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An Aspiring Actor Refuses to Be Defined by His Past

The Neediest Cases

By KENNETH ROSEN NOV. 13, 2015

To hear Michael Terry tell it, everything about his life seemed difficult. But anything was possible.

Like others who have come to New York City with big dreams, Mr. Terry, 31, hoped one day he would be a star on Broadway. He wanted to sing as he had since childhood in church and in school choirs, or along with his mother while listening to the radio.

Mr. Terry survived many troubles: emancipation from his mother's care as a teenager, attending two high schools, living in a foster family, a failed year at Ohio State University, assaults by a clergy member when he was young, and days spent homeless on the streets of New York.

Instead of focusing on his own strife, Mr. Terry likes to point out that others have suffered worse hardships. What is ahead of him matters most — a lifelong dream of becoming a working actor.

“I still have those daydreams,” he said, recounting the lonely one-way bus ride from his hometown to Manhattan years ago. His few friends called him crazy. No one who lived in public housing, especially someone who lived in foster care, made it out without trouble following them, they told him.

He arrived in Manhattan in fall 2005 with \$25 in his pocket. He returned to Ohio a little more than a year later after accelerating through and graduating from the two-year performing arts program. He was 24, and no longer got the financial support of loans, tuition assistance or \$150 weekly checks from his mother, but he wanted to return to New York to start his career. The city then seemed much larger.

“I didn’t go to the shelter in the beginning, so I was walking around sort of like staying on the street, on stairwells, anywhere I could,” he said.

Eventually he found the Create Young Adult Center, which referred him to Harlem Congregations for Community Improvement, which helped place Mr. Terry into federal Section 8 subsidized housing and helped him find a job. To save money, he walked last winter from his Harlem apartment on West 153rd Street to his stockroom associate job at the Aeropostale clothing store between West 44th and 45th Streets.

Harlem Congregations for Community Improvement referred Mr. Terry to the Community Service Society, one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund. The society drew \$3,547.45 from the fund for rent, overdue utility payments and five monthly MetroCards for Mr. Terry to help him commute to work and go to job interviews.

He works two jobs — overnight at the clothing retailer and at a call center in Midtown — while auditioning and singing when time allows.

“I have to do what I have to do to make it,” he said. “I have this dream I’ve got to take care of.”

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