

Waiting on the World to Change

The Hopes, Dreams and Hardships of Children in America's Most Dangerous City

By JOSEPH DIAZ

Jan. 25, 2007 — Abandoned homes, empty lots, gunfire, police sirens. These are the sights and sounds of Camden, N.J.

Camden has been named America's most dangerous city twice by City Crime Rankings, an annual reference book. During the 2005 Christmas holidays, there were four slayings in 48 hours, all too characteristic of a place with a murder rate more than seven times the national average.

A typical morning in Camden, detractors say, could see 33 drug busts in less than three hours. Crack, heroin and marijuana are the currency of the streets, making up by some estimates a \$43 million industry.

Imagine trying to survive in this environment. Now imagine being a child, struggling to thrive.

Three young citizens allowed "20/20" to document their lives for 18 months: 6-year-old Moochie, who promised to get straight As in school; Billy Joe, a teenager determined to be the first in his family to graduate high school; and a homeless 4-year-old, Ivan, who had one big dream: "I want my room, and I'm never gonna get it."

In a park, the "20/20" team met Ivan Stevens; his mother, Precious; and his little brother, Imere. Sometimes they spent the whole day dirty, hungry and homeless, with no place to go.

The owner of an illegal boarding house occasionally gave them a place to sleep. He padlocked the refrigerator to keep them from taking food, and all three of them slept on one chair, surrounded by clutter and roaches.

Ivan wished he could be Superman and fly on someone's back to find his family a home. "Superman" had also heard of kindergarten.

"I wanna go to school so bad. I wanna read," Ivan said excitedly on the first day of school.

On the way to school, though, reality set in, and Ivan realized that for the first

time he'd be without his mother's protection. He was also afraid that the other kids would be mean to him, and he started to cry.

"It's alright. ... You can be scared," his mother said. "But you gotta be a big boy. I'm not going to ever leave you where you [are] not welcome."

The teacher welcomed Ivan to the class, and he reluctantly said goodbye to his mother. A school administrator sat down and helped him get started.

"Do you know your threes?" asked the school district supervisor. Ivan easily counted the three wheels on the tricycle, but he was stumped when asked how many meals you are supposed to eat in a day.

Ivan, who has gone to school without eating breakfast, was puzzled. The words *lunch* and *dinner* seemed foreign to him. In fact, at the end of the day, when commenting on how great kindergarten was, he proudly showed the extra juice box he was able to take with him.

"I'm not going to cry no more, and I'm going to be a big boy," he said, noting that he also had eaten cheese with bread and applesauce.

In another part of town, 17-year-old Billy Joe Marrero was fighting the temptation to make easy drug money, and struggled to fulfill his wish of being the first in his family to graduate from high school.

"I'm very worried about my grades," he said. "I'm very scared. ... I don't want to be a failure to myself and to my family. My father deserves to see me graduate."

It was Billy Joe's critical senior year, and his grades were rocky. If he didn't pass one of his English classes, his graduation would be in jeopardy. His teachers said, "He'd be miles past everybody" if he applied himself.

But Billy Joe's stress didn't end at school. There wasn't much electricity or heat in his house, and sometimes his family used the stove and oven to stay warm at night.

Food was also scarce. On one occasion, his toddler nieces were without milk, but poverty breeds ingenuity, and containers of coffee shop half-and-half were poured into their bottle.

Luckily, Billy Joe worked at a fast-food chain in a neighboring town, where he could get a free meal and also earn some money.

"I feel the obligation to help my father out," he said. "'Cause I know that he can't do it all by himself."

At 10:30 p.m., Billy Joe boarded the bus back home, where his homework was still waiting for him. Always in the back of his mind was the knowledge that he would have to wake up at 6 a.m. the next day and do it all over again.

"Greatness requires sacrifice," he said.

Elsewhere in Camden, "20/20" met 6-year-old Andriana Rodriguez, who goes by the nickname "Moochie."

She took "20/20" on a matter-of-fact tour through her neighborhood and playground.

"Don't fall," she said. "You might get stuck by the needles. The drug dealers come and put a whole lot of needles in here. The killer ones, the raper ones, they're evil people."

Her home life was also something of a war zone, with her parents battling constantly, often about her father's drinking problem. All Moochie could do was cover her ears to try to block the arguments.

Jamie, Moochie's dad, drinks a six-pack of beer and a pint of vodka nightly, stashing the evidence under the couch. He said he didn't think his kids noticed,

but his daughter certainly knew that something was wrong.

School provided the sole sanctuary for Moochie, who vowed to get straight As and graduate from college.

"Please stop drinking," Moochie said affectionately to her father while hugging him. "I love you!"

After nearly two weeks in rehab, Jamie returned home, but days later was back to his old habits. After staying sober for just ten days, Jaime was placed in a long-term mental facility.

"My dad didn't change, not one bit," says an angry Moochie. The family situation has taken a toll on her, and she now suffers from migraines. But through it all, Moochie has not given up her dream of becoming a judge.

Billy attended summer classes earning that elusive high school diploma and the family's power has finally been turned back on. He will be attending community college and still has his sights set on greatness.

Ivan told us his Christmas wish was a house with "bathrooms, food in the refrigerator, cabinets, bread, chocolate pudding, curtains, lights and a heater."

While Santa's elves did come through with some toys for Ivan, his reaction was "he forgot to get me a house."

Despite the constant rejection and disappointment, Ivan remains positive that one day he will finally get that house.