

The New York Times

November 23, 2009

THE NEEDIEST CASES

Feeding a Hunger for Skills, and Finding a Future

By [MICHAEL WILSON](#)

This year, the numbers of those feeling themselves among the neediest have stretched, like the wallets of the city itself. To the ranks of those who have needed food, or clothing, or a place to live, or a prosthetic limb, or an electric wheelchair, add Dion Lewis. He needed a job. He needed training he could not afford. He needed to have his daughter see him reach a goal by sheer, stubborn persistence.

Her name is Shardei Lewis, 18, and it's just the two of them in the apartment in Weeksville, Brooklyn. He tears up a little, sometimes, when he talks about her, but he doesn't talk down to her as if she's a child. "I never stopped letting her know that it's not all peaches and cream," he said.

Mr. Lewis, 39, had a seasonal job last year at [Battery Park City Parks Conservancy](#), as a maintenance worker. The agency let him go for the winter, but Mr. Lewis was intrigued by what he had learned on the job about green technology, and he attended a lecture at the [New York City College of Technology](#) late last year. A speaker described a training class.

"I didn't want to embarrass myself in front of the class, so I followed her to her car," Mr. Lewis recalled. "I asked, 'How can one get funding for this if they can't afford it?' " The speaker, Wendy Fleischer, a sustainability project manager from [Pratt Center for Community Development](#), told him to keep in touch.

He did, and she directed him to another agency, the [Fifth Avenue Committee](#) in Brooklyn, which in turn pointed him to the [Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies](#), one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund. In March, the agency paid Mr. Lewis's \$1,245 tuition for training to become a building analyst. The course was taught at [Bronx Community College](#), where Mr. Lewis learned how to analyze a building for its energy efficiency.

He was immediately fascinated. "Learning is like air, like food," he said. "To me, this is like a second chance on life. So I'm so hungry."

He has made mistakes that he has vowed never to repeat. He was arrested twice out of state for selling drugs when he was 19 and 23, "trying to put food on the table," he said. He has been working ever since.

He learned to weatherize a house, starting with the doors and windows. He learned how to operate a blower door, a tool that measures how airtight a building is after the rest of the house is sealed.

During the course, the students took a field trip to an apartment building on West 158th Street in Washington Heights. Once again, he waited before making his move on the sidewalk: The class met the contractor, Leroy Anthony, with the [Community Environmental Center](#), and when Mr. Lewis saw an opportunity, he stepped forward and asked for a business card.

“I called Leroy,” he said. “Persistent, persistent. I’ve seen the future, where this is going. The world is getting a makeover.”

Finally a job opened up for Mr. Lewis in September. He has worked in buildings in Flatbush, Canarsie and Bushwick, Brooklyn, and in Ozone Park, Queens, and a visit in October found him working at the very same building his class visited on the field trip.

The sprinkler system had turned on and damaged the walls. Mr. Lewis, dressed head to toe in a white protective suit and wearing a mask, was part of a team pumping GreenFiber insulation into the walls.

The job got him off unemployment. He pays \$479.73 a month in rent for an apartment that has been in the family for most of his life, but he fell behind in payments and said he was struggling to catch up.

His training was a blessing and a curse: Now he could see everything wrong with his own apartment: the mold behind the walls, the lead in the paint. “You never look straight ahead anymore,” he said. “You look up, side to side. I don’t take anything for granted anymore. It’s like the matrix has been revealed to me.”

He hopes to one day start his own company and call it Green Life Maintenance. “The only way I can show my gratitude,” he said, “is to employ someone who’s taken the same path I have.”

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