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THE NEEDIEST CASES

Family Bonds That Hurt Also Heal



Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

Mignon Taylor said she was so sad when two siblings died that she could not keep her job.

By JENNIFER MASCIA

If Mignon Taylor had her way, she would open a craft shop and tearoom for the young people of Spanish Harlem, where she grew up.

"There's nothing for them to do here," she said. "I just want to help out the kids. I'd be happy."

For now, Ms. Taylor, 55, serves as the unofficial caretaker of her extended family, both the living and the dead. Photos of the latter, yellowing with age and showcasing the clothing of a bygone era, perch on bookcases and occupy positions of honor on an otherwise barren living room wall.

"This is Eugene Montgomery Taylor," Ms. Taylor said, pointing to one picture. Her younger brother. "He was killed by a sniper's bullet," she said. It happened 20 years ago, while he was shooting hoops at the neighborhood basketball court. Smiling and handsome, he was 16.

"This is my moms and pops," who died in 2001 and 2003, respectively, she said.

"This is my sister Michelle," who died from lupus in 1993, at 31, "and this is her daughter, Yvonne," she said. "She was 2 when her mother died. We tell her all about her mother. We're not ashamed of talking. And we have pictures galore."

Most of the surviving members of the Taylor clan occupy a busy three-bedroom apartment in a housing project in the shadow of the Metro-North Railroad tracks on East 112th Street and Lexington Avenue. It is the same apartment Ms. Taylor grew up in. Though she now lives in the St. Nicholas Houses across town, where her 33-year-old daughter also lives, she spends most of her time in the 112th Street apartment, being a cook and den mother to a sister, a nephew and three nieces. Her 28-year-old son splits his time between Ms. Taylor's apartment and the 112th Street apartment, Ms. Taylor said, "because he says we need a man in the house."

It is a full house, she said of the apartment in Spanish Harlem, "but it's a loving house. I don't think we'd actually know how to live without each other."

Her spirit is strong and her outlook is optimistic, but 20 years ago, the first of many tragedies set Ms. Taylor on a lonely and confusing path.

"I really think I went through an emotional breakdown after my brother's death and my sister's death," she said, speaking with difficulty about Eugene and Michelle. Once a [Metropolitan Transportation Authority](#) employee in a token booth, she found herself unable to work without crying uncontrollably. She did not file for unemployment compensation.

"I didn't know how to navigate the system" for help, she said. When she applied for welfare, she said, she felt so demoralized by how she was treated that she never went back. She has [Medicaid](#) but has recently been notified that she makes \$90 too much a month, so her days of medical coverage may be numbered.

Ms. Taylor barely gets by. Her "very good son" helps her, and she has an income of \$10,000 a year: she receives a monthly stipend of \$846.06 from [AmeriCorps](#), a community service organization for which she works as a program coordinator. She was offered the position two years ago through the Community Service Society, one of the seven agencies supported by The [New York Times Neediest Cases Fund](#), immediately after she received \$1,700 from the fund to stave off eviction. Her rent is \$685 a month.

"We've lived through the upside, and we've lived through the downside," she said of her family's predicament. But regardless of the hardship, she holds fast to her dream of owning a craft shop, and she says she would offer full medical benefits to her employees.

"That's exactly what I would do, if I had the money," she said. Until then, she will spend her slivers of free time attending her 6-year-old nephew's soccer games, cooking, crocheting and reading just about any book that comes her way.

"One day I'll actually know what it is to sit down," she said.