

Protective Brooklyn Mother and a Disabled Son Face Life's Challenges Together

Though he would prefer to put his socks on without his mother's help, Zaquan West, 25, does not have a choice.

A genetic disorder has encumbered Mr. West all his life, but he has needed assistance with this particular task since only last year. In November 2011, he had surgery to remove a cancerous tumor on his left thigh that was as big as a football, but he was left less flexible.

"He doesn't do well with disability, with the label," his mother, Joann West, 55, said. "He doesn't tell people that he has a disability. If they can't see it, they just can't see it."

When her son was 13 months old, Ms. West learned he had neurofibromatosis, a disorder that causes tumors to grow on the nerves and, in some cases, to infringe on vital organs, or as was the case last year, to become malignant. It also creates large bumps on the skin known as nodules.

At ages 5 and 8, Zaquan had operations to remove neurofibromatosis clusters that were eating away at his left hip bone. The disease has left his left leg a few inches shorter than his right. After each operation, he had to relearn how to walk.

Because of his physical disability, he was placed in a special-education class at school and given the same homework every night, his mother said.

"I advocated for him," Ms. West said. "I kept fighting, because he was no dummy. He was physically impaired, not mentally. I went out of my way to try to give him a better life. The system would have failed him more than it did if I hadn't stepped in." Her efforts led to his being moved from a special-education classroom to a regular one in second grade.

Ms. West, a single mother, acknowledges that her protective instincts made her a very controlling parent, and she did not allow Zaquan out of the house much,

which limited his friendships.

"I was afraid for him," she said. "The streets, they don't care about your disability."



Joann West is a constant caretaker for her son, Zaquan. Though Ms. West works as a receptionist, the family fell behind on rent. Credit Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

When Mr. West entered high school, it was the first time he had truly been away from his mother's watchful eyes. He began skipping class, often going to the park or wandering their Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, neighborhood with truant friends. He eventually dropped out of school.

"It was just me being out on my own and making my own choices," Mr. West recalled.

Though she did not agree with her son's decisions, Ms. West said that his need to explore was in some ways a result of her actions. "At a point, I stepped back," she said, "to allow him to do certain things on his own and do what he wanted to do."

In 2007, a couple of years after he dropped out, Mr. West joined the Door, an organization focused on empowering young people to reach their potential. There, he obtained

his high school equivalency diploma.

Today, Mr. West is job hunting so that he can help pay his and his mother's expenses.

But paying the monthly bills has become a struggle, Ms. West said, in part because of a recent change in her budget. In August, after an increase in income, they stopped receiving \$324 a month in food stamps. The additional income did not cover all their expenses, however, and Ms. West eventually fell behind in the rent on their apartment.

Ms. West, who has been employed in various administrative jobs, currently works as a receptionist for Howie the Harp Advocacy Center, an agency that provides employment help to people with psychiatric disabilities. Her annual salary is about \$25,000 before taxes. Her son receives \$646 in [Social Security](#) disability benefits. After the family's food stamps were cut off, Mr. West applied individually, and he now receives \$200 in food stamps each month.

With the addition of Mr. West's disability benefits and food stamps, their net monthly income is \$2,213. Their contribution for the Section 8-subsidized apartment Ms. West has lived in for the past 30 years is \$969.

Knowing she was in need of help, Ms. West's boss told her about the [Community Service Society](#), one of the organizations supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund. And the society drew \$1,598 from the fund to cover her debt.

Ms. West remains a constant caretaker for her independent-minded son, who, she says, has come to accept her help grudgingly. She says that even if they are not on speaking terms after a disagreement, she is there to lend him a hand.

Both are continuing to deal with the inevitable challenges: Mr. West is awaiting word from doctors on whether a new growth in his lungs is cancerous. But one of his greatest assets, given all that he has overcome, is that he is comfortable in his own skin.

"I'm just always going to be me," he said, "so why deal with somebody else?"