

## *Seeing an Opening to Leave Her Husband, She Took It and Didn't Look Back*



Katherine Rivera, in dark red shirt, with her children, from left, Kayla, Edwin Jesus and Kiara in Manhattan, where they have been living at a shelter for the past year. Credit: Cinthya Santos Briones for The New York Times

### **The Neediest Cases Fund**

**By Emily Palmer**

**Jan. 2, 2018**

Katherine Rivera left her husband around Thanksgiving 2012 when he went away for a few days.

Ms. Rivera and their three children spent the night at a shelter in Pennsylvania. The next morning, she took them to church, and cried through the service.

Her son, Edwin Jesus, now 10, remembers only the cherry pie served during the shelter's Thanksgiving meal.

Ms. Rivera, 35, shook her head. "I don't remember anything from those years," she said.

"He abused her," Edwin Jesus said.

Ms. Rivera ducked her head and laughed nervously, uncertain of what to say.

"It's not funny, Mom," Edwin Jesus said. "He abused you."



“The kids witnessed a lot,” Ms. Rivera, 35, said of her 10-year marriage. “For me, it’s so hard when they talk about it. I don’t want them even thinking about it.” Credit: Cinthya Santos Briones for The New York Times

“The kids witnessed a lot,” Ms. Rivera said. “For me, it’s so hard when they talk about it. I don’t want them even thinking about it.”

For the last year, Ms. Rivera has been living with Edwin Jesus and her daughters, Kayla, 14, and Kiara, 12, at a Manhattan shelter.

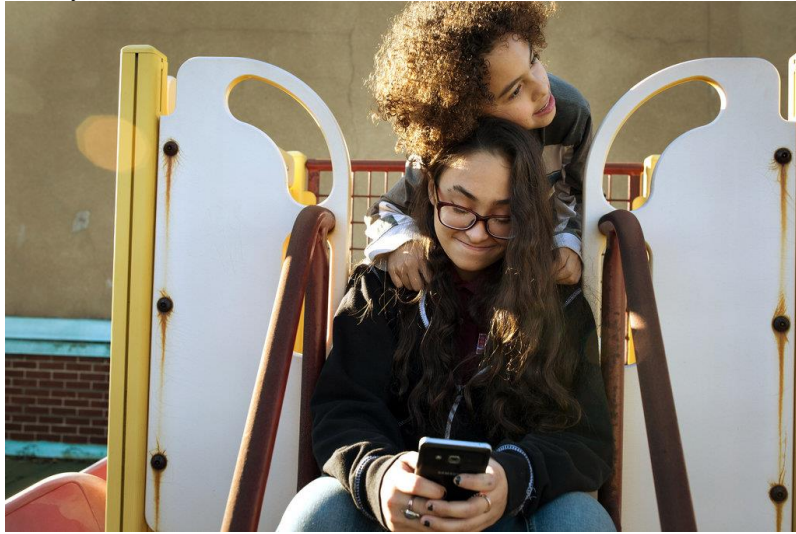


The move to New York has been hard on the family. Kiara, 12, shown with her mother, and her sister said they were often bullied and felt ostracized at school. Credit: Cinthya Santos Briones for The New York Times

Ms. Rivera spoke softly as she recalled that painful time in 2012 and how a fight that November with her husband of 10 years prompted her departure. “I thought, This is my chance,” she said during a recent interview in the East Village. “I felt like my heart was going to pop.”

Ms. Rivera had not filed any police reports, but when she left, she first sought help at a domestic violence shelter in Berks County, Pa., called Safe Berks. A case manager, Mereliss Colon Ortiz, who is now the director of residential services there, said in November that staff members go through 66 hours of training to learn how to interview potential clients. After hearing Ms. Rivera’s story, she signed a domestic violence

verification form, which was approved and enabled Ms. Rivera to receive federally funded benefits from the county for several months in 2013.



Kayla, 14, and Edwin Jesus, 10. Kayla uses writing as an outlet, drafting short stories and free-verse poetry on a library computer. Credit: Cinthya Santos Briones for The New York Times

Contacted by a reporter, her ex-husband denied the allegations and accused Ms. Rivera of manipulating the children.

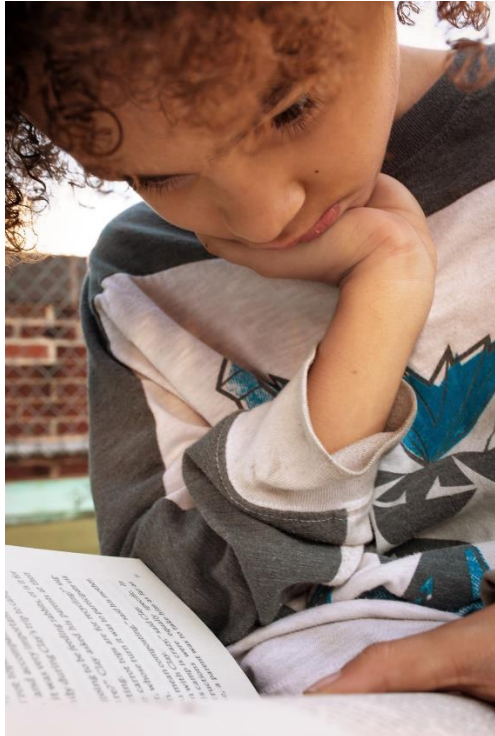
During the year after Ms. Rivera left her husband, she and the children passed through five shelters in Pennsylvania, the children switching schools each time. Sometimes they slept on air mattresses. At one transitional housing program run through a set of churches, they changed locations each week.



Kiara on the roof of the Catholic Big Sisters and Big Brothers program, which has paired her and her sister with mentors. Credit: Cinthya Santos Briones for The New York Times

In December 2013, Ms. Rivera moved the family into an apartment in Carlisle, Pa. “It was my very first apartment,” she said, smiling. “I’d never had my own anything before.”

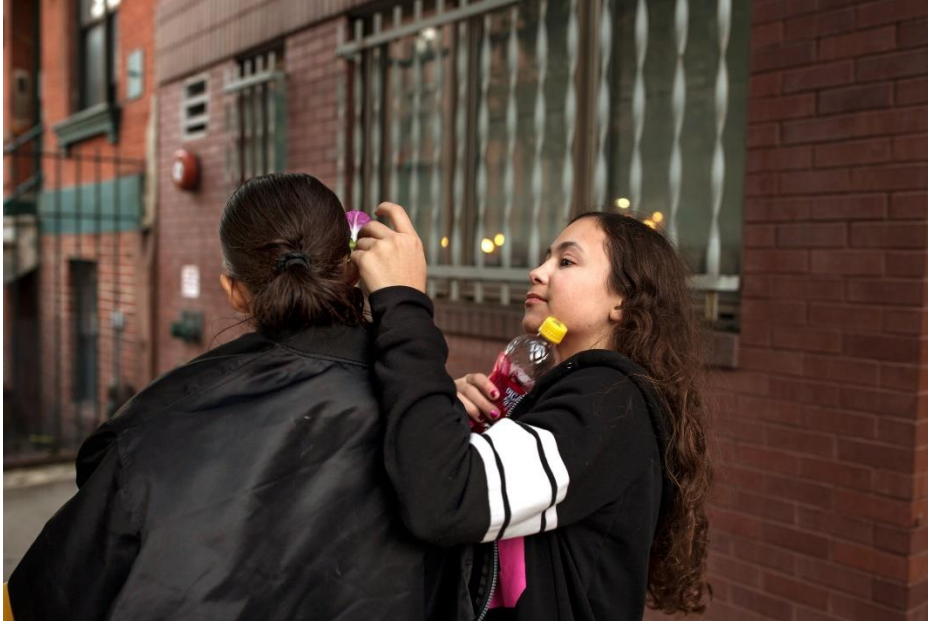
Ms. Rivera, who left school in ninth grade and had her first child at age 20, had no work experience. So she took a series of factory jobs, which required her to stand eight to 10 hours a day, exacerbating her scoliosis. At a Pepsi warehouse, she made \$8.50 an hour, labeling, packaging and taping products in an assembly line.



Edwin Jesus, like his sisters, enjoys reading in his free time. “They wake up with books, and they go to sleep with books,” Ms. Rivera said. Credit: Cinthya Santos Briones for The New York Times

Her children appreciated the stability of the new home, which enabled them to attend the same school for two years, the longest they have stayed anywhere since entering the shelter system, they said. But Ms. Rivera, who was born on the Puerto Rican coast and spent her teenage years in Manhattan, was paying about \$34 a day in cab fare to get to her job because she did not know how to drive. When she no longer had the money to commute, she quit her job and fell behind on bills. With no water or electricity and an eviction notice, the family moved in with a neighbor for the next three months.

Fearing her ex-husband would find them — he had once come to the apartment — Ms. Rivera moved the family. The shelter in their hometown had closed, so on Christmas Day 2016, Ms. Rivera returned to New York City with her children. They were eventually placed at a shelter in Manhattan, where they have remained and where Ms. Rivera receives counseling for depression.



Kiara and her mother. Ms. Rivera, who has an interest in science, hopes to earn her high school equivalency diploma and eventually enter the medical field. Credit Cinthya Santos Briones for The New York Times

For much of the interview, Ms. Rivera's daughters appeared immersed in other matters. Kayla scrolled through her phone, a college prep book beside her. Kiara read "Rapunzel and the Lost Lagoon." Edwin Jesus, who began taking advanced classes this fall, interjected often, throughout a game of hangman.

"They wake up with books, and they go to sleep with books," Ms. Rivera said proudly.

The move to New York has been hard. Kayla and Kiara, who said they were often bullied, have felt ostracized at school.

Putting down her fantasy book, Kiara said her mother gave her a tiara for her birthday that she wore to school "until someone tore it off my head and smashed it." The student said, "You're not supposed to be a princess." Smiling into the distance, she said, "I think I'm a princess in disguise."

Kayla uses writing as an outlet, drafting short stories and free-verse poetry on a library computer. "I create characters who have been through what I've been through but who just aren't me," she said. "It helps to put my thoughts into writing. But I write my own made-up stories, too. I like dystopian worlds, scary stuff, sad stuff."

Last year, she saved money from a summer job to buy her mother a cellphone. In order to ease the children's transition, [Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New York](#), one of the eight organizations supported by The New York Times [Neediest Cases](#) Fund, has paired the girls with mentors as part of the [Catholic Big Sisters and Big Brothers](#) program. And in September, Catholic Charities used \$360 from the Neediest Cases Fund for school clothes and coats for the children.

The family receives \$498 in cash assistance and another \$400 in food stamps each month. This month, Ms. Rivera plans to start First Step, a 15-week computer technology training program concluding with internships and job opportunities. With an interest in science, she hopes to earn her high school equivalency diploma and eventually enter the medical field. "I've started learning how to be on my own," she said. "We have passed through a lot, and I'm still trying because my kids haven't seen happiness yet. We're still looking for that."