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NY TIMES NEEDIEST CASES

After Years of Instability, an Illness Is in Check and a Mother Reconnects With a Son

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Margaret Silvestri, left, and Jillian Brown, a caseworker, shopped for clothes. Ms. Brown works at Metro House, where Ms. Silvestri lives

By **EMILY VASQUEZ**

Margaret Silvestri stopped getting out of bed altogether when her son was about 11 years old. She had been experiencing symptoms of depression for years, but this was a breakdown. Her son, Mark Silvestri, called relatives for help.

“She started to scream and cry,” Mr. Silvestri, now 26, said. “She was thinking I was calling them to get her.” But he made the calls, he said, mostly because there was no food in the apartment and he did not know what to do.

As her depression worsened, Ms. Silvestri spent her days shedding quiet tears, leaving her son to cook for himself. Their apartment was rarely cleaned.

“I was always crying,” Ms. Silvestri, now 53, recalled of the time before her breakdown. “I knew something was wrong.”

After her son called for help, Ms. Silvestri was hospitalized at Jacobi Medical Center for several weeks in 1991. Meanwhile, her son stayed with his aunt and uncle for months, realizing how different life could be outside his mother’s Bronx apartment.

In her life, Ms. Silvestri had suffered a number of medical problems, yet it was only depression that seemed overwhelming, she said.

She was born prematurely and soon received a diagnosis of hydrocephalus, an abnormal buildup of fluid on the brain. She was 8 months old when she had surgery to correct the problem. She was also born blind in her right eye.

Nevertheless, she played softball as a child, though her father refused to watch her games out of fear that she would get hurt, she said.

When she became depressed in her late teens, Ms. Silvestri said she thought about suicide and twice asked her brother to take her to a hospital before she harmed herself.

To cope with her depression, she went into counseling. Meanwhile, she took typing and business math courses and eventually got a job at a Manhattan insurance company and an apartment in the Bronx.

But, at 27, her depression returned after she gave birth to her son. Four years later, it got worse after she had a second child, whom she gave up for adoption.

With the help of medications her doctors prescribed, Ms. Silvestri said she seemed to move beyond her depression at times, but it returned periodically, and her struggle left little structure for her growing son.

By the time Mr. Silvestri reached his teenage years, he often refused to go to school and his temper would flare violently, she said.

“He was always angry,” Ms. Silvestri remembered. “I couldn’t understand why.”

Unsure of how to help him, Ms. Silvestri sent her son, then 13, to live at Children’s Village, a boarding home in Dobbs Ferry, N.Y., where he remained for about two years.

When he returned to live with her, his anger had subsided and their relationship improved, but their peace was short-lived. In 1999 they were evicted from their apartment after falling behind in rent and had to leave most of their possessions behind.

Afterward, they spent two years in a Brooklyn shelter and then another two years in a shelter in the Bronx, in each sharing a single bedroom.

During that time, Ms. Silvestri began experiencing mood swings. At one point she called the police on her son, who was forced to move out of the shelter and live with friends for a while.

In 2003 she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder at Lincoln Medical and Mental Health Center, where she remained for treatment for two months.

In the meantime, her son, who had since returned to live at the shelter, had secured steady work with a general contractor. He later decided to get his own apartment, and he also pulled away from Ms. Silvestri emotionally.

When Ms. Silvestri was ready to leave the hospital, social workers there helped her secure a room at Metro House on University Avenue in the Bronx, which serves once homeless, mentally ill people and is run by the Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty. The council is affiliated with the [UJA-Federation of New York](#), one of seven agencies supported by The [New York Times Neediest Cases Fund](#).

Ms. Silvestri has furnished her small room at Metro House with a telephone, a television and a small refrigerator with income from Social

Security disability and the help of her son, who was married in 2004 and has slowly begun to reach out to her. She shares a bathroom and kitchen with other residents on her floor.

On her walls, she has taped up pictures of her relatives and a certificate of membership to her nearby church, where she is an usher.

This winter, social workers at Metro House helped Ms. Silvestri buy warm clothing, including a coat, with \$300 from Neediest Cases.

“I’m comfortable, I’m happy to be here,” Ms. Silvestri said, adding that she could not afford an apartment and that she knows living with her son is not an option.

Ms. Silvestri said she would like to talk to him more often.

“I was a half-good mother and a half-bad mother,” she said, but added that her son has not been unforgiving. “He told me at one point he understood what I was going through as a single mother; that it was hard.”