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She climbs a hill, from homeless to Harvard

It is an uphill climb to Harvard Law School from the homeless shelter, but it is one that Tajah Muhammad knows how to make.

It is more than a wish; it is an imperative.

"I really do feel I have to succeed," Muhammad said. "There is no other choice."

Law school means that Muhammad, 21, can achieve the life she briefly glimpsed when she and her mother lived in Mendham Township in 2002 in the home of a man her mother hoped to marry. Law school means that the children she hopes to have someday will have a chance at that life she saw — the life that money buys in moneyed Morris County.

But more, law school means that Muhammad can buy a home for her mother, maybe to break that cycle of dependence on abusive men, like the one who put her in a Georgia hospital, an act that again sent mother and daughter on a downward spiral.

"Not only do I want this for me, but for my mother," Muhammad said. "I want it more for my mother. She had worked so hard. If I could get a home for her it would be worth it, even if that is all I could do."

They had been on that path once, with the crash coming on Christmas Day, 2002, when Muhammad's mother called the Mendham Township police to ask where a family goes when they have no home.

They ended up at a shelter run by Homeless Solutions, the Morristown-based organization. Muhammad was living in the shelter when she was the point guard for the Morristown girls basketball team, when she graduated from high school in 2003.

"I have a big idea about the bottom," she said. "One day I was living in a nice home in a town where 16-year-old girls get BMWs in their million-dollar homes. I have seen their homes, they truly did not know" — that Muhammad and her mother were living in a homeless shelter.

"You wake up and you're living in one room with your mother," she said. "From that day I realized I needed to go to school and finish."

Still, she said, "We laughed. We had to take the positive side."

Now, one year away from graduation from Montclair State University with a pre-law degree, Muhammad faces uncertainty about how to pay for campus housing, which she said would make her studies easier, or how to pay for LSATs and other tests that would prepare her for law school. Because she is an adult, but can not be declared independent until she is 24, Muhammad said she seems to be in between everything.

She lives in Irvington with her sister, but drives a car that needed a new transmission. She works, but when she lost her job for two months a year ago, she had bills to pay instead of saving for college. Loans pile up.

She applied for public housing with the Morristown Housing Authority but was placed on a waiting list.

If living in a shelter until she graduates from Montclair would get her one step closer to her dream, Muhammad said she is willing to do it again.

Perhaps because she knows the system so well, Muhammad said she has little patience for some of the bureaucrats she had dealt with. College is a business, she said. They make that perfectly clear.

"I've done everything you've asked me to do," she said to some absent desk jockey. "Why can't you help me?"

There is a weariness to Muhammad's voice as she talks about her life.

"They say that college is supposed to be the best four years of your life, but I don't know that," she said.

No clubs to join. No spring breaks in Cancun.

Weekends are for working. Weeks off mean more hours.

It's not about money, she said: "Money comes and goes. I'll pay now and party later."

What is it about?

About the dignity of living, about surviving, overcoming. About standing up and saying, I matter, dammit.

It is also about becoming hard, fearless, immune to the bruises that could be so evident.

Tajah Muhammad, 21, climbing that hill to Harvard, says, "I'll cry later."
