

Leigh: Every set back is an opportunity for your greatest come back.

We are all living an uncertain reality today. For many, this is their first time experiencing such uncertainty. Unfortunately for my family, uncertainty was normal, long before it became the “new normal”.

Last August, my children and I faced homelessness for the first time. We were fortunate to find emergency shelter at People’s Emergency Center (PEC), in West Philly. I didn’t know places like this existed, until we needed one. I used to think that homeless people lived on the street or in their cars. I was surprised to find out that it really can happen to anyone. I was a college student, and employed full-time. I don’t struggle with substance abuse. I love my two boys and want to give them life’s greatest opportunities. Now I know you can have a job and still go “home” to a shelter, if there isn’t enough affordable housing available.

Sharing a room no larger than a bedroom with two other families was a challenge. My sons couldn’t sleep at first. They had never shared a living space with strangers before. I was homeschooling my oldest until we came to PEC, where the staff encouraged me to enroll him in a nearby school. He was doing better but when the quarantine started, I had to send them both to live with a relative. Separating from my sons was a very difficult decision.

In December, I was hired as a Home Healthcare Aide by a company attending PEC’s Job Fair. Because I care for homebound patients, I knew I would be considered an essential worker during Coronavirus, and couldn’t be present for my kids while school was out.

Getting to work is very difficult. Needing to stay protected and respecting physical distance, limits the number of riders allowed on public transit. Bus schedules and routes change often. I leave much earlier to get there on time, and can still be late sometimes. On the way to work, I see many people sleeping in the subway stations. I really feel for them.

When I arrive at my client’s home, I immediately start cleaning, and disinfecting, while wearing a mask and gloves. I wash my hands so often, my skin is cracking. I know that my clients need me—and I need this job. This job is essential to helping us get back on our feet. I feel blessed because I can keep working and saving for an apartment during quarantine. Other families in the shelter aren’t as lucky. With the current health crisis, finding a job is more challenging than ever.

After work, I’m careful not to spread germs to any of the other residents. I wash up and video chat with my boys—it really brightens my day to see them doing well. I want to hug them again. I also spend a few minutes looking for an apartment. Though, many apartments I can afford don’t accept families. To stay healthy in the shelter, we rotate in shifts during mealtime, with no more than five families at a time allowed in the cafeteria. Sometimes I eat a little later than usual.

I work hard to be optimistic and appreciate my blessings. I am determined to not give up on my goals for 2020: to be in my own home again with my boys, and to enroll in a certification program so that I can

serve my patients better and earn more for my family. This setback is going to be my greatest comeback.