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THE NEEDIEST CASES

Serious About His Studies and Helping Out at Home

By Jennifer Mascia



Raymond McCrea Jones/The New York Times

Emilio Lora, left, with Todd Herrell, of CUNY Prep, who helped him obtain a grant to assist his parents in paying overdue rent.

For a while, kitchen table conversations in Emilio Lora's household were tense.

"We used to discuss it every day," Mr. Lora, 19, said of his parents' financial hardship. "It was a really big problem."

His father, Raymond Mercedes, 47, had been an electrician at an oil refinery in St. Croix, where the family lived for seven years after moving from the Dominican Republic. But Mr. Mercedes was laid off, and a year and a half ago he decided "to start over, to start a new life, especially for me," Mr. Lora said.

In New York, Mr. Mercedes, whose command of English is shaky, makes \$40 to \$60 a day selling pastries to bodegas and restaurants. Mr. Lora's mother, Persia Mercedes, 49, is a home health aide, but because her \$8-an-hour pay rate earns her only \$120 a week after taxes, she supplements her income by networking to sell her homemade wares: tightly knit hats and scarves, available for \$8 and \$18; pastelitos, which are similar to empanadas and filled with meat; and quipes (pronounced key-pays), which are deep-fried bulgur rolls.

“They’re low-sodium,” Ms. Mercedes is quick to point out, gesturing to a plate of warm quipes, which she stores in a commercial freezer in her kitchen. She usually sells them at church for \$10 a dozen.

But the family has had trouble keeping up, despite the income Mr. Lora brought in for several months last year as a part-time cook at Yankee Stadium.

Last January, Mr. Lora approached Todd Herrell, the assistant director of college access and support at CUNY Prep, a transitional high school in the Bronx, and confided that he might have to leave school and get a full-time job to help his parents. They had fallen behind on the \$942-a-month rent after Mr. Mercedes was laid off from his position as a building superintendent. And they cut back: “We pretty much had to cancel everything,” including cable service and Internet access, at their two-bedroom on Belmont Avenue, Mr. Lora said.

“We had to help,” Mr. Herrell recalled. Mr. Lora’s appeal turned out to be well timed. The school, which helps students who have dropped out of regular high school get into college, had just entered a partnership with the Community Service Society of New York, one of the seven beneficiary agencies of The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund. Mr. Lora was the first to receive grant money: in this case, \$3,700 for the back rent. Since then, the list of needy students has grown to 30.

“We want to spend our money wisely, and it was not even a second thought with Emilio,” Mr. Herrell said. “He never missed a day” of classes, he added. “In our population of students, that’s rare.”

Bringing family problems to an outsider was not easy for Mr. Lora, but he said that opening up lifted a weight from his shoulders. “I felt bad, because I don’t want to see my parents go through so much,” he said. “There were times I used to think I should just join the Army.”

Instead, Mr. Lora finished up at CUNY Prep and enrolled at Hostos Community College in September, and is studying business. He wants to transfer to Millersville University of Pennsylvania, and after that, “I see myself owning restaurants and hotels.” He paused for a moment before adding, “I’ve got to take it one step at a time.”

But most important, Mr. Lora never wants his mother and father to worry about money again.

“I want to work very hard to build the house she always wanted,” he said, looking over at his mother, who was clad in a smart jacket-and-skirt set. “She just wants a house, not too big, that she can be comfortable in.”

Mr. Lora’s parents still struggle with the rent, often paying it a couple of weeks late each month. But because of the grant they received, “they don’t stress as much as before,” Mr. Lora said, and smiled.