

Lives rebuilt, trust regained

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Lakeasha Tyson has yet to get used to waking up with a tiny foot stuck in her face. Or noise generated by a brother and sister tussling with each other one minute and playing happily together the next.

Or challenges of dealing with a son whose bad behavior at school sometimes leads to phone calls at work and tests the skills she picked up during parent classes both in prison and at a halfway house.

But it's all good, said Tyson, of Bridgeport. She has her kids back.

Tyson, 25, is a convicted drug dealer. Two years ago, while living in an apartment off Stratford Avenue, she was charged with operating a drug factory and selling cocaine.

She spent 15 months in prison, eight months in a halfway house and a month re-establishing herself with a job and apartment.

During that time, the state Department of Children and Families placed her two children, Shawn, now 7, and Markwaisha, 2, with Shawn's grandmother, Leola Young.

Robert Rickard, Tyson's DCF social worker, credits both Young's willingness to step in and Tyson's commitment to turning her life around that have made this a Mother's Day when Shawn and Markwaisha don't have to visit their mom to give her their handmade cards.

After many supervised and unsupervised visits, followed by sleepovers at her new apartment, the children were permanently reunited with their mother March 31. That took place less than a week after a Connecticut Post article chronicled Tyson's efforts to straighten out her life and win back custody of her children.

The children still spend nights at Young's on days when Tyson has to work late as a nurse's aide in Norwalk.

"Am I tired? Yes. But we're doing great," said Tyson, looking out over the water from a bench at St. Mary's by the Sea on a warm spring day last week.

The bright sunshine and sparkling water, Tyson said, made her feel like firing up some charcoal for a picnic. Joining her for the outing were Young and her daughter Sarafina, 14.

Shawn showed off his acrobatic skills by jumping over the back of the bench. His sister tried to copy.

"Shawn, don't. Sit down," scolded his mother.

Tyson said she knew it would be tough.

"It's like I have to earn their trust again. I left and they make that known to me," she said.

Shawn, who plays basketball, baseball and soccer, is missing games now because he is grounded for eating an entire container of ice cream without permission.

"Sometimes, I don't know what approach to take. It's like I can't get through to him. He looks at me, then he's back at it again," said Tyson.

She is sometimes tempted to spank the kids when they misbehave. But parent classes have taught her to try other approaches. She's learning to encourage positive behavior by rewarding it. A recent good report card by Shawn warranted a trip to an arcade. Splurges, however, are rare.

Tyson works three days a week as a nursing assistant in Norwalk, earning just enough to cover the rent on her second-floor apartment. She takes overtime assignments when she can get them, and will spend this Mother's Day working. "I'll be home by 4 p.m. if I can get a ride," said Tyson.

Money is tight. Tyson takes a bus to work and now, on days off, to Longfellow School, where Shawn is a first-grader, and Young, his grandmother, is president of the Parent Advisory Committee.

From the bus stop, she walks to Longfellow, drops off Shawn, then is back at the bus stop by the time the same bus makes its loop through Black Rock to pick her up again.

After school, she follows the same routine and calls city buses reliable.

After the first article about Tyson was published March 26, someone donated a car to the family.

To drive it, Tyson has to get a license. She's studying now for the test. Others have offered her career assistance by posting her resume on the Internet. Tyson would eventually like to get a nursing degree.

Efforts are also under way to find Tyson supportive housing. Because of her conviction, she is not eligible for a Section 8 subsidized housing voucher for three years, said Rickard, her social worker, who will stay involved with the family for at least six months.

"I got a lot of good responses from the article. Some just thanked me for sharing my thoughts," said Tyson, who is comfortable with the rhythm of her new routine.

Shawn showers and lays out his clothes for the next day at night. The baby gets a bath in the morning.

In the morning, Tyson makes Shawn a quick egg-and-cheese sandwich while he brushes his teeth. Then it's off to the bus stop.

Markwaisha likes either pancakes or oatmeal. Evenings are spent making sure homework gets done and cooking dinner. Tyson said she reads to the kids, but not at night. That's when she has Shawn read to his little sister.

Tyson rarely has any time to read on her own anymore, a former pastime.

"By the end of the day I'm tired. I can't get enough sleep," she said. "But it's all worth it. When they hug me at night, tell me they love me. Markwaisha giving out all that sugar.