

"I Don't Have the White Picket Fence—Yet"



Clockwise from lower right: Diaz (left) with Moore, Cindy and Kenneth; the kids with baby Laniyah; in the kitchen; the dream house on Cedar Street

Maria Diaz bravely battled cancer while struggling to raise two children by herself. Then Habitat gave them the home of their dreams BY ANNE CASSIDY

ed more for her child, and soon returned to New Haven, settling into the cramped attic of that cramped two-bedroom apartment. After completing coursework to become a certified nurse's assistant, she felt she was finally on track.

Then, at 22, she found a lump in her breast. After the biopsy revealed cancer, Diaz endured months of radiation and chemotherapy, and the lump shrank. But new challenges awaited her: She had a son, Kenneth, in 1989, but the relationship with his father quickly faltered. Soon after, Kenneth began to have difficulties walking and talking. While watching TV in the doctor's waiting room during his 18-month checkup, Diaz saw a public service announcement about lead poisoning. "I'd never heard of it," Diaz says, but asked that Kenneth be tested anyway. It turned out that the level of lead in his blood was so high that he was whisked straight to the hospital. When doctors told her that Kenneth would

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Late at night, when she couldn't fall asleep in the crowded two-bedroom apartment she shared with her baby and three friends in New Haven, Connecticut, Maria Diaz would sketch her dream house. It was small, only one story, with a big lawn and a white picket fence. "I hoped and prayed that one day I could actually own one," Diaz says. "And I don't mean just the house, but the *feeling* of a family, too."

That was back in 1984, when Diaz, then 18, moved back to New Haven in order to be near her family. Two years before that, the plucky

teenager had sold everything she owned to move from New Haven to Brooklyn, New York, where she had been born and where she thought she could get a job—and more of a life. At first she lived with her older brother, but when he moved, Diaz stayed behind, scraping by on low-wage jobs such as cashier and sales clerk. Then she gave birth to daughter Cindy in 1984, but soon ended her relationship with Cindy's father. Despite the burdens of single motherhood, Diaz continued to work and even managed to graduate high school that same year. But she want-

HABITAT FAMILY

suffer chronic asthma and learning disabilities from ingesting the peeling paint in their attic apartment, Diaz was devastated. Then, after Kenneth had undergone several months of physical therapy, Diaz came down with a sore throat. "Every time I tried to speak or swallow, it felt as if the air was being cut off," she recalls. The cancer, she would learn, had returned, this time in her throat.

Once again, she endured months of radiation and chemotherapy. Now she had two young children—and a new boyfriend, James Moore, 46, a musician—to live for. She lost most of her long, dark hair, could barely eat and was constantly tired. Somehow, she found the strength to keep up her routine of caring for her children, taking Kenneth to the doctor, and teaching a computer skills class affiliated with a welfare-to-work program, where she had done so well as a student that she was asked to become an instructor. In 1994, she, Cindy and Kenneth moved into a two-bedroom apartment, but there was drug traffic in the neighborhood, and the faulty heating—it rarely reached 65 degrees—aggravated Kenny's asthma. "There were days I was ashamed to go out, but coping with cancer made me strong," she says. Finally, the tumor began to shrink.

And Diaz kept looking ahead. In 1996, she earned a degree in business administration from Gateway Community College by attending night classes, and got a job in the front office of a construction company. When a friend from work told her about Habitat for Humanity in the fall of 2002, Diaz applied, attended an orientation meeting and was interviewed by the local affiliate. After becoming a partner that December, she threw herself into

the required 400 hours of sweat equity. Once Diaz selected her own home, a renovated, two-story, three-bedroom house in the historic Trowbridge Square area, the fun really began. "I complained so much about wanting to use power tools," she recalls, "that they finally said, 'Here, go ahead.'" She put a \$400 down payment on the house, which was finished just before Christmas 2003.

Diaz's struggles have not ended. Kenneth, 14, who now attends a special school for his learning disabilities, requires a lot of counseling and speech therapy. Diaz still supports Cindy, now 19, who has a 14-month-old daughter, Laniyah. And her parents are having health and employment problems of their own. "There's no time for fun," says Diaz, who works full time as a scheduler for the Family Care Visiting Nurse Agency and continues to volunteer for Habitat. She also sees Moore frequently; in fact, the couple recently became engaged.

"Maria doesn't talk about her problems," says Sue Sigler-Popkin, executive director of the Greater New Haven affiliate. "Her attitude is, 'Enjoy what you have.'" What Diaz is most thankful for is her health—she's been in remission for years—and her home on Cedar Street, where she's already planning to convert the attic into a playroom. She's come a long way from the days when she used to sketch her dream house on a sheet of paper. This one she's gutted, framed, walled, and painted; she's filled it with family and friends. "I don't have the white picket fence yet," Diaz says with a laugh. "But give me time. I'll put it up." ♡

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