like a light came on,” he said, adding that in the midst of the arrest, an officer asked why he was smiling. The reason, Mr. Carter recalled, was that after two previous jail sentences — a few months each — and years of addiction to marijuana and crack, he somehow knew that it would all be over.

That was in 2002.

“I turned my life over to Christ,” he said with his ever-present, toothy grin. “I’m still smiling today.”

Though Mr. Carter, 49, is short, at 5-foot-6, his direct and outgoing manner commands attention. His voice, tinged with a northern Florida twang, resonates with the rhythmic inflection of a Baptist minister. (He was ordained a deacon in 2008, and when he speaks, he often sounds as if he is preaching a revival sermon.) He is given to handshakes and hearty laughter.

While Mr. Carter was serving six months in jail and undergoing substance abuse treatment, he remembers, a fellow prisoner confronted him about his inexplicably positive attitude, saying, “I just don’t believe that nobody can be so happy locked up.”

“I started to laugh,” Mr. Carter said, “and I reached my hands out to pray with him.”

Today, he is still praying, but he has more trials to overcome. In March 2009, he was laid off from his job as lead carpenter at a construction company, Harry Pepper & Associates, where he had been earning as much as \$50,000 annually, with overtime.

Mr. Carter is also an experienced forklift operator, concrete finisher and barber. Despite his varied skills, he had no luck on his job search, and he and his wife, Carol, decided to leave Jacksonville in October 2009. They placed many of their possessions in storage and flew more than 800 miles, headed to Astoria, Queens, to live with her adult son from a previous marriage. The crowded, two-bedroom apartment is just big enough for Mrs. Carter’s son, daughter-in-law and two young grandchildren, and she and Mr. Carter sleep in the living room.

They have received some help. With a grant from the [East River Development Alliance](#) — a beneficiary agency of the Community Service Society, one of the seven organizations supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund — Mr. Carter was able to pay \$340.30 in back storage fees for his and his wife’s belongings.

And in June, after an agency training program in résumé writing and computer skills, he was hired as a mailroom clerk at G-III Apparel Group — a full-time job paying \$12 an hour. Last month, he also started working part time as a maintenance man for the Center of Hope International, whose Long Island City church houses the East River Development Alliance’s offices.

As always, religious faith keeps him motivated, and his fervor has not gone unnoticed by the church staff. “A lot of people, you ask, ‘What are they after? What is their motive?’ ” said David Thomasson, a church elder. But with Mr. Carter, “you could see that he had a zeal to help people any way he can.”

Still, Mr. Carter is far from where he wants to be. He dreams of moving into a new apartment soon, and — maybe, one day — of being a construction superintendent, or a minister to his own congregation. For now, there are bills to pay and work to be done. So on Friday nights, he can be seen jogging down the church’s long, narrow stairs, with a mop and bucket in hand. His mission is to keep the building tidy, from the sanctuary to the sinks.

“I want God to notice me,” said Mr. Carter, solemnly, as he leaned over, mopping a bathroom floor. “When he notices you, he makes provisions for you.”