



Finding her way *home*

Tasha Brown was a hard-working, churchgoing, devoted single mother who lost her savings to a con artist. With resolve and gratitude, she kept her family healthy and whole while they spent months living in Calgary's homeless shelters. Now she and her daughter are speaking out for other families in crisis.

by Catherine Dunphy | photographs by Roth & Ramberg

A mother-daughter moment is happening in a trendy Toronto tattoo parlour. The music is pounding and progressive, and 12-year-old Delilah Brown from Calgary is having her ears pierced. Cracking jokes, her mother, Tasha, is capturing it all on camera.

"My ears have no idea what's coming," Delilah says, scrunching her pretty features into a goofy face. When the needle pierces her lobe, she lets out a cry. "Owww, it hurts," she says. "So maybe you don't want to have kids now," Tasha chuckles. Delilah is furious, forgetting for a moment that this is what she wanted and what her mother has saved for.

"What a baby," Tasha says, still snapping photos. Then she strokes Delilah's knee, murmuring, "It's okay, honey." The look Delilah gives her mother brims with trust and something more – maturity and comprehension. At last, everything really is okay.

Just two years ago, Tasha and her family were homeless, living in shelters in Calgary. Now they're in Toronto, several weeks before Christmas, as special guests of the filmmaker and activist Laura Sky. They are two of the subjects in Sky's new movie, *Home Safe Calgary*, which is screening that night. It's the first in a series of four documentaries telling some of the stories of the growing number of homeless children and families in Canada. In Calgary, one of the nation's most affluent cities, homelessness has increased by 20 percent since 2006. And across the country, nearly one in seven people residing in temporary shelters is a child. Even though the Browns felt lost at times, it turns out that they were far from alone in their struggle.

Hoping for a fresh start

Tasha Brown is a churchgoer, a non-smoker and a non-drinker. She'd done everything she could to be a good mom, unlike her own mother, a drug user and alcoholic who moved her kids twice a year just to collect the damage deposit paid by social services. "She scammed everybody," Tasha says, recalling a childhood of abuse and neglect; when her baby brother cried during the night, it was Tasha who got up to care for him.

Tasha lived in and out of foster care until she was 17, and she became a mother

at 18. (She's 31 now.) She never married Delilah's father, nor the fathers of her two sons, Diante, 9, and Domanik, 7. Living in Saskatchewan and working as a waitress, she did a good job raising her kids on her own. In 2005, she moved them to Calgary to be closer to her brother and some extended family. It seemed like a fresh start, until their building changed ownership and she was given 90 days' notice to vacate.

Tasha kept telling her kids, "We are lucky, we are safe." Each morning, she had them write a thank-you note to the church volunteers.

An acquaintance named Mike told Tasha he could help her out; after he showed her a big house with trees, flower beds and a basketball hoop outside, she handed him her savings as a deposit on rent. Then, the day before she was supposed to move, she had a funny feeling and went to look at the house. The lights were on. Tasha knocked on the door and met an elderly couple who had lived there for 20 years and were not planning on moving any time soon. She never did find Mike or her money. "Of course, I felt like it was all my fault," she says.

Unable to get another apartment without first and last months' rent, Tasha was forced to take Delilah, Diante and Domanik to an emergency shelter that's part of Calgary's Inn from the Cold initiative. The organization provides accommodations and food for homeless families on a rotating basis at more than 80 churches, synagogues and community centres.

For three months, the Browns were shuttled from one church basement to another, never in the same place for two nights in a row. Sometimes there were showers, sometimes not. They slept on cots, or just mats on a floor, close to strangers who had hacking coughs or screamed at night.

Each morning they were roused from bed at 5:30, fed breakfast and sent away in yellow school buses, carrying everything they owned in their backpacks. They were dropped off downtown, into the midst of >>

briefcase-toting workers, where they walked down a back alley to a community centre. From there Delilah and Diante rode a bus for two hours to get to school. The churches and community centres would give the children lunch each day in a brown-paper bag, conspicuous among the fancy lunch boxes the other kids at school carried.

Tasha bought each child an identical black notebook and special pen. This was their journal, she told them; they were having an adventure and they should write about it daily. "We are lucky, we are safe," she reminded them. Each morning, she sat them down to write a thank-you note to the volunteers and church organizers working at the shelter. She told them to find something specific to acknowledge. Tasha laughs about it now: "I was surprised none of the other families were doing it. [The volunteers] weren't used to getting thank-you notes, that's for sure."

But despite her efforts to provide stability and structure, her family was hurting. Little things ate at Tasha's self-respect, like the fact that she and the other homeless families were ushered into each church via the back door ("It was so insulting," she says) or the pushing and shoving as families struggled to be first inside each night. Sometimes the volunteers were rude.

Delilah's marks started to plummet. She was in the fifth grade, and because the family had left their previous home, she had to attend a new school. She was away from her old friends and supportive teachers. At her new school, she made a fatal social mistake; she told a girl she thought was her friend that she was homeless. "She backstabbed me," Delilah says, her blue-green eyes full of pain. "She told everybody. They rubbed it in my face."

Tasha felt helpless. Her children were exhausted from too many hours on a bus, >>



Tasha Brown (centre) at home with her kids (from left to right): Domanik, Peter, Tibor, Delilah and Diante.



too many church basements and too little sleep. The boys were acting out. Diante defied her at a shelter. She carried him into the hallway kicking and screaming before she was overcome with tears: She realized that she had no place to put him for a time out.

A sense of purpose

When a reporter from the *Calgary Herald* came to a community centre that Thanksgiving to write about homeless families, Tasha told her family's story. After the article was printed, Tasha was offered an apartment for six months at a reduced rate. It was the first step out of homelessness. Her family has since moved into a subsidized, Calgary Housing townhouse. It has a yard and a great view of a field and the city skyline. Delilah, now 13, has her own room, which she has painted peach and decorated with posters of Gwen Stefani and Linkin Park. School is 15 minutes away; her marks are up, she's been on the volleyball team, she takes swimming and hip-hop lessons, and she has just passed her babysitting first-aid course. "Life's better," Delilah says. "I don't have to look back."

Except, that is, when she chooses to. She and her mother have been trained as ambassadors for the Home Safe project: They lead discussions at film screenings and answer questions about what it was like to be homeless. Tasha enjoys the sense of purpose. In addition to earning a childcare certificate and working for an organization that helps homeless families, she has become the legal guardian of two teenage brothers who left their abusive father. When she tells me that people now look up to her, she is suddenly a little shy, pushing away the shiny, straight brown hair that frames her face. Delilah adds, "I realized that this is a good opportunity to talk about how homelessness was for me and my brothers. It's important for people to know that just because someone is homeless it doesn't mean they're invisible." ■