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As a child **KHADIJAH WILLIAMS** had a secret. While classmates went home at night, she checked in at a shelter with drug addicts and mentally ill people. But she fought the odds to realize her goal of enrolling in one of the most prestigious colleges in the country. From the Harvard University campus **JEANNINE AMBER** tells this young woman's incredible story

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HASSAN KINLEY

# A Homeless



HAIR: ADELINE CHARLES, MAKEUP: KIM BOWER/EXCLUSIVE ARTIST MANAGEMENT, PHOTO ASSISTANT: CHRIS MOREL

She could be any college freshman, walking across her quiet, tree-lined campus with a book bag slung across her shoulder. "It's so great to meet you," Khadijah Williams exclaims cheerfully as she arrives for breakfast at a quaint Cambridge, Massachusetts, restaurant, where she orders a smoked salmon omelet on a croissant. Outside it is a bleak and rainy February morning, yet Khadijah's enthusiasm seems boundless as she speaks about her school, her friends and the debate team. But ask her about her childhood, and she stops short. Khadijah, 19, looks off in the distance, then apologizes. "There's so much of it I've blocked out," she says. "I've had to push a lot of my past away."

For most of her life, Khadijah has been homeless. Currently 1.5 million children in the country are without a permanent place to live, a number that experts predict will grow under the weight of the recession, which is affecting African-Americans more than any other group. Khadijah knows all too well the rootlessness of this particular American story. "We lived in an apartment at first," she remembers. "I was about 4. But then my mother couldn't afford the rent, so we moved into a shelter."

For years, the family shuffled from one facility to another, in and around Los Angeles. "I've lived in San Diego, Orange County, San Bernardino, Santa Ana, Ventura County, San Pedro," she rattles off. "Sometimes we got money from welfare. When we didn't, my mother would redeem cans and bottles or stand in line for the dollar man"—a clergyman who would give one or two dollars to homeless people at the shelter each week. Other times Khadijah's mother would do temporary manual labor. Money was always scarce and housing transient. Often, on a moment's notice, Khadijah's mother would announce to her and her younger sister, now 12, that the family had to pack up and move. Maybe their time had run out at a temporary shelter, or maybe she sensed the conditions were becoming unsafe. The girls would hurriedly stuff their belongings into plastic trash bags and board a city bus in search of a new facility, often in a different school district.

Despite such upheavals, Khadijah has accomplished a goal many girls her age can only dream of reaching: In May she completed her freshman year at top-ranked Harvard University. Khadijah, who receives financial aid, just shrugs when you ask her how she did it. She says that going to Harvard was the plan all along.

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A 2009 report by the Campaign to End Child Homelessness notes that the nation's one in 50 children without a home will likely endure a multitude of impediments to education—a lack of structure, lost school records, poor physical and mental health and high absenteeism. Many of these students will lack even the most basic of requirements—from school supplies that are stolen in the night to clean clothes to put on in the morning. For homeless children, getting through high school is a feat in and of itself. Three out of four never graduate.

But for Khadijah, school was a refuge, a reminder that outside the shelter was a world filled with possibility. "People focus on the material things you don't have when you're homeless," she says now. "But a lot of the challenge for homeless children is psychological. No matter how nice a shelter is, you never feel safe, and all you see around you are people who are down on their luck. It's not the kind of atmosphere that makes you think big. Books helped me escape all of that." And so Khadijah read—the backs of cereal boxes, old copies of *Reader's Digest* that she would find at the shelters and any books she could get her hands on. *Black Beauty*, the story of a horse that is shunted from one owner to another, was one of her favorites.

"There's been a lot of discussion recently about the newly homeless," she reflects, "but what people don't talk about is that once you get inside this cycle, it's very hard to see a way out. I think that's what happened to my mom." But Khadijah grasped early on that education meant opportunity. "There were times that I couldn't go to classes because we were moving around so much," says Khadijah, who missed her entire first grade year. "Sometimes I would cry about it. But the first thing that my mom did when we were in a new place was enroll me. She saw that school was really important to me. She would use her last money to do laundry to make sure I had clean clothes to wear, so I didn't feel self-conscious. She always had my back." ▸

# Girl's Dream

## A HOMELESS GIRL'S DREAM



"In high school, there were times I couldn't get my papers in on time because my textbooks would get stolen," recalls Khadijah, here reading in the campus bookstore.

home during rush hour was even longer. But she soldiered on. She'd balance her books on her lap and do her homework on the bus. And sometimes, after lights out at the shelter, she would slip into the hallway or bathroom to study.

**“My life was proof that I could succeed, no matter what.”**

Among the residents of the shelters Khadijah became known as the girl who was trying to make something of herself. Not everyone was supportive. “Some people would say, ‘What makes you think you’re so special?’” she remembers. “Or they would tell lies about me to my mother, like I was working as a prostitute, when I was really at the library.” But others seemed to take an almost proprietary pride in her accomplishments. Khadijah recalls one time when she was standing in line for food and a man with glazed eyes started waving a dirty syringe at her. Another man stepped between them. “Get away from her,” he told the addict. “She’s going to school.”

“Men who’d been on skid row for 20, 30 years would see me and say, ‘Don’t worry, I’m looking out for you, schoolgirl.’ I don’t even think they knew my name.” But while her diligence gained her a certain profile in the shelters, it didn’t make life as a homeless student any less difficult. She recalls the smell of human waste and unwashed bodies, and the garbage and bottles and bags that people would cart around with them. And she recalls the noise.

“There were always babies crying, people yelling and cursing and fighting,” she says. “Sometimes people would be drunk. It was never quiet. There was this one woman who was constantly fighting off demons, crying for them to get off her. And another woman would drink her own urine.” She pauses. “I remember this one family would do these horrible things to their baby. I was so young when I saw it, and I didn’t think anyone would believe me if I told.” Her voice trails off. She is silent for a long time. “I can’t even talk about it,” she says finally. “I just got so good at blocking everything out, and doing all these mental aerobics in order to succeed.” And through it all, Khadijah kept reminding herself, *If I get into a good college, then I will never have to put up with this again.*

At school she was “very friendly,” but she never got so close that someone might expect an invitation to her house. “I told them my mom didn’t like visitors,” she says. “For me it was like, if I told anyone at school I was homeless, then I would have to admit to myself what was really going on. I had to disconnect from that reality in order to focus on my goal.”

Even today Khadijah’s discomfort with her past is evident. She pauses frequently as she speaks about her childhood. “I can feel myself getting tense and emotional just thinking about it,” she admits. She credits her mother, who she notes is still struggling with homelessness, for setting the foundation for her achievements. Khadijah also availed herself of every program she could find that offered academic assistance, guidance and support to low-income students. There was School on Wheels, which provided supplies and tutors, and Upward Bound and Higher Edge Scholars, which focused on preparation for college. In her junior year she linked up with South Central Scholars, >

Khadijah recalls the time in third grade when she tested in the 99th percentile on a standardized test: “The school was like, ‘Oh, this is probably a mistake.’ They didn’t really think it was possible for me to get that high a score. But my mom went in and put them straight. By standing up to the teachers, she was telling me, *I know you’re smart, don’t listen to them.* She said as long as I did my best she would be proud of me. My mom didn’t always know how to navigate the school system, but she knew her daughter. She always had high expectations of me. If she hadn’t, I don’t know where I’d be today.”

By the time Khadijah reached high school she’d been to more than half a dozen schools. She was granted gifted status while at one school, then lost it when she moved and her records were misplaced. She was absent so often, sometimes for months at a time, that she was marked as truant, and fell two grades behind.

“In eighth grade, I realized I was two years older than everybody else,” she remembers. “I stayed in that class for less than a month, then we moved to another county. When we got there my mother took me to the high school. We spoke to the administrators and they agreed to put me in the tenth grade. But I had to make up the subjects I’d missed at a community college, so for a while I was doing that along with high school. By eleventh grade I was taking honors and AP classes.”

In her junior year Khadijah was living in a shelter so far away from the school that she had to wake up at 4:30 A.M. and take three different buses to make it to her first class. The commute

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a privately funded program aimed at highly motivated but financially disadvantaged students. Randy Winston, president of student services at South Central Scholars, says he was immediately struck by Khadijah's ability to maintain her focus. "She created her own protective world that revolved around the pursuit of knowl-

**“In just one year, college has made me realize there is so much I can do.”**

edge,” he says. Winston adds that Khadijah only admitted to him she was homeless after he'd arranged for her to go to a semiformal function with some African-American alumni from Dartmouth, and she didn't have appropriate clothing. "She kept telling me her clothes were in storage. It was only after I pressed her that she finally told me the truth. She was truly embarrassed."

Winston, who picked up Khadijah at the shelter on occasion, describes the living arrangement as deplorable. "It was a situation that no one would want to be in," he says. "Her mother did her best to protect Khadijah and her younger sister, but there wasn't a whole lot of privacy. It was like a gymnasium after a disaster—just a room with a whole lot of cots lined up. Khadijah would tell me that

there were men there who would whisper obscenities to her."

But Khadijah refused to let her concentration waver. "From the moment I met her she talked about going to an Ivy League institution, where she could be challenged," recalls Winston. "Her desire has always been to go to the top." The founders of South Central Scholars, Dr. James and Patricia London, also noticed Khadijah's extraordinary ambition. They bought her a laptop and invited her to live with them during her last few months of high school.

Khadijah says she "went crazy," applying to 26 colleges in all, including Princeton, Yale, Stanford and Columbia. Instead of hiding her homelessness, during college interviews she did as her advisers had encouraged—she pointed to her life circumstances as a measure of her determination. "I told the interviewers my life was proof that I could succeed, no matter what," says Khadijah. She was accepted into 22 of the 26 colleges to which she applied.

Months later, on a warm spring day, Khadijah is dressed in crimson-colored Harvard sweats and a white T-shirt with her braids pulled up in a ponytail. With freshman year just completed, she is packing up her dorm room for the summer, folding eight loads of laundry and filing away a year's worth of class notes.

"It's not just the academics that I've appreciated here," says Khadijah, who intends to pursue a Ph.D. and perhaps a career in education policy. "I've never spent so much time just thinking about everything: class, race, diversity. Now I realize we aren't just

fighting poverty, but also the assumptions others have about Black people. At the same time, I've met so many strong, professional Black women, and they've become my role models. In just one year, college has made me realize there is so much I can do to help myself and to be more useful to society."

Ironically, Khadijah's past may have helped ease her adjustment to the Ivy League. "A lot of her peers have never faced any kind of disagreeable situation," says Rita Poussaint Nethersole, who is Khadijah's "host mother" at Harvard. "But Khadijah knows a bad situation is not the end of it all. You pick yourself up, you figure out what to do, and you keep moving. She's doggedly determined to succeed."

For the summer Khadijah is headed to New York for an internship at a company that focuses on education and technology. "If it wasn't for Harvard I probably wouldn't have this opportunity," she says. "Harvard really helps get your foot in the door. Actually," she adds with a laugh, "you can basically just walk right through the door. That's what Harvard does for you. It says, 'This person is smart and driven.' It really adds to your confidence when people already believe in you. This year hasn't been without its bumps, but I definitely wouldn't want to be anywhere else." □

**"Harvard is a microcosm for what I'll have to face in the real world," says Khadijah.**



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