

A Woman In Need

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She's a single mom who works at Wal-Mart. She scrimps and saves so her child can enjoy the good things in life. Sometimes, she wonders if she can keep on.

By Barbi Walker

It's warmer than expected on this October day. Children are playing on the jungle gym at the Church of the Beatitudes in central Phoenix; their faces glisten with perspiration. Theresa Reddy watches as her 3-year-old daughter, Althea, runs up a ladder and slides down the curving clay colored slide. Althea is hot and thirsty and runs toward the church rectory. Theresa follows. Inside Theresa sits on a bench, her aqua-colored tank top lifted slightly above the nipple of her right breast so that she can nurse Althea. Her toes point on the floor like a ballerina as she presses her knees together in lady-like fashion to keep her yellow skirt from riding up.

Althea watches three women dressed in Prada and Gucci leave the church building as she nurses.

Theresa and the other women have just attended parenting classes given by North Central Parenting Group (NCPG), a non-profit, non-denominational organization. Theresa paid the \$470 annual fees out her own pocket for the privilege to attend NCPG. To attend the bi-weekly classes, she takes time off from her job at Wal-Mart. After Althea is finished nursing, Theresa and Althea walk through the parking lot, it's full of high-end cars, BMWs, Mercedes, Range Rovers and a myriad of SUVs. Theresa opens the driver's side door of her little economy car. It's hard to tell if the car is blue or black. The paint is oxidized from the sun.

Althea climbs in over the front seat to get to her booster seat in the back.

"The door is broken," Theresa says.

"I do the best I can with what I have."

Theresa Reddy is a 36-year-old single mom who has no community but yearns for one. She's like most mothers; she wants to spend as much time with her daughter as possible, yet her desires compete with her financial circumstances. In the face of an economic downturn, she survives as she always has — with thriftiness and innovativeness.

She can afford only \$350 a month to pay for housing, but she's never been homeless. She's too "well off" to qualify for housing assistance, yet works part time at Wal-Mart. She wears the same outfits over and over but attends a parenting group where mothers wear Prada and Gucci. She doesn't think she's smart, but she knows how to survive.

Sometimes, even Theresa wonders what's going to happen to her and Althea in uncertain economic times.

"I worry about providing for her," Theresa says.

"I do the best I can with what I have."

The perfect child

Theresa's memory of her early childhood in California is a jumble of home baked cookies, camping trips, picnics, and field trips to museums and zoos. Her mother, Rosanne Reddy, was a stay-at-home mom.

As a child Theresa was well liked and popular, Roseanne Reddy recalls. Theresa sang and played guitar in the choir at church and Rosanne loved watching her in front of the congregation performing. Rosanne remembers Theresa enjoying being the center of attention and entertaining people. Although Theresa was a good student, she became more of a perfectionist as she got older.

"She is very precise," says Rosanne. She needed a lot more time to finish assignments but she was always eager to learn. As one teacher told Rosanne, Theresa was the most-eager-to-learn child he'd ever had. Theresa spent nine years at the University of Arizona in Tucson, but didn't finish her degree. She now seems estranged from her family.

In fact, she doesn't think Althea would recognize anyone from her family in a photograph, except maybe Theresa's sister.

A child is born

Althea was conceived while Theresa lived in Tucson. The child's father was a cousin of Theresa's college roommate. Edward Dick, Jr. now lives in Bakersfield, California and says he works in the film industry. He says he tries to see Althea often, but since he lives in California, it is expensive to get back to Arizona. He says he recently spoke to Althea on the phone. She sang a song to him. If you ask Edward to describe the relationship with Theresa, he'll say they just didn't work out as a couple. Theresa believes it is best for Althea if she remains single.

Jeers and Tears

Mother of the year! That's what a man and a woman yelled at Theresa when she left Althea alone by a fountain, just for a minute, at the Desert Botanical Garden.

Theresa remembers it as though it were yesterday, but it happened a year ago. She and Althea had arrived at the garden for Earth Day. Theresa's hands were loaded with bags, snacks, and baby gear-- all the things that she and Althea would need for the day. She and Althea had walked from the parking lot to the fountain when Althea begged to be carried in Theresa's arms.

Not knowing exactly what to do, Theresa instructed her young daughter to sit at the fountain and wait until she returned. Theresa couldn't carry both her daughter and all of the things she already was carrying. She figured she might as well take the snacks and baby gear back to the car, then return to carry Althea. When Theresa returned to the fountain, Althea was waiting patiently for her right where Theresa left her. It was then that a man and a woman who did not have children with them, belted out "Mother of the Year" so loudly that everyone around could hear.

You try not to take it as an insult, especially if, like Theresa, you're a single mom who is very alone and cashiers at Wal-Mart for a living. You want to give your child a normal life, a safe home, a semblance of happiness. You want to survive in an economy that is ever more challenging for the working poor. You want things to be better than they are. So you try to stay upbeat. Theresa chose to think of the insult as a compliment. She chose to think of it as though the people yelling at her really meant that she was a great mom-- MOTHER of the YEAR!!

And of course, now that she thinks back on it, she shouldn't have left Althea alone by the fountain. It's hard to be a single parent, and make all the decisions.

The princess bed

The sun blazes down on the sidewalk outside The Little Gym where Althea has finished tumbling classes. Theresa has taken Althea to tumbling classes since she was six months old.

For two and a half years, one gym let Althea take the classes for free. But that franchise is no longer around, Theresa says, and now she has to pay \$395 for five months of lessons at a different gym. The new gym may only be eight miles from Theresa's home, but there is no freeway access, she has to take surface streets. The cost of gas and wear and tear on the car worry her, but she takes it on so she can give Althea the things she wants for her.

Next door to the gym is the huge baby store, USA Baby. After Althea begs, they enter the store, which is filled with baby and toddler furniture, clothes and toys. Althea runs to a giant princess bed, decked in pink sheets and blankets. A pink turret-like structure, complete with a pink flag, sits atop a slide that descends from the top bunk. She runs and jumps and giggles and screams as she plays in the princess bed.

A salesman approaches and talks about the construction of the beds. The pieces can be added to the bed as the child grows. The special, memory foam mattress has a protective fabric that repels water. The tiny mattress starts at \$499, which is more than the \$250 that Theresa brought home from her last paycheck.

The salesman tells Theresa his daughter wanted a bigger bed for Christmas, but when he told her that her room was too small, she said she wanted a bigger house.

Theresa smiles and turns her back on him to collect her daughter.

A few moments later she notices Althea is nowhere in sight. Theresa walks the store, ever so often calling Althea's name, heading back to the princess bed, which is only a few feet from the front door. Theresa walks

to the bed and lifts up the skirt to find Althea underneath smiling and giggling.

"She likes to hide at home now too," Theresa says. "She'll hide from me and won't answer when I call for her. She thinks it's fun to be quiet and hide."

Home is where the heart is.

It's late November. The road leading to Theresa's rented room winds through a working class neighborhood in north Sunnyslope. The streets are curvy and hilly. Most of the homes are brick and much the same today as they were when they were built in the 70s.

Soon, the man who rents a room to Theresa will sell the home, which means she will have to move too. Only, she doesn't know where she'll go.

She's happy with where she lives now. It's a house that sits on a plot of mostly dirt dotted with a few cacti. Lava rocks line the driveway. A screened in front porch houses toys, weed killer, rubber boots and a large, wooden footlocker.

Theresa has just bought groceries. She carries groceries and Althea from the car and struggles to unlock the door to the house.

Once inside and able to unload her goods, Theresa opens the sliding arcadia doors to the backyard. Althea heads out to play. The backyard is much like the front, dirt and a few weeds scattered here and there. A metal fence encloses the pool. Some of Althea's toys sit in a sand box.

Althea rakes and scoops in the box. A moment later Althea brings a small ceramic dish to the open arcadia doors.

"I cleaned up all the cat poop," she says, holding the bowl of sand and poop out to her mother.

"We don't have a cat," Theresa says.

Lunch is next on the agenda. Fresh, ripe organic tomatoes sit on the counter along with a package of Oscar Mayer hot dogs and a newly purchased basil plant. While the hot dogs cook in the microwave, Theresa washes and slices the red plump tomatoes. She talks about needing to find a place to live before the end of the month, just two days after Thanksgiving. She explains that she gets around \$630 a month in child support from Althea's father and goes over her monthly expenses.

Rent is \$200 for a room that she and Althea share. Auto insurance is \$116. Her total for these "basic" expenses is \$316 a month. Additional living expenses, cell phone, groceries and gas, and the \$140 she spends on daycare come to a grand total of \$319 each month. She is so frugal she could cover almost all of her monthly expenses with the child support. Instead of spending her child support, thrifty Theresa saved it. Theresa works to keep her expenses low so that she can do things with her daughter that most single parents can't afford. She accomplishes this by renting a \$200 room rather than a \$600 apartment.

She doesn't particularly want to live alone. She feels safer in a house with a roommate. She says she once lived on her own in a house that her mother owns and was robbed three times. Theresa has never felt safe living alone since, which is why she hopes that soon she will be able to move into a home with assistance from the Homeward Bound program, which helps low-income families with affordable housing and creates a community for them.

Homeless Bound

A few days later, Theresa meets with Homeward Bound officials.

She sits in her neat, clean Wal-Mart uniform and carefully writes her goals down on the required paperwork.

"I want a community, a network. I have people that I call on when I need help, but no real friends, people I can do things with," she says.

She continues her list of goals. She wants to save money for a retirement nest egg. She wants to maybe to get out of retail. But she doesn't know what else she can do besides retail.

Two women walk her to a cool lavender-colored quiet room. Theresa says she wants a home that's safe, and she wants friends, but the most important thing to her is time with her daughter.

Homeward Bound will not accept her into its program. Theresa has too much money in the bank. She's too thrifty.

Theresa's most recent paycheck stub indicates \$6,129.04 has been deposited into her checking account for the year and \$315 into her savings account. Along with her monthly support check, she has brought home \$12,948.24 for the year so far. She makes roughly \$1294 per month. According to the U.S. Census Bureau the poverty threshold for a family of two is \$14,291 annually. At the end of this year, Theresa will have made \$103 above the poverty threshold. Theresa's frugality has undermined her opportunity for housing assistance and the community she yearns for. The year spent saving each month's child support check for emergencies has backfired. To qualify for acceptance, the maximum amount anyone can have in his or her bank account is \$1000.

Now What?

Theresa's only option at the moment is to move with her current landlord and rent a room in his new apartment. But if she does, her commute will more than double, which means more time in daycare for Althea. Maybe she can get a job at the Wal-Mart near the apartment, but then she will have to uproot Althea and find a new daycare too. All of these decisions, and the costs associated with moving, press down on her. Theresa now has less than a week to find a new home.

She picks up Althea at daycare. The child cries in the backseat as Theresa makes her way through Phoenix rush hour traffic.

She talks to a reporter by cell phone. The recession has hit Arizona hard. The state estimates it has a budget shortfall of about \$1.2 billion, the unemployment rate continues to increase and foreclosures are at record highs. The reporter wants to know, how does this bode for Theresa's future?

"I really don't know what the economy holds for me," Theresa says. "I just have to find a place to live."

The line goes dead.