

NEW YORK:

Healthier and happier in a Habitat house

Measuring time is easier, or at least more visual, when children are involved. A woman photographed at 31 doesn't look dramatically changed at 36. But the difference between an infant and a 5-year-old is a striking reminder of the passage of time.

And to a family in trouble, five years can be a lifetime.

This past summer, Candace George and her five children marked their five-year anniversary in a tidy brick Habitat row house in the historic, once notorious neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Before they teamed up with Habitat for Humanity, the George family lived in a one-bedroom, fifth-floor walk-up, where the rats were such a familiar presence, the children gave them names.

At the time, the whole family — mom; daughter Soudea, then 12; son Pryce-Gary, 7; twins Elizabeth and Elijah, 5; and baby Daniel — shared one big bed.

It wasn't the overcrowding or even the rat and roach infestation, though, that was most alarming about the family's living situation. The ramshackle apartment, it turns out, was killing them.

Daniel, as an infant, was the most vulnerable. Several times, his mother had to rush him to the hospital after he started wheezing and gasping for breath. Doctors quickly diagnosed a serious asthmatic condition, but no one seemed to know why Daniel would relapse as soon as he went home.

"Within two weeks of getting out of the hospital, he would be sick again," his mother remembers. "We couldn't figure out why.

"I called the health department, and they sent a kit to test the water," she says. "That wasn't it. Then an inspector came out and said, 'Oh, my God.' Every window we had was covered with black mold. That's what was causing him to get sick."

George had already been accepted as a Habitat partner and had begun earning sweat equity toward her future home. But the family's discomfort was now a life-threatening crisis, and so Habitat New York City responded quickly, finding a temporary home for George and her children in Queens until their row house in Bedford-Stuy could be finished.

"Even during that temporary stay, Daniel was so much better," George says. "And since we've moved here, I've had his nebulizers up on the shelf. We don't need them anymore."

Mama always sets the standard. She went to college, so now I have to go to college and law school. She owns a house, so I have to own a house, too. I can't go back on everything she's accomplished."

— SOUDEA GEORGE

The tall bookcase in the family's comfortably cluttered front room is lined with textbooks and LSAT manuals, signs of Soudea's interests and also her mother's. George has worked for 13 years as a welfare fraud investigator for the city's Department of Social Services. She has a bachelor's degree from John Jay College of Criminal Justice at the City University of New York, which she earned when Soudea was a baby. Someday, George would like to go to law school herself and specialize in public interest law.

The closeness of this family is obvious, and it is flexible enough to expand when others need help. This house on Willoughby Ave-

nue has provided temporary shelter for two young cousins, at two separate times, who were having trouble in their own homes. And now the family has grown permanently to include Pryce-Gary's 20-year-old half-brother, Donald Turner.

"Mama has used this house to help a lot of people," says Soudea.

"Mama always sets the standard," she adds. "She went to college, so now I have to go to college and law school. She owns a house, so I have to own a house, too. I can't go back on everything she's accomplished."

On this particular afternoon, Daniel, who has grown into an

exceptionally talkative 5-year-old, has been supremely focused on a coloring book, singing some unrecognizable song to himself and occasionally weighing in on the conversation going on around him or interjecting some fact on the Brazilian rainforest or black panthers.

Secure at home, surrounded by family, he is the picture of health — and of unlimited possibility.

By Teresa K. Weaver, a senior writer/editor for Habitat for Humanity International

Habitat homeowner Candace George (center) is surrounded by four of her children (clockwise from top): Pryce-Gary, 12; Soudea, 17; Elijah, 10; and Daniel, 5 (daughter Elizabeth, 10, is not pictured); and Donald Turner, Pryce-Gary's half-brother. The family has lived in a Habitat row house in Brooklyn, N.Y., since the summer of 2003.



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