

L

Inside:  
Town News,  
Police Beat,  
Who's Cooking, Dining,  
The Readers Page,  
Real Estate  
Classifieds

I

Ed Lowe:



A Client  
In Waiting  
Page G3

F

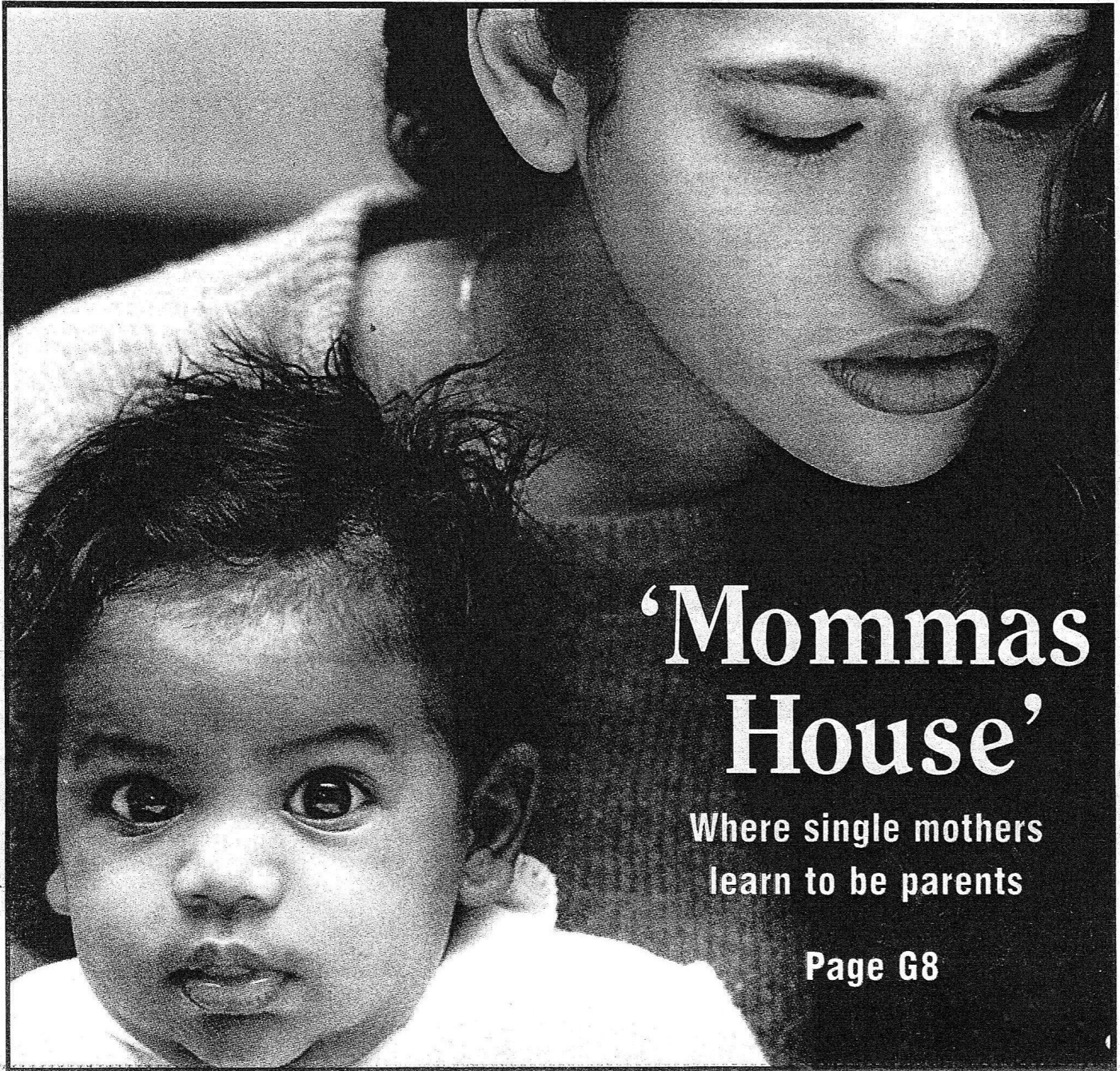
Hedges Don't  
Have to Be Boring  
Page G5

•  
Here Comes The  
Fuller Brush Man  
Page G3

E

Newsday

Sunday, February 1, 1998



# 'Mommias House'

Where single mothers  
learn to be parents

Page G8

# STARTING OVER

**N**O LITTLE GIRL ever says, "When I grow up, I want to be a homeless unwed teenage mom."

"My childhood dream was to become a CEO of my own company — which I'm still hoping to do someday," says Noelia, a 19-year-old from Massapequa Park, who, like the other young women in this story, declined to use her last name. "I was doing marketing in my senior year in high school." Then the cramped swelling in Noelia's belly became a baby that shattered her life at 17.

"Where should I start? I had a good childhood," she continues. "I was never a bad girl, I never did drugs, never took alcohol . . . nothing. I was like the perfect little daughter. I did everything my mother wanted me to do. I couldn't cross the street until I was in the sixth grade. I know she was just trying to protect me."

Six months before high school graduation, Noelia had to make the biggest decision of her life: whether to have the baby of an older man of whom her parents did not approve. She chose the baby. "There was no way my mother could take me back. So I came to Mommas House."

Noelia found her second chance in the unlikely of places: the former convent of St. Paul the Apostle Church in Brookville. Since it started in 1986, the Mommas House program — a not-for-profit organization whose founder, Pat Shea, is an anti-abortion activist — has established a residence on the grounds of Our Lady of Lourdes parish in Malverne as well as the Brookville convent. And in those dozen years, it has helped more than 200 young unwed mothers between the ages of 17 and 21 begin the hard work of growing up and learning to be a parent.

The mothers of Mommas House in Brookville are the subject of an ongoing photo project by Belenna Mesa Lauto, 38, of Hicksville, an associate professor of photography at St. John's University in Jamaica. Lauto has spent two years photographing the everyday moments of the mothers and their children, hoping to foster a dialogue about teen pregnancy.

"There is no one cause for teen pregnancy," says Cuban-born Lauto, "no one solution for surviving it."

In the Brookville house, a happy chaos fills the dormitory-style space. Noelia and her toddler, Patrick, share with three other teen moms and their babies. Mommas House pulses with Kodak Moments — doughy babies whose



Belenna Mesa Lauto

young mothers glow with pride when their young ones finish a jar of strained peas, or smile nervously when they've changed a diaper correctly.

In those tender instants, it is easy to romanticize motherhood. But there is something terribly unromantic about this place, which in another time would have been called a home for wayward girls. Mommas House is more than a place to live; it is a boot camp that teaches young mothers how to raise a child responsibly. Some stay for as little as a few months; others, up to two

Photographer **Belenna Mesa Lauto** offers a look at the everyday moments and life-changing challenges of unwed mothers

years. All enter into a "covenant" to obey rules, participate in a family life fostered there, and pursue an education during the day, when day care is provided by volunteers. The mutual goal is to have the mother leave with a plan for a better future.

"We offer young women a place to live, learn about motherhood and find support as they complete their educations," says Shea, 57, of Massapequa, a longtime activist with Birthright of Nassau-Suffolk, an anti-abortion group. "We offer support systems so that the girls can get on with their lives."

Mommas House began as an attempt to provide a safety net for at least some of the young mothers that members of the Birthright group met in area hospitals. Too often, Shea says, deciding not to abort meant the women would be shunned by family and spurned by lovers.

A St. Paul the Apostle parishioner,

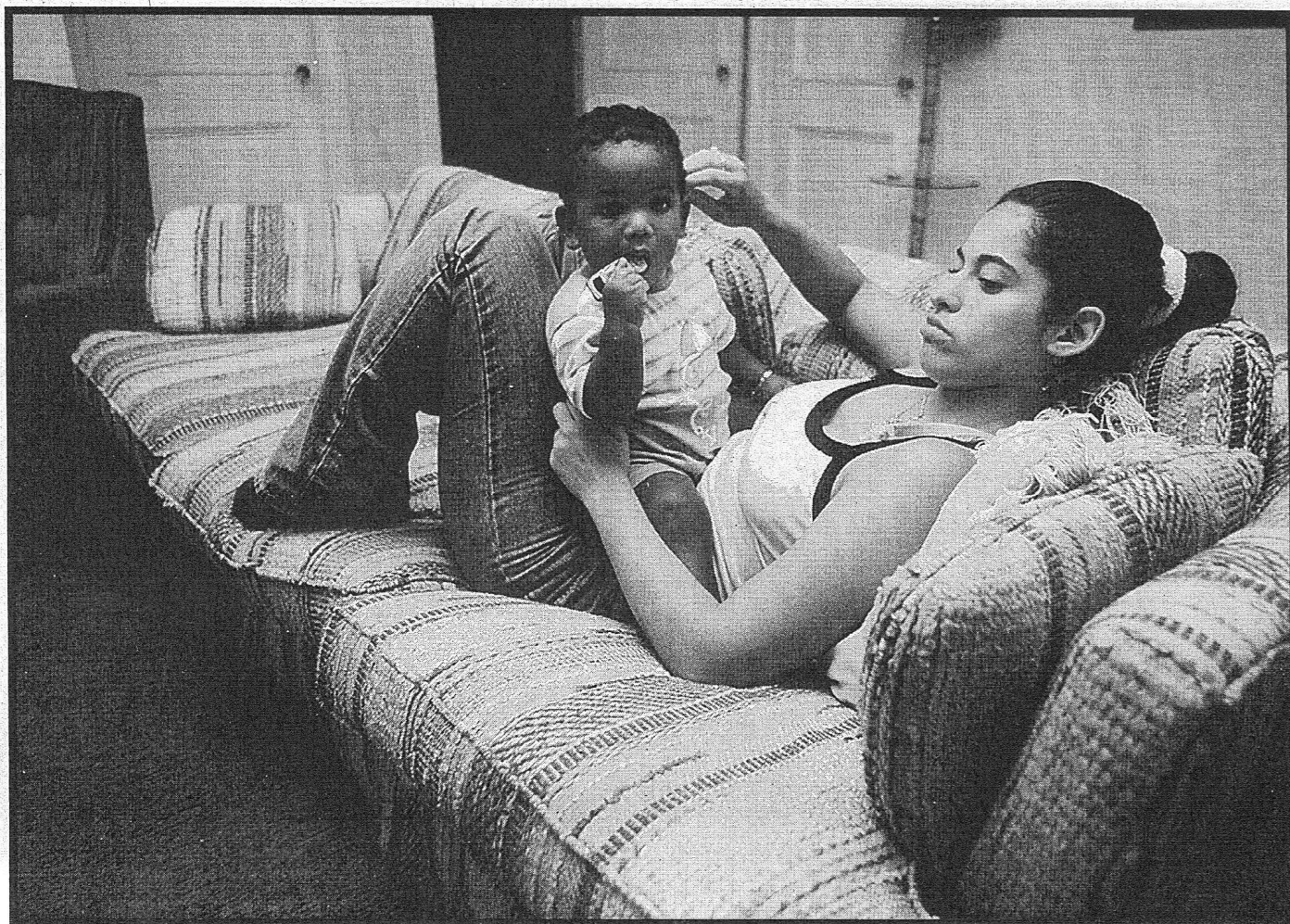
Lauto decided to document the struggles of the women of Mommas House when the Brookville residence opened in 1995. As part of her project, Lauto asks the young women she photographs to provide a spoken or written biography that tells where they have been, and where their new lives are taking them. The accounts of three mothers that follow are based on those self-portraits.

Though Lauto's own life with her husband of 17 years, Bill, and their two sons, ages 10 and 4, is far removed from the circumstances of most Mommas House moms, she feels their stories teach an important lesson.

"People see a pregnant teenager and it's such a negative; I see an opportunity for an educational message for other teens and for other parents," Lauto says. "I want to create an awareness that not all these girls are disposable. We all are required to take a second look."



Founder Pat Shea with Samantha. "We offer young women a place to live, learn about motherhood and find support . . ."



After being pushed out by her boyfriend, Noelia and Patrick went to Mommas House. Though she bristled at first at some house rules, she has come to understand them.

## NOELIA AIMING FOR THE TOP

**N**OELIA DESCRIBES herself growing up in Massapequa Park as "a perfect little Dominican girl" who "led a very sheltered life until I was 16." She had hopes of heading her own business someday. Then she was raped.

"It was somebody I knew. It was a friend. At that point, I felt like garbage. I felt like I deserved it . . . All those things about low esteem that girls feel, I felt. It's not so bad anymore because my experiences make me a better person. I forgive. I just have to go on."

Feeling so violated and ashamed about the rape that she didn't even tell her mother, Noelia started to see herself differently, and she started to behave differently toward boys. "I felt I deserved it and that sex was all that guys would want from me. I felt like that was my job: to have sex. I didn't do anything with anybody but I always felt dirty."

She got a job at McDonald's and fell in love with 20-year-old Patrick, who, Noelia says, turned out to be a jealous and possessive lover whom her parents disliked. "Patrick was the only person I slept with . . . I mean, besides what happened to me . . . but that wasn't a choice. So to me, Patrick was the person I lost my virginity to."

Patrick proposed marriage to the 16-

year-old five months after they began dating. Noelia was naive, in love — and soon pregnant.

"I remember the school telling me to go some other place because they offered some parenting thing. That — me off. Just because you're pregnant doesn't mean that you no longer have a brain. In my high school, numerous, numerous girls had gotten pregnant. They all had abortions. I was the only one actually strong enough to say, 'I'm keeping my baby.'"

Noelia graduated with a Regents diploma. "I was so happy to be on that stage. Here I was, six months pregnant, standing on the stage probably smarter than half the kids present. I proved everybody wrong."

Within months, Noelia would no longer gloat. "I was still in my own world, thinking that everything will be fine, knowing very well that nothing was fine." She left her mother's house, and lived with Patrick and their new baby son for three months before he told her to take his son and get out. "I can't be-

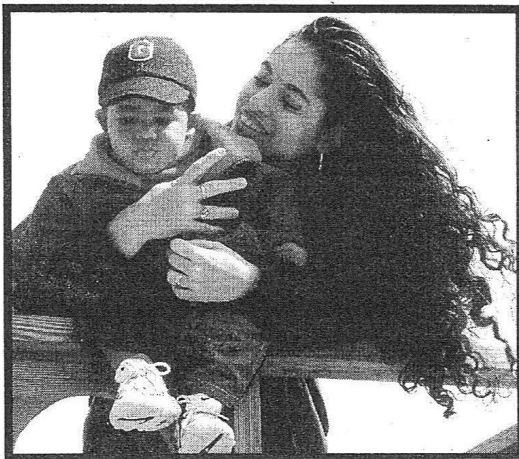
lieve Patrick could let me go. I mean, he just let me go, as if it was nothing. It was horrible."

Noelia was equally upset at the prospect of living at Mommas, which is where her parents eventually brought her a year ago. "I was now

in a house full of strangers with a baby I knew nothing about. I didn't know how to take care of a baby." Though she bristled at some of the house rules and practices, such as "grading" a mother on how she cares for her child — "you shouldn't have to compete to see who is the better mother" — she now understands what they exist for.

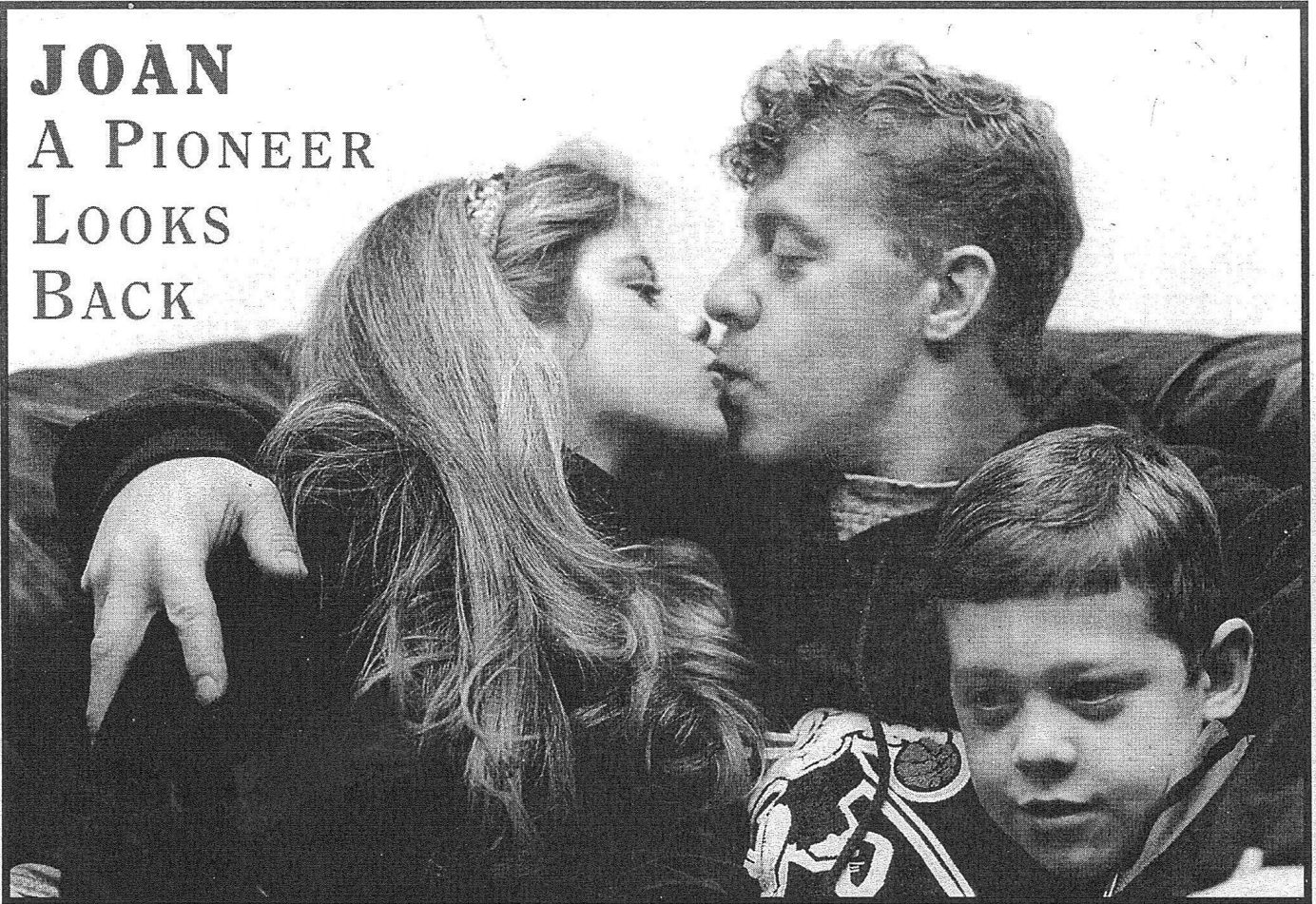
Today, 19-year-old Noelia is enrolled at Nassau Community College and hopes to leave Mommas once she gets her associate's degree in marketing in August. She and her son, Patrick, will be moving into an apartment in Bellmore with a girlfriend.

Noelia still hopes to be CEO of her own company. "There are many girls my age, of my descent, of my heritage, that, as minorities, just become statistics. It's constant. It's always happening. I felt good that I wasn't going to be another one."



Of the pregnant girls at school, Noelia says she was "the only one actually strong enough to say, 'I'm keeping my baby.'"

# JOAN A PIONEER LOOKS BACK



In 1986, Joan had Timothy, right, and was the first one to move into Mommas House. Two years later, Joan had moved along in her life, marrying Timothy's father, Brian.

**J**OAN, WHO LIVES in Merrick, is the modern mom incarnate — a nurturing suburban wife and mother of three. A social worker at Mommas, the 32-year-old is finishing her bachelor's degree in human services at the State University at Old Westbury.

But Joan took a rocky road to arrive at her happy ending: The first homeless mother to move into Mommas House in 1986, Joan lived with her newborn in the program's Wantagh house for a year while beginning her college education. (The Wantagh operation has since been moved to Malverne.)

"I grew up in Wantagh with seven brothers and sisters. It was tough, and I often felt lost in the shuffle. At 21, I was faced with an unplanned, unwanted pregnancy. Neither my boyfriend, Brian, nor myself wanted to continue the relationship. Both sets of parents also felt that was best. There was a tremendous amount of social pressure. I was advised by many individuals that to terminate the pregnancy would be the best option.

"I never considered that. I felt ashamed bearing a child out of wedlock. I gained a 'bad girl' status and actually believed that I was a bad person. My feelings had become so complicated. I felt it was wrong to be pregnant and even worse to be sad about it."

Joan's parents decided that the most appropriate thing would be to "deliver and relinquish." "I didn't want to hurt or disappoint my parents. My position affected the lives of everyone involved. The decision to relinquish was made by others. Life would be more fun, less expensive, easier, they assured. I just wanted to be accepted again. So I went along with my parents and said

whatever they wanted to hear."

After a covert delivery in the local hospital, "I came to a realization that I wanted my baby and that I always wanted this baby. I didn't want to place him." She told her parents. "In announcing my decision to keep Timothy, I was basically homeless."

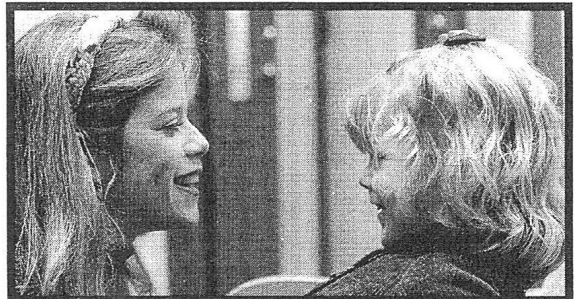
Joan was allowed to come back to the family house but Timmy was placed in foster care for the first three months of his life. "I was frantic. I was calling around to every agency in the phone book and I called Birthright." As soon as the Wantagh house was opened, she moved in.

The first year at Mommas House was trial and error, "a slow process. After some time, I was ready to be more independent, and I moved into an apartment with another single mother who watched Timothy with her child while I went to work full time."

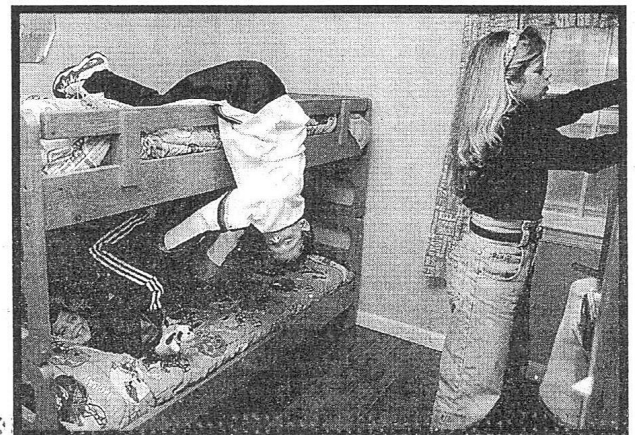
Joan had started seeing Timothy's dad, Brian, during his visits at Mommas. "Eventually, Brian and I both felt we loved each other and wanted to become a family with our son." Two years after Timothy's birth, they married. "To say that marriage is a challenge is an understatement. Our marriage has undergone all the changes other couples have adjusting to each other, but also adjusting to being Timothy's parents."

Today, Joan describes their relationship as "deeply rooted," and their family has grown by two: another son, Tyler, 8, and a daughter, Shannon, 4. Joan, who doesn't want to glamorize teen pregnancy, admits she was lucky.

"After all we've been through, I reflect back on the day Timmy was born. I know that not only gave birth to my son, but also to a meaningful life for myself."



Joan and Brian have had two more children, Shannon, 4, above, and Tyler, 8, below, playing with Timothy in the family's Merrick home.





Sonia, playing with Pierre, now works for a biomedical company.

## SONIA A BETTER FUTURE AHEAD

**S**ONIA, ORIGINALLY of Elizabethtown, N.C., weaves a tangled story of a childhood spent shuttling between her mother in Manhattan and her maternal grandparents down south. Dating was a pastime; kissing started leading to more. "At 14, I became pregnant. By 15, I had given birth to a baby boy who I gave up for adoption. My mom did not know until six months after."

After the adoption, everyone pretended it never happened. Two years later, what was left of her family structure fell apart. "My grandmother died of cancer on April 14, 1990. I started acting out. Being bad. I was having problems with the police," such as truancy.

Sonia's mother moved the 17-year-old to New York City, but was dealing with her own problems. "She was working when I came up north, and as time went on she stopped working and stopped taking care of herself. She got food stamps and cashed them in for drugs."

After falling in with a bad crowd, Sonia dealt drugs in a desperate attempt to catapult from poverty. "By the time I graduated high school, I felt the only way I could leave this ghetto life was to sell drugs."

With the money from her drug dealing, she tried for a clean start by moving to Montreal. There, sharing a loft with six friends, Sonia had her first experience with a stable home. "We no longer sold drugs. We learned there was a better way to achieve what we truly wanted

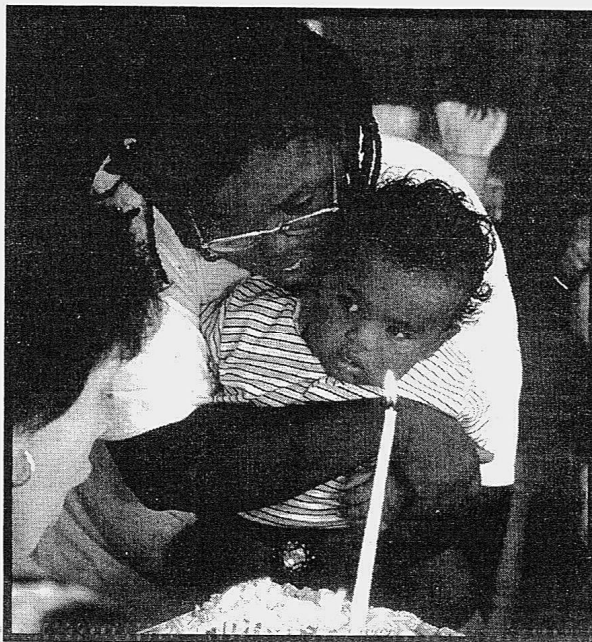
out of life, which was stability. We six lived in Montreal and worked in Plattsburgh, New York, for a year and a half."

In 1994, Sonia returned to Manhattan in a failed attempt to rescue a younger sister still living with her drug-addicted mother. The next year, soon after her new boyfriend Michael was jailed in Florida, she learned that she was carrying his baby. She lived in a Freeport rental and had a job, but as she grew bigger she was fired. Thus began the domino effect — no job, no money, no home.

Sonia lived for a time in local parks before finding Mommas House. She moved in three days after delivering Pierre. She was 21.

In the 2½ years that Sonia has lived at Mommas House, she has completed her courses for certification in computer electronics at Suburban Technical School. Now, at 23, Sonia is working for a biomedical company, traveling to local hospitals to service their electronics equipment. When Sonia and Pierre leave the house in March, she says she will be ready to establish a home for her son akin to the one she enjoyed as a youngster in North Carolina.

Those memories and the Mommas House lessons have prepared her. "I've learned about patience at Mommas. And that's what I remember most about my grandmother: She was very patient with me. Everybody's been very patient with me." She adds, "The future I had dreamed of seems within reach." ●



Sonia returned recently to Eisenhower Park, above, where, while pregnant with Pierre, she lived for three weeks before coming to Mommas House. At left, they celebrate Pierre's birthday. Living at Mommas House, Sonia has regained the sense of structure she lost after the death of her grandmother in 1990.