

## BIG CITY

## *She Escaped Sex Work for College. Now the Virus Threatens Her New Life.*

Her dorm closed for the quarantine. In a month she ages out of foster care. What happens when there is no safety net?



By **Ginia Bellafante**

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Last fall, toward the end of her first semester in college, Destiny Moura turned in a paper for an English composition class in which she described her introduction, at the age of 14, to “the life.” The “life” referred to the exploitation of girls by pimps, traffickers, manipulators.

In Destiny’s case, these abuses brought to conclusion a childhood that never had any proper beginning. A great deal of instability preceded this point; so much sadness and shame followed. But by the end of last year, Destiny, at 20, had rebuilt herself, as a student at Borough of Manhattan Community College with a grade-point average of 3.4.

The journey was accompanied by rewards both internal and external — she loved her coursework and the people she met. She even loved her commute to the BMCC campus in TriBeCa from a group home north of the city where she was in foster care. In January, through the Dormitory Project, an initiative designed to help children in New York City’s foster system succeed in college, Destiny was given the most meaningful of these new gifts a place of her own — a room at a residential hotel, with other students, in Midtown Manhattan.

The apartments she had shared with her family growing up in the Bronx were marked by the chaos of addiction. Her new room was quiet and serene, with a view of the Empire State Building. The joy of occupying it ended abruptly in March, when the emergence of Covid emptied dorms around the world, leaving Destiny with no obvious or adequate place to go.

Returning to the group home in Pleasantville was not a lasting solution. On June 11, Destiny will turn 21 — the age at which most children are discharged from foster care in New York State, largely leaving behind the structure and services it provides. Embarking on a grown up life during a pandemic has only further complicated the profound challenges of making the transition from foster care to independence, one that under ordinary circumstances too often leads to unemployment and homelessness.

“Even young people who seemed to have rock-solid plans for life after foster care are seeing those plans evaporate,” Kerry Moles, the executive director of CASA, an organization of volunteers that helps children in foster care, told me. Many 20-year-olds in the system also have children of their own, who are now further at risk.

Fearing a surge in these bleak outcomes, late last month, a group of lawyers who advocate for children in poverty, wrote to Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, asking him to issue an executive order suspending terminations from foster care for 180 days during the current crisis. Several other states, including California and Rhode Island, had already done something similar. So far, no action has been taken.

The coronavirus outbreak has derailed a beleaguered child-welfare system in varied ways, all of them disturbing. It has separated imperiled children from the teachers and administrators who are required to report suspicions of abuse; contracted the family-court system to virtual hearings held only in the most dire cases; halted the important visits between birth mothers and the children whose custody they are training to regain.

But there is a distinct tragedy in the narrative of reversal — of young people so close to the threshold of transformation suddenly watching the line pulled away to a future no one can foresee.

Given only two days to vacate her dorm room, Destiny went back home, to the one-bedroom apartment she had shared with her father, an alcoholic, and his sister before she entered foster care at 17.

“What is so heartbreaking about Destiny’s situation is that she worked so hard and then through no fault of her own is brought right back to the source of her trauma,” Rachel Lloyd, the founder of GEMS, an organization that helps sexually exploited girls, told me. “I’ve seen such a drop in her level of confidence.”

The first time I spoke with Destiny, she sounded buoyant, hopeful. “I know I am not where I am supposed to be,” she said. The next time, a day later, she seemed despondent, remote.

Ms. Lloyd, who has been speaking to her girls via Zoom during this period of confinement, said she can hear shouting in the background when she meets with Destiny. During one of these sessions, the support of the others was strong but limited. “Girls in the group were saying, ‘You’ve got this Desie; you can do it,’” Ms. Lloyd said. “But she hangs up the Zoom call, and she is right where she started.”

Destiny had lived apart from her mother, whose own life had been given over to drugs. Her aunt had told her that one day, her mother had dropped her off for a visit and never returned. Whether or not this was true seemed unclear to Destiny. By the time she was in sixth grade, her problems were compounded by bullying at school. In ninth grade she was expelled from a charter school for getting into a fight. A succession of different schools followed, none of them had ignited any interest in learning.

The comforts of “the life” had come to seem greater than the comforts of home, she told me. Prostitution brought her things. “At home I wasn’t cared for; I needed money,” she said. “A lot of the women who were in the life felt OK about it and they were mother figures to me.” It would take time for her to see what a mistake it was to elevate them that way.

Throughout all of this, with each new school, Destiny told me, “I would hope for a moment of enlightenment.”

Not long before her 19th birthday that epiphany finally came; she cannot explain it. Certain realizations had accumulated and were driving her forward. “It was a month or two of the same dingy hotel rooms, the back of people’s cars. I’d never seen myself like this,” she told me. “I needed to give my potential the moment it deserved.”

Her first stint at the group home in Westchester two years earlier had gone poorly. She would take off, either with friends or alone and rebel. She returned to the life. But now she had resolved to make changes and she quickly took the necessary steps. She called her social worker, left the Bronx, returned to the group home, followed the rules once she was there, got her high-school equivalency degree and enrolled at BMCC.

“I was still fighting the other me, but every day I pushed and pushed,” she said. “I fell in love with myself, I was getting up early, sleeping at night. I was on Metro North going somewhere.”

Among the well-off, there is little commitment to the idea that adulthood actually begins at 21. Around the country, in recent weeks, children have returned home from college to their own rooms, to privacy for remote learning, to parents who will bake a pie or roast a salmon or wash a sweater on demand.

Destiny’s next date in family court is in a few weeks. She hopes the system will find a way to accommodate her — she needs stable housing, braces for her teeth — but she isn’t sure that it will.

“I’ve had no kids, no pregnancies, no abortions,” she told me. “I did a 180 and I want to be accounted for.”

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