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Angela Whitiker's Climb  
By ISABEL WILKERSON

CHICAGO, June 10 - Angela Whitiker arrived early and rain-soaked at a suburban school building with a carton of sugar water in her purse and a squall in her stomach. It was the small hours of the morning, when the parking lot was empty and the street lights were still on. There she was alone in the darkness for the biggest test of her life.

If she passed, she could shed the last layer of her former self - the teenage girl who grew up too fast, dropped out in the 10th grade, and landed aimless and on public assistance with five children by nearly as many men.

She would finally be the registered nurse she had been striving toward for years. She could get a car that wouldn't break down in the middle of the Dan Ryan Expressway. She could get an A.T.M. card and balance her checkbook and start paying down her bills and save up for that two-story colonial on Greenwood that was already hers in her dreams.

She would never again have to live in that gang-run nightmare of a place, the Robert Taylor housing projects - where she packed a .38 for protection - or in Section 8 housing or in any government-subsidized anything. Her children could be proud of her and go on to make something of themselves too, once she proved it could be done.

But if she didn't pass. ...

She couldn't think about that. And so, as she would often tell the story later, she got up before dawn and made herself some oatmeal and a hard-boiled egg and toast and got to the testing site for the state licensing boards for registered nurses two hours before the test began.

She had never been good at tests. All through nursing school, she agonized the night before an exam, overstudying the charts and graphs, termites dropping from the ceiling onto her physiology books, mice crawling at her feet, and her children tugging her leg to find out what was for dinner.

She had only recently become the first woman in her family with a college degree and, if everything went well this day, would be the first nurse anybody in her family knew personally.

So, she left long before she needed to that morning to avoid traffic, a missed turn, not enough gas. Once there, she sat parked in the rain trying to compose herself. She pulled out her Bible to read the 91st Psalm, the one about the Lord being her refuge. She broke out the sugar water to get glucose to the brain.

In the hallway, she avoided looking anyone in the eye. She spoke to no one. She didn't want to pick up on anyone's anxiety. She had enough of her own. She took a last drag on a Newport.

The testing room began to fill. The examiner checked her identification and assigned her computer No. 12. She drew in another deep breath as she walked to her place. She was about to sit down to take a \$256 pass-or-fail entrance exam into the American middle class.

For most of her 38 years, Angela Whitiker has been on the outside looking in at the seeming perfection of the professional classes, the people who did the college-career-wedding-house-in-the-suburbs-2.5-kids routine. Her life has been so very different from that. She was a child of the working class who, through ill-considered choices and circumstance, slipped into the welfare class and had to fight her way out.

While the rest of the country has fitfully cut back welfare and continues to debate class disparities and the barriers to mobility, Ms. Whitiker has quietly traversed several classes in a single lifetime. She has gone from welfare statistic in the early 1990's to credit-card carrying member of the middle class, a woman for whom there are now few statistics, so rare has her experience been. This is the story of her 12-year slog to the middle class and of how hard it is to stay there.

The third of five children, she was born to a mother who was a cook and to a laborer father whom, though the parents had married, she didn't meet until she was 10. She said it was a heartbreaking visit in which, smelling of whiskey, he promised to buy her a bicycle and didn't. She hasn't seen him since.

Within a few years, she was using men as a substitute for her father and her adolescent longing for him. By 15, she was pregnant with her first child. By 23, she was the mother of five children, had been married and separated, and been a casualty of the crack epidemic of the 1980's. She had lost and would later win back custody of her children, and had worked a variety of odd jobs, from sausage vendor to picking butterbeans.

At 26, she gained short-lived celebrity when she and her oldest son, Nicholas, then a 10-year-old fourth-grader with a man's obligations, were [the subjects of a profile by this reporter](#) in The New York Times, part of a 1993 series on at-risk urban young people called [Children of](#)

## the Shadows.

She, Nicholas and her four other children were living in a second-floor walk-up in Englewood, a crime-burdened neighborhood abandoned first by the white middle class and then by the black middle class that succeeded it.

For her, each day meant trying to piece together enough to take care of herself and her kids - one day petitioning the fathers for child support, the next counting what was left of her food stamps; one minute rushing to an administrator's office to get bus vouchers for school, the next bargaining with the electric company to get her lights turned back on.

To keep her family out of the projects and on what might be described as the upper rung of poverty, she had taken up with a man who worked handling baggage at O'Hare International Airport. He paid the rent and was the father of her fifth child, Johnathan. His paycheck gave her breathing room to get into a pre-nursing program at Kennedy-King Community College on the South Side.

But men never seemed to hang around that long, and it fell to Nicholas to be father to the younger children that the men in their lives seemed unwilling to be.

He was the one who washed his and his siblings' school uniforms in the bathtub at night because they each had only one set. He was the one who pulled his brother Willie out of the line of fire by the hood of his jacket when gunshots rang out in the schoolyard. And he was the one who took the blame and the beatings if something wasn't done to his mother's boyfriend's liking.

Readers responded with great outpourings of generosity after the article was published, but it was clear from the reporter's continuing contacts with the family over the years that it was not enough to materially change the basic facts of their lives. It was still a household run by a single mother with only a high school equivalency degree, no career skills, no assets and no immediate prospects for independence.

In addition, the fraying relationship between Ms. Whitiker and her boyfriend fell apart after publication of the article, and, without him to pay the rent, she fell further behind. She wound up in the only place that a woman with five children, no job and no money could get in Chicago in 1994, a cellblock of an apartment in the Robert Taylor Homes, an urban no-man's land where you could move about only when the gangs that ran the place let you. The elevators, sticky with urine, didn't work, and gunshots were background music.

From the start, Ms. Whitiker felt that it was beneath her. She looked down on the women who had grown accustomed to bullet holes over their dinette tables, who watched "All My Children" and ate Doritos all day and didn't seem to want anything better. She carried the gun to protect herself and had to use it once when, having climbed nine flights of stairs, she found some strangers playing cards at her kitchen table. She fired shots into the ceiling to get them out.

It was the lowest rung of the poverty class in America, lower in a way than the worst nights in a crack house in her early 20's, because now she was fully conscious of exactly where she was. She vowed from the very first night to get out. But she knew she couldn't make it out on public assistance. So she figured she'd get whatever job she could. She would have to put off her nursing studies.

She worked at a fast food restaurant, rising to assistant manager but never making much more than minimum wage. She worked nights as a security guard in the projects, a job that was dangerous and equally dead-end but paid a bit more.

Every day held its own kind of peril or indignity, much of it coming from her 1976 Chevrolet, which she relied on to get to and from work but was well past its natural lifespan. It had a cracked windshield and a hole rusted through the floor. It wasn't big enough for all of her children, but they piled in just the same with no thought of seatbelts, because there weren't enough anyway.

When she was coming home in the rain on the expressway one night, the defroster conked out and the windshield fogged up. "I had to stick my head out the window to drive," she said. "God drove that car that night."

One time the car caught fire because of a hole in the gasoline line. Flames shot out of the hood and into the air. Ms. Whitiker jumped out and told her sister, Michelle, riding in the passenger seat, to do the same.

"Get out of the car!" she screamed. "It's gonna blow!"

A fire truck came to put out the fire. The firefighters argued over which one should try to start the engine. None of them wanted to. So she had to try herself. Somehow, it started and got her home, just another day on her long climb out of the hole.

The drug economy played out every day on the cracked concrete lawns of Robert Taylor, and her preteen older sons, Nicholas and Willie, could not help breathing it in. The only working men they saw were the drug dealers who were up early to meet their sales quotas, wore the latest gym shoes and got the girls. Their cars were new and didn't catch fire.

The family lived at Robert Taylor for nine months. "It was hell," she would say later. "I wouldn't want a dog to stay up in there."

She left there a new woman. She knew she had to get back into nursing school if she was ever going to get anywhere.

## **Learning a New Way**

Then she met a man by the name of Vincent Allen. He wasn't like the other men she had known. He had a college degree. His father had

been a military man, his mother a homemaker, solidly middle class. He had a nice apartment with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking Lake Michigan. Ms. Whitiker was struck by his manners and how he spoke like the teachers and social workers she had known growing up - enunciating his words, slipping in a few she didn't know. He was a police detective.

They met on the job when they were working as private security guards. He took an immediate liking to her, saw that they both wanted the same thing - in his words, a "picket fence kind of a life." He encouraged her to follow her dreams. Soon she and the kids were moving in with him. He took his job as the man of the house seriously and actually liked the father role. Suddenly, there was a man asking about homework and where Nicholas and Willie had been. He noticed if they had slipped on some gang colors or had their caps pushed to the left or the right as gang members did.

He took it upon himself to correct the behavior of the younger children and pick them up from school.

That had been Nicholas's job for all of his short life, and, as his mother recalled, he did not take displacement well. First, she said, he figured he would scare his rival away. He stole his clothes, talked back, came in late.

It would only be a matter of time before this man would go the way of all the other men, Nicholas thought. But Mr. Allen did not leave. And the sweet little boy who had been the father of his family went out and found a new family in the streets. The drug dealers were more than willing to take him and put him to work. Before long, Ms. Whitiker discovered that her 12-year-old Nicholas was a lookout for the dealers.

She and Mr. Allen could see the road Nicholas was on, but, streetwise though they were, could do little to stop it. The more vigilant Mr. Allen was, the more resentful and alienated Nicholas became and the worse things got. It was as if he had grown so accustomed to the chaos of his mother's previous lives that he did not know how to function when a family worked as it should. He had made himself into a wind gauge and had no purpose when the air was still.

Ms. Whitiker sent Nicholas to live with his father, a laborer who had married, had other children and lived on the other side of town. She hoped that being far from his homies would put Nicholas on a straighter course.

Mr. Allen started encouraging her to go back to nursing school. They figured that, with him providing a place for her to live, and with Pell grants and the other financial aid for low-income students, she could make a go of it.

She enrolled at Kennedy-King College again, but it was different this time; or, rather, she was different. She was no longer the fun-loving girl looking for something to do. She had seen the bottom of the well and never wanted to go back there again.

She had also seen a new way of managing one's life. The professional people she met in college and now Mr. Allen had different ways of thinking about spending and saving money and carrying oneself. They tended to plan and save for things. She had never had enough money or reason to save. They paid attention to things like late fees and interest rates; she mostly ignored them because she couldn't pay the bills anyway. They set long-term goals for themselves; she just tried to get through the day. It all rubbed off on her, and it changed her.

On top of that, she had a renewed sense of time pressing against her. How long would Mr. Allen put up with her and the kids while she went to school? What if he got tired of it and left? What if he insisted she quit school and get a job to pay her share of the expenses? She didn't like the idea of owing him and couldn't bear the thought of slipping backward again. So, when it came to her studies, she would have to be more focused and efficient than she had been about anything in her life.

### **'I Had to Make It'**

There were certain points in certain years - say from 1996 to 2002 - when Angela Whitiker didn't yet know that Tupac Shakur had been killed or that President Bill Clinton had been impeached.

"If it wasn't about nursing or biology or what was on my test Friday, I wasn't interested," she said. "I blocked everything and everybody out. I used to be so particular about cleaning the house. I got to the point where I'd see a shoe, and I'd just kick it over."

She felt she had to work extra hard because she felt so outranked in the classroom. She endured the stares of the middle-class teacher's pets who looked down on her for the circuitous route that got her there. "They were snobs whose moms were nurses, and they knew everything," she said. "I had to show them that I was somebody, that because I had five kids, that I made bad decisions, that I didn't have a father - and so what? - I was determined to show them I can do this. I had to make it. I couldn't fail."

Whenever test day came, she recalled, she would work herself into such a state of anxiety that sometimes she had to excuse herself to throw up. The professor had to go get her out of the bathroom.

"Are you O.K.?" the professor would ask. "You're going to kill yourself."

Everybody knew when a test didn't go well. They could see it in her face, the simultaneous pouting and rolling of the eyes, and hear it in her voice, the way she snapped at the lowest registers over the littlest thing.

"Mama didn't pass her test today," the first child to notice would say to the others. "Don't say nothing."

Because she wasn't from a professional family, she brought a kind of naïveté to school with her. One day in a clinical class, she recalled, the teacher went around the room asking students how their patients were doing. When the teacher got to her, Ms. Whitiker thought about the colostomy bag attached to her patient, and started crying.

"Oh my God," the teacher said. "Did your patient die?"

"No," she said, still sobbing. "But she had this hole in her stomach."

"Well, go on in there and wash your face," the teacher told her.

Soon she was working with cadavers as if they were just another piece of office equipment, but she didn't know anyone who could give her the ins and outs of the field or tell her what to expect. "I didn't have anybody I could go to who had a degree other than Vince," she said. He went over her papers and marked them up - too much for her liking, sometimes - and read her papers aloud so she could hear what was wrong with them.

When she made the dean's list, he celebrated. When she failed a test, he consoled her as best he could.

"Oh baby, you're going to make it," he'd say.

"Oh shut up, you don't understand," she'd shoot back.

In May 2001, she finally finished nursing school at Kennedy-King, one of the City Colleges of Chicago. For her class picture, she wore her hair in a flip like Gidget and a nurse's cap that looked like white dove wings. It was a long way from the teenager in a jheri curl and too-tight jeans.

Soon she would be driving in the rain to take the nursing boards on computer No. 12. "It was a step to another life," she would say years later. "It was a do-or-die type of thing. I thought I was going to kill myself waiting for the results."

### **The Test Results**

One morning in late 2001, when Ms. Whitiker was alone and the apartment was uncharacteristically quiet, the mail arrived and, in it, an envelope from the state boards. In that moment, she came closer than at any other time of her life to upper-middle-class young people awaiting word from the Ivy League school of their dreams. The chatter among her fellow nursing students was that a thin envelope meant you passed; a thick one, presumably filled with the things you got wrong, meant you failed. She got a thin envelope.

"My heart just dropped to the floor," she said. She took the envelope into the apartment and threw it on the bed, afraid to open it, afraid that, given the disappointments of her life, somehow the grapevine had been wrong and the thin one meant failure.

She called her mother to get the courage to open it. Soon she was out in the middle of the hallway. "I passed my boards!" she screamed to neighbors fumbling for their house keys.

The family took her out to celebrate. They had dinner at Hooters and bought her a cake. Soon after, she and Mr. Allen agreed it was time they married.

"My daughter was getting to an age where I was trying to tell her to do right," Ms. Whitiker said of Ishtar, now 17. "I can't tell her to do right if I'm doing wrong."

They married at Faith Temple Coptic Church on June 7, 2003. She wore an ivory shift and a long white veil and carried a bouquet of white carnations. He wore a black tux. It was the groom's first marriage, the bride's second.

All the kids were there except Willie, who, still on the path he learned at Robert Taylor, was in jail. The remaining kids were dressed to their mother's specifications, except Nicholas, who, having by now declared that he wanted to be a rapper, showed up in pants hanging off his body and a baseball cap turned backward.

For the family wedding picture, Ms. Whitiker told him to stand in the back so nobody could see what he had on. She was already becoming class conscious, aware of appearances and decorum. And so, on this triumphant day in the family's history, all that is visible of Nicholas is his head.

### **High-Stress Work**

Ms. Whitiker finished nursing school as vice president of her class and with academic awards in biology and pharmacology, but despite her hard work and potential, the reality of her life was that she could not afford to go any further than a two-year associate's degree. That limits her job prospects even in a high-demand field like nursing. She doesn't have the contacts to get a job at the teaching hospitals in Chicago where she would get better training and higher pay.

She landed a job at a small inner city hospital on the South Side, known not for its groundbreaking procedures or training opportunities but as the hospital where the eight student nurses killed by Richard Speck in 1966 had worked. It's an unnerving history that is always in the

back of her mind, but she needs the job and the pay is more than she could ever have imagined back when she was on food stamps.

She has worked high-stress assignments in telemetry - monitoring cardiac patients - and in the intensive care unit. With all the night hours she puts in, she made \$83,000 last year, more than 90 percent of all American workers. It is hard work, messy, often thankless. She has found herself in a pecking order that surprises and frustrates her. The doctors seem to expect her to work magic on their orders, she said, and the certified nursing assistants resent her place of privilege.

A few years back she might have sympathized with the nursing assistants. They do what no one else wants to do, attending to the unpleasant bodily needs of the very ill. There was a time when that would have been a move up for her. But their envy and resentment only made her feel more distant. And now, she was showing the same disdain for them that the middle class might have felt for her in her other life.

"I'm like, don't be mad at me because I'm a nurse," she said. "If you want my job, you need to suffer and cry like I did."

She tried to find her bearings in this new class she was in. She resented the old friends who drank muscatel at the taverns late into the night and hit her up for money. And yet her past had a way of catching up with her in unexpected ways. She was out running errands once when a man recognized her from her days on the street.

"I know you," he said. "You're the one who stole money from me."

She feigned ignorance and walked away, even though, she would later say, she remembered taking his money and his television set, too, back when she was on drugs.

She tried hanging out with the nurses from work. But some were bourgeois and uppity, had a sense of comfort and confidence she did not possess. At one party she went to, some of them started smoking marijuana. It was a fun little escape for them, but it took her back to a place she could not afford to revisit.

"I reached for my purse," she said. "When I got my first paycheck, that was high enough for me."

Her life was complicated as it was. For one thing she was now the mother of six (seven, if you counted Zach, her husband's 13-year-old son, who recently moved in with them). Her youngest, Christopher, had been born shortly after the uncertain time at Robert Taylor and had been with her only off and on because of a custody fight between her and Christopher's father.

Both the fight over Christopher and the fact that he came after a lull in childbearing when she was a more mature 28 help explain why she is investing in him in ways she had not had the luxury of doing with her older kids.

She now knows how to discipline without using a belt, and the value of grounding and timeouts. She spends her off time shuttling Christopher to and from school or to little league practice in her new Chevrolet sport utility vehicle, an early benefit of her higher paychecks. When he has a science project, she's on the floor helping sculpt the volcano with him. She's quick to hug him and expects a kiss when she drops him off. She says he has become the very embodiment of the fresh start she was seeking for herself, and onto him she has grafted all her middle-class hopes.

He reminds her so much of Nicholas -- the same round face and velvet skin, the same precociousness that she saw as impudence in young Nicholas when she was barely out of her teens, but now sees as reflecting her youngest's unlimited potential. While Nicholas went to a strapped public grade school in a perilous neighborhood, Christopher is in the gifted program of a school she handpicked on the middle-class side of town. While Nicholas played a hand-me-down Nintendo on a television with a busted tube, Christopher plays 3-D chess on the family's Dell computer.

Christopher is now 10, the same age as Nicholas when he appeared in *The Times*, but he talks like one of the sweet, smart-alecky kids on a network sitcom rather than a streetwise man-child who's seen too much too soon.

Asked what it means to be in the gifted program, he had a ready answer. "It means I'm smarter than the other kids," he said without flinching. At that age, Nicholas's conversations were about running from bullets.

### **Demands and Responsibilities**

At first, nursing was like hitting the lottery. She was making enough for the family to move into a four-bedroom apartment in a prewar building overlooking Lake Michigan. It has crown molding, a marble fireplace and grander rooms than they have furniture for. She had a contractor paint the rooms the colors of sweet peas and corn on the cob. She bought a mahogany king-size bed, propping it high with pillows for herself and her husband, and bunk beds for the kids.

But she has found herself alone. She is making more money than anybody she knows. And come payday, everybody needs something, and not just the kids. Relatives need gas money, friends could use help with the rent. Even her patients, on hard times themselves, have their hands out.

"You got some money to lend me?" one of them, an older woman whose telephone had just been cut off, asked her. "You get your check yet?"

Suddenly, she is the successful star in her universe who is supposed to cover the cost of the family reunion, give career advice to the nieces and nephews, show up for their basketball games, float a loan to whoever needs it. After all, she's making \$83,000 a year.

She is making more than her police detective husband and has found herself tiptoeing around his ego and expectations. They have tried different ways of dividing the bills, at one point splitting the \$1,475 rent and sharing the utilities, at another point, one paying the rent and the other the utilities. But after Medicare and Social Security deductions and her share of the household obligations, groceries for a family of seven, her \$500 monthly car payment, the assorted expenses that come with three teenagers, loans to relatives who think she makes a fortune and the debt left over from her previous life, she finds that there is often little left over at month's end, and most months she's still in the hole.

She exists in an in-between place, middle class on paper but squeezed in reality. Take her car, for instance. It's a 2002 two-door Blazer that cost \$29,000. She really needed the bigger four-door, just so everybody could easily get in. But that would have cost an extra \$5,000, so everybody crams into the two-door. Insufficient though it is, it still comes at a high price. She pays 17 percent interest on the car loan - with \$13,000 remaining - because of bad credit from her previous life, when sometimes the choice was whether to eat or pay the light bill.

The kids asked her the other day if she was getting a new car. "No," she said, "you can pop the seat and duck your head and get in like everybody else."

But she winces every time Christopher and Zach have to fold themselves into the size of a bag of groceries to fit into the rear storage compartment. She says she wants a bigger car like a Lincoln Navigator, but with gas so high she shudders at what it would cost to fill the tank, and she knows she can't afford a new car anyway.

So despite her income, Saks and Macy's are somebody else's world. Instead, she frequents the places she did in her previous life. She still shops at the dollar stores in Englewood, her old down-and-out neighborhood. On a recent trip to Louisiana for her family reunion she watched every nickel and checked her balance at the automated teller machine several times a day.

She has become keenly aware that what middle-class comforts she does enjoy are built on uncertain scaffolding. First, her status requires two paychecks and the stability and backup she gets from being married. It requires that she work the higher-paying 12-hour night shifts that keep her away from her family for long stretches and leave her tired and irritable when she's with them.

It requires that Mr. Allen work extra hours as security at an elementary school, which leaves the two of them with little overlapping time to reinforce the strong marriage they need to stay where they are.

### **Stretching Every Dollar**

Her job and paycheck say she's middle class, but what does that mean? She said that when she was on the outside looking in, she never imagined it would mean working three and a half years without a vacation or having an empty dining room waiting for a table and chairs. It never would have occurred to her that she would be working this hard and still have to choose between paying the phone bill and paying for her daughter Ishtar's prom.

She exhibits a mounting awareness of just how far her money will and will not go, and of how much hard work each dollar represents and how carefully she must protect it because any loss means she has to work that much harder.

So she drops what she's doing when she sees a spot on the sofa because it cost four figures and it's not paid for yet. She buys in bulk and has to watch out for relatives wanting to shop in her kitchen.

"I caught my aunt going into my pantry getting her some soap," she said. "I told her, 'That's Dove!' "

For Ms. Whitiker, being middle class has meant working upside-down hours for so long that she's started to greet people on the street with "Have a good evening!" It means taking on family members as unofficial patients with their edema and diabetes. "When you're the only nurse in the family they think you're a doctor," she says. "Mama calls me. Mama has her friends calling me."

She has no choice but to keep up the pace because she wants to get vested in the retirement plan at the hospital. She has 18 months to go. She wants to open up a Roth retirement account, but can't seem to save enough. She wants to go back to school to get a bachelor's degree, but has neither the time nor the money.

"I feel like every corner of my body is being stretched," she said the other day.

More than anything, Ms. Whitiker wants to buy a house. Sometimes she drives by her dream house on Greenwood in the comfortably middle-class neighborhood of Chatham. It's yellow brick with a spiral staircase and a two-story foyer and vertical blinds. But she's having trouble saving anything toward that house or any other. The bad credit from her previous life still haunts her. Where she wants to live, they can't afford. And where they could afford, she doesn't dare live.

"I have to live in a decent neighborhood," she said. "I can't walk around the projects in my nursing uniform. They would try to take everything I got. And my husband - he's arrested half the people in Englewood. We're in danger."

### **Missing Pieces**

Ms. Whitiker's ideal of middle-class perfection, with well-educated, smartly groomed kids gathered around a big middle-class dining room table, has two missing pieces: Nicholas and Willie. Her success came too late to benefit them. They were already on a road she was unable to steer them from. Nicholas dropped out of school in the 11th grade and has been on and off the streets ever since. Willie, ever the follower looking up to Nicholas, was right behind.

At 22, Nicholas is a burdened soul who saw too much too soon. His front tooth is broken from a fight he got into trying to protect Willie on the streets. His car has bullet holes from a drive-by shooting. He knows what it's like to have a pistol jammed into your chin, or to be a 12-year-old making \$50 from neighborhood drug dealers for sitting on a hydrant and calling out "Five-O!" - street slang for the police. And worse.

"I could be dead right now," said Nicholas, his chiseled features weary, water welling in his eyes. "I should be dead. I hurt so many people. I hurt myself."

There were times when Mr. Allen, on patrol and by then Nicholas's putative stepfather, would catch him on the street and write up a summons but then let him go. But Nicholas finally got caught and spent about six weeks in jail in 2002 for stealing two coats from a Marshall's store in the suburbs and for fighting the police when they tried to arrest him, a consequence, his mother believes, of unresolved "anger issues" from the chaos of his childhood. She wishes she could go back and do some things differently. She thinks he needs to get into anger management and get into school to put his quick mind to good use.

For now, he lives in a walk-up apartment in the suburbs with the mother of the second of his three children; she's a housekeeper at the local Y.M.C.A. He has worked part-time as a stock clerk, but he is pinning his hopes on his rap music, which his exasperated mother admits is pretty good. He closes his eyes with hands quivering and begins one of his songs: "Going to change my ways," he sings in a near whisper. "Lord have mercy on me."

Willie has become a sturdily built young man with a movie star smile and a precisely trimmed goatee. Like Nicholas, he has worked low-paying service jobs when he has worked. He has two children, and a more serious criminal record that includes a felony drug conviction for selling near a schoolyard. "I was doing some things I shouldn't have been doing," Willie said, still sweet-faced at 21.

Ms. Whitiker's two older sons are living reminders of the world she wants to put behind her. She lives in constant fear of what may happen to them.

"I go to work," she said wearily, "and I don't know when I'm going to get that call, that your son is dead or in jail again."

It was soon after she began working as a nurse that she got the call she had been dreading. She was in the intensive care unit bandaging a patient when she was called to the phone. Willie had been shot. It was not clear where he had been shot or how seriously hurt he was, or if he was conscious or would live.

She dropped everything. It turned out he had been shot twice in the leg. She found it suspicious that he was shot on a well-known South Side drug corner that had been contested by rival dealers. But she rushed in to save her son.

"It almost killed me," she said. "I almost had a nervous breakdown. I'm at work bandaging up patients, and I get the call that he's been shot. He said he was robbed. So I took him in and took care of his wounds."

Last summer, she got another call. She was at home in bed this time.

"Your son Willie's been shot," said the slurred, panicked voice on the phone.

It was a call from one of Willie's acquaintances from the very corner where Willie had been shot the first time.

"They were so ghetto," Ms. Whitiker recalled with exasperation. "They were arguing over the phone about what they should do."

She thought quickly. The nurse in her kicked into gear.

"Where was he shot?" she asked.

"In the leg," came the answer.

"Is he breathing?"

"Yeah."

She knew then that he would live.

"So I hung up and turned over and went to sleep," she recalled later. "I didn't even tell my family."

In the days and weeks that followed Willie's shooting, Ms. Whitiker made perhaps the most painful decision a mother could make in order to keep her family on the straight and narrow. She has performed a kind of emergency triage, banishing the infected to save the well.

She didn't visit Willie in the hospital, didn't take him home to tend him as she had the first time. She made it clear that neither he nor Nicholas was welcome until they got themselves together, got their high school equivalency diplomas and started taking care of their kids. She has big plans for the younger ones: graduations, proms, college, professions. She doesn't want them getting shot like Willie.

"I told him you can't bring that here," she said. "How are his brothers supposed to feel? They're trying to do right and their brother is in the other room with a gunshot wound. I don't want him bringing that to the house and spreading it to the others. The other boys are on the right path, and I want it to stay that way."

Her plan appears to be working. The younger children rarely speak of Nicholas and Willie. When Willie showed up at the apartment one afternoon, Ishtar knew to alert her mother on her cellphone.

"Willie's here," Ishtar said. "What you want me to do?"

Everyone knows about the quarantine, even if it's breached. When Nicholas's name comes up, there's an awkward silence and a looking away.

### **Pushing Higher Goals**

Thursday was a big day for the family. It was the day Ishtar walked across the stage and became the first of Ms. Whitiker's children to get a high school diploma. It caused quite a flurry in a family with a history of more births than graduations. After the ceremony, Ms. Whitiker's sister, Michelle, took Ishtar's yellow mortarboard and said, good-naturedly: "Let me try this on. Which way does it go? They don't give you these when you get your G.E.D."

Everyone was there, except Willie, who was looking for work in Milwaukee, and Nicholas, who was in the public library reading up on contracts and music royalties to get a record deal. The day put Ms. Whitiker in a class quandary even as she went without a telephone to pay for the commencement and the prom.

While proud of Ishtar, who made it to the prom after all, Ms. Whitiker is torn between making a big deal of graduation and keeping it in perspective. "I'm not going to do like these other mothers and brag about, 'My baby graduated from high school!' " she said the other day. "I'm not going to say that's good. No, that's just the beginning. I want her to go to college and have a profession. She asked me, 'What age do you think I should have sex?' I said, 'I think about 30.' "

Ms. Whitiker has made no attempt to hide her displeasure over Ishtar's wanting to join the Navy - not only because her daughter could be deployed to the Middle East but also because it does not fit the middle-class ideal Ms. Whitiker now has for her children. She sees Ishtar going into law.

She is nudging 14-year-old John, who brings home A's, is a linebacker on the football squad and a squad leader in the Reserve Officers Training Corps, to consider becoming a doctor. John listens and applies himself but says he wants to go into the Army first. Before she became a nurse, the military might have been seen as a step up for her kids. Now she sees it as a detour from what they really should be doing.

"I try to talk to my kids to go into a profession," she said. "If you're certified and licensed, nobody can take that away from you."

To Nicholas and Willie, her advice is very different. "Can't you see your life is going down the drain, and you're the only one who can save it?" she asks to shrugging shoulders. "You want a quick way out. There is no quick way out. I tried that. It doesn't work."

But she still has hope. "I'm a late bloomer," she says, "and I know it's not too late for them."

### **Real Riches**

What has kept Ms. Whitiker going is the knowledge that there are certain things no one can ever take away, that certain pieces of paper really do matter. That is why the letter she was afraid to open, the one announcing she had passed her nursing boards - it's folded up, crinkled in her wallet beneath a picture of her husband and her A.T.M. card. The college diploma that it took her eight years to earn - her husband keeps that in his bedroom drawer, as if it is as much his as hers.

But as their second anniversary approached, the balancing act that plays out every day of their lives came down to the more immediate questions of getting by. Will they have a telephone this week or will Ishtar go to the prom? Will Ms. Whitiker be able to cut back her hours at the hospital and spend more time with her family? Can she work days instead of nights? Will she be able to find a home she can afford instead of spending five figures in rent each year?

Recently, she took a second job as a visiting nurse, checking in on elderly patients on the South Side during the day. It allows her to have more control over her schedule and work fewer nights at the hospital. The earnings potential is uncertain, and she has no health benefits under this new part-time arrangement, relying instead on her husband's. But a burden has been lifted for now.

So here she is on a late spring afternoon in her S.U.V. running errands in the old neighborhood. She has always felt safest with the familiar. She drops off some clothes at the dry cleaners where her sister's former husband's sister works. She buys a duffle bag at a dollar store that hired her aunt to fill in. She checks in on the niece who just had the Caesarean. "How's the baby?" she asks. "You know I want to come up

and give her some sugar."

Her cellphone rings.

"That's the kids," she said. She answers immediately, confident that, whatever bills are waiting in the mailbox, she's rich in the one thing that matters.

"Family is like the most important thing in life," Ms. Whitiker said. "Without family, I don't even see a purpose."