

Biggest blessing: Season of Sharing helps Sarasota mom and scholar-athlete son find home

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Coleia Thomas with her 16-year-old-son Isaiah Belt. THOMAS BENDER/HERALD-TRIBUNE

Some evenings, when Coleia Thomas and her son, Isaiah Belt, would be parked near the Van Wezel, they would look in the distance, toward the silhouette of construction cranes hovering over Lemon Avenue.

“Mama, why don’t we try to live there?” Isaiah would ask about the apartment buildings going up.

By then Coleia and her young teen son had been bouncing between the homes of family and friends, trapped in limbo between a move, her changing career and a spiraling housing crisis, at times needing to sleep in the car.

It had been a long slide from the “perfect” life Coleia once had before her divorce, when she had a high-powered job, a dream house and a sports car parked in the garage.

She told Isaiah she was sure they'd never qualify for one of those units near downtown. Besides, she'd heard you had to be a nurse, teacher or firefighter to get in – a type of “hometown hero” – and she was none of those things.

But she wasn't giving up on finding them a home. She had sacrificed too much for this boy, her miracle child – who excelled at everything from school to sports and drama.

Sometimes, though – on little sleep, overwrought with worry – she wondered how long she could go on, praying in the car as Isaiah rehearsed his lines for a play outside on the deserted Van Wezel steps.

“Please, God,” she'd say aloud. “When can I come up for air?” She just needed to find stability, a place to live, to make sure Isaiah would continue to thrive.

She couldn't see how close they were to an answer, or how his star was about to soar.

From riches to rags

A decade into her marriage, Coleia and her husband seemed to have it all.

Their home in a small town south of Atlanta was Coleia's dream, with cathedral ceilings and a three-car garage holding her sports car. They owned nice furniture, held Falcons football season tickets and ate at fancy restaurants.

But Coleia felt empty. Something was missing: a child. “We got tired of being a couple and wanted to be a family,” she remembered. They'd spent years trying and thousands on fertility treatments. After resigning themselves to life without children, Coleia learned she was pregnant with Isaiah.

“I think he was a miracle,” she said.

To her, he was also a little genius – walking and talking and potty-trained by the age of one. Coleia spared him nothing. The couple paid for a church-run private school, where Isaiah made great grades. He loved youth sports, singing and acting – earning accolades at events in their town.

But by then Coleia's marriage was unraveling. Divorce proceedings dragged on. So did a custody battle as Isaiah moved through elementary school. Lawyers' bills drained her bank account. Coleia fought for stability, to maintain for Isaiah a semblance of their former life.

But debt was racking up. And Isaiah kept getting sick, first from allergies, then asthma and ear infections. Coleia switched to jobs in sales and retail for flexibility, while shuttling him to doctor's appointments.

"I couldn't get a job with a sickly kid."

Times got tighter. Coleia lost the house, the furniture and the sports car, holding onto her SUV. She switched Isaiah to the local public school, where she found stable work in the cafeteria. "I hated it," she said. "I used to cry and cry, but I had to do it to pay the lawyers."

Soon she was promoted and obtained credentials to work with behaviorally challenged kids, a job she grew to love. But still every month she was barely eking by. "I was living a single mom life," she said, describing a descent from "riches to rags." "We ate beanies and weenies and prayed the lights were on when we came home."

Finally, in 2019, when Isaiah was in fifth grade, Coleia won the custody battle. A change beckoned. Family in Sarasota called her south to her roots in the region. And then she got a job with a prominent investment banking company in the area.

As Coleia packed them up for the move, it seemed they were turning a promising new page. "I didn't realize," she said, "that I was running to poverty."

Roadblocks

It was a dream job in Sarasota. But it lasted a matter of months. When the offices relocated out of the region, Coleia found work where she could, first as a notary and a wedding coordinator.

Through the pandemic, life was unstable once more. Despite receiving child support and working, Coleia struggled, less support for single moms in Florida than she had in Georgia.

Saddled with \$10,000 in debt from the move, she also battled costly car repairs, bad credit since the divorce, and surging rents as the region became mired in one of the worst housing crises in the nation.

Between stints living with her relatives, Coleia rented apartments she could afford that wound up with mold and roach infestations. One nice condo seemed to offer stability – until rent surged from \$1,400 to \$2,500 a month.

Through it all, Coleia based her work and time around Isaiah's schooling and extracurricular events.

"At the end of the day, I'm a mom first," she said.

She enrolled him for junior high in the Sarasota School of Arts and Sciences.

From scholastics and traveling baseball teams, to flag football, piano and drama at Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe, Isaiah brimmed with talent no matter what he tried.

Most apartments she called had no openings. Those that did asked for three times the income she made or thousands in deposits and move-in rent.

"Everywhere we went we hit a roadblock," she said.

Depression closing in, the only thing keeping Coleia going, she knew, was her faith and her son.

"If it wasn't for Isaiah," she'd recall, "I wouldn't have gotten up most days."

Hard work pays off

Isaiah was a thriving freshman at Sarasota's Riverview High School when Coleia got the word.

The school was hiring, another parent told her. Coleia had experience as a paraprofessional. She should apply. It would align her schedule with Isaiah's and his extracurricular events.

Already the school seemed the perfect match for Isaiah – with its rigorous scholastic programs as well as strong offerings in theater and arts. What's more, Isaiah was proving to be a standout on the football field – promoted to varsity by the end of his first season.

Coleia got the job, working as she did before with exceptional youth. But she was still needing to sleep in her car while Isaiah stayed overnight at the home of family friends.

However, as a school employee, a door opened. She now qualified as a “hometown hero” for those new buildings she and Isaiah had watched going up near downtown – called Lofts on Lemon, with units priced as workforce housing.

Encouraged by other parents and friends, she put her name in the lottery system – and got a two-bedroom, two-bathroom unit. But there was still the hurdle of move-in costs. School social worker Jim Camelo was on it. He'd already helped Coleia with gas cards. Now he turned to Season of Sharing – which helped get Coleia and her son in the door. Isaiah couldn't wait to see it.

Last fall, of 2022, the two moved in. At first, Coleia seemed to have the stability she'd long sought. But the years of stress had taken a toll. Her health collapsed.

Severely anemic, she missed weeks of work, falling behind on rent. “I can't be homeless again,” she told herself. She battled another fear – holding Isaiah back. “I didn't want Isaiah to think I was his shortcoming,” she said.

Camelo came through another time – once more tapping Season of Sharing, which paid almost \$1,500 in February to help her catch up on back rent, with an assist from the Salvation Army.

Since then, life has finally felt stable. “I'm forever grateful. I'm thankful, I know God is working,” Coleia said. Isaiah's future seems brighter than ever. At 16 and a straight-A student this fall, he is a star running back on Riverview's football team, scoring three touchdowns in one game alone this past season.

What's more, Coleia has rediscovered her passion for working with exceptional kids. Popular with students in the classroom, she found they helped her as much as she helped them.

“School saved me,” she said one afternoon as she waited for Isaiah's football practice to let out. “Being here has become my therapy.” As she spoke, she broke into tears. “Things looked like they were falling apart,” she said, “but they were actually falling together.”

Hardships remain, as she juggles the \$1,700 monthly rent, ongoing car repairs and other expenses. She hopes to save for a house and go back to college someday, maybe to specialize in writing curriculum for exceptional students and those with behavioral problems.

But her first order of business is getting Isaiah through graduation and onto firm ground as an adult, to make sure he doesn't struggle the way she has. “If he's well off, that's all I ask for,” she said. It makes all of her difficulties worth it. “Isaiah was my biggest blessing.”

How to help

You can donate to Season of Sharing by going to cfsarasota.org or calling 941-556-2399. You can also mail a check to Season of Sharing, Community Foundation of Sarasota County, 2635 Fruitville Road, Sarasota, FL 34237.

This story comes from a partnership between the Sarasota Herald-Tribune and the Community Foundation of Sarasota County. Saundra Amrhein covers the Season of Sharing campaign, along with issues surrounding housing, utilities, child care and transportation in the area. She can be reached at samrhein@gannett.com.