

# The New York Times

*THE NEEDIEST CASES*

## MetroCard Blazes Mother's Path to a Job

By Channing Joseph

Published: December 6, 2010



Mustafah Abdulaziz for The New York Times



*Every year since 1911, 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.*

Jessica Torres, who was unemployed, attended a training program and then won a paid internship with Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow in Brooklyn

When Jessica Torres is nervous, words flutter from her mouth like butterflies in springtime, flitting in every direction. As she giggles, short phrases fly from her lips, colliding with each other, trailing off or suddenly reappearing.

"It makes me feel like ...," she begins. And "honestly, you know, like ...," she begins again, a split second later.

All the while, her hands emphatically slice and grab at the air, as if to catch her wayward words and put them back in some kind of order before they escape forever.

It is difficult not to smile and laugh with Ms. Torres, 22, as she talks about her young son, D'Anthony, her love of blue jeans and bargain-priced earrings, or her dream of one day owning a funeral home. (As for working with dead bodies, she said with a chuckle that she "wouldn't mind.")

But when her swirling sentences begin to settle down, her serious side reveals itself.

"I was just so scared," Ms. Torres said, recalling a moment in 2006 when all the right words did escape her grasp.

For two days, tension had hung like smoke over the three-bedroom apartment that she and her mother shared in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Ms. Torres's father lives in Puerto Rico and visits New York only once a year, so her mother is the only parent who has been a consistent part of her life. But for two days, that parent had stopped speaking to her.

"I was packing my things," Ms. Torres remembered, "because I thought she was going to throw me out."

Indeed, her mother, Freda Torres, 57 — a Pentecostalist who attends church every day and is adamantly opposed to abortion — had warned her repeatedly about the risks of unprotected sex and the hardships of teenage parenthood. Yet the younger Ms. Torres, unmarried and 17, was pregnant.

No words seemed appropriate to break two days of weighty silence, so the normally talkative Ms. Torres simply placed a sonogram of her 3-month-old fetus on the pink sofa where her mother often sat to watch soap operas. And she waited.

“That’s when she came to me,” Ms. Torres recalled, adding that her mother finally told her reassuringly, “ ‘We’ll get through this.’ ”

Even with her mother’s support, the last four years have not been easy for Ms. Torres. She and D’Anthony’s father, a sheet-metal worker, are no longer together.

And though he has been helping out financially, the primary child care responsibilities have fallen on Ms. Torres and her mother, who lives on disability payments.

After dropping out of high school, Jessica Torres spent two years supporting her son and herself with jobs in retail sales before obtaining her high school equivalency diploma in October 2008.

Last June, after a bout of unemployment, Ms. Torres discovered [Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow](#), a beneficiary agency of the Community Service Society, one of the seven organizations supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund. With a grant of \$89, she was able to buy a one-month unlimited [MetroCard](#) and to participate in the agency’s five-week job-training program, which included classes in business math, business English, office procedures and other subjects.

When she completed the training, Ms. Torres was hired for a paid internship at the Bushwick, Brooklyn, office of Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow.

There, she greeted clients and helped with marketing, fund-raising and administrative duties. Those who have worked with Ms. Torres say she has gained confidence and a new sense of pride.

“I think she has come to realize her abilities and her self-worth,” said Dani Smejkal, a senior counselor.

But Ms. Torres’s internship ended nearly two months ago, so she is again hunting for a job. Still, she is optimistic about her prospects.

And when she reflects on her current circumstances — and the people who motivate her most to succeed — her words float into place easily.

“It’s just me, my mom and my baby,” she said.