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TENT LIFE SYMBOLIZES SAD DESCENT

A 43-year-old woman suffering from schizophrenia lives outside her mother's house, beyond help.

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In a coral-colored family room, amid snapshots of Carmelita Jackson's 24 grandchildren and 19 great-grandchildren, sits a photo of her daughter Primrose looking like a princess in a white wedding dress with a sweetheart collar below a strand of pearls.

Less than 20 yards from the den, the real Primrose Jackson lives on the sidewalk inside a makeshift tent of sea-foam green plastic attached to the Jacksons' fence by chicken wire. Her clothes have not been washed in months, and she walks barefoot against the blazing afternoon sun.

Since Primrose's descent into schizophrenia a decade ago, she has wandered the streets in her mother's neighborhood just north of Opa-locka Boulevard.

Earlier this year, the 43-year-old Jamaica native built the plastic shelter in the shadow of a ficus tree beside the Jacksons' modest beige home.

In the years since Primrose lost her way, Carmelita Jackson says she has tried everything to get help for her daughter, including going to court to involuntarily commit her for psychiatric care, only to watch as doctors release her days later no more healthy than when she arrived.

She's tried to coax Primrose into the house to take a bath or wash her clothing. She's offered her daughter food, only to be rejected, she said, because Primrose is afraid she will try to poison her.

To Jackson's neighbors in this blue-collar North Miami-Dade community, Primrose is a menace who once set fire to her mother's kitchen and has been known to defecate or change clothes openly. But she will always be Jackson's little girl -- alone and sick.

"It's like dying inside; I feel so helpless. I've tried everything, and nothing works," said Jackson. "I worry, because she's on the street a lot. Sometimes I can't sleep because I don't know if she's alive or what happened to her. She's my child, regardless."

Primrose lost her job as a home health aide when the elderly woman she cared for was admitted to a nursing home, Jackson said. Weeks later, a collections agency took her car and then her husband's truck. "I told her it wasn't the end of the world," Jackson said. "But she said, 'I'm going to be homeless soon, because I can't pay my rent, and they're going to evict me.'"

And they did.

In the ensuing months, Primrose moved in with a friend, then moved into her mother's house. She stopped caring for her five children and then lost custody

altogether to her ex-husband. She largely stopped eating. She began talking to herself. Eventually, she stopped going to church.

"She just started to go, slowly, slowly," Jackson said. "I tried to tell her she was sick and needed help."

For the next several years, Primrose walked the streets around Opa-locka. She begged for food outside Winn-Dixie and Publix, and slept wherever she got tired. Again and again, Jackson begged her daughter to accept help. Again and again, Primrose refused. Her teeth turned black and rotted, and have mostly fallen out.

MENTAL EVALUATIONS

Primrose has been involuntarily committed for psychiatric evaluations two or three times in the past, Jackson says, including a hospital visit around Memorial Day a year ago. Doctors released her after three days with prescriptions for psychiatric drugs that were never filled. Primrose received a \$6,400 bill. It was never paid.

Other strategies have been equally ineffective. On the advice of a police officer, she said, Jackson removed her daughter's tent and had her belongings taken to the dump. When Primrose returned to the camp hours later, she called police to accuse her mother of larceny, Jackson said.

On a recent visit, a rooster crows in the distance as Primrose sits on the sidewalk and methodically peels small slices of wood from a log with her fingernails. She is dressed in a filthy tan button-down shirt and a flowing blue skirt that droops loosely from her hips. Her hair hangs in tangled knots.

"My mom lives here," she says, by way of explanation. She says she has "an active case" somewhere in the court system and that police or court officials have given her permission to set up camp on the sidewalk. "They know I'm here," she says.

Primrose is burning twigs in a pan on the sidewalk and is cooking some substance she refuses to identify.

Gesner Guerrier and his son live directly behind the Jacksons in a small house he rents. "I don't use my backyard," he says matter-of-factly.

"No one can do anything, but we fear having her there," he says.

Hugo Castillo, 65, who lives across from Primrose's little camp, said his family has avoided being outside -- and had to keep children at his son's recent birthday party indoors -- because Primrose's behavior has been so disturbing.

"She does everything out there. Everything," Castillo said.

In October 2007, an anonymous neighbor reported the Jacksons to Miami-Dade County's code enforcement department, complaining that a "squatter" had taken residence outside the home.

But records show the county's Team Metro took no action. "This was a family issue and not a typical compliance case," said county spokeswoman Vanessa Santana-Peñate. "The case was closed."

COMPLAINT LODGED

A month later, on Nov. 7, 2007, inspector Sylvia Williams was back at the Jackson home again, this time to investigate an anonymous complaint that the Jacksons had erected a black iron fence without a permit. Carmelita Jackson

said they built the fence to keep her daughter from getting into the house and setting a fire again.

Santana-Peñate said the fence had been permitted, county records say, and again the case was closed.

Police have been called to the Jackson home about 10 times in the last two years, said Roy Rutland, a spokesman for Miami-Dade police. Calls to police have involved reports of vandalism, burglary, disturbances and theft, Rutland said.

"It's crazy. Sickening," said Jackson. "I don't know what to do. It's been so long -- 10 years of this."

