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Marquis Barnett escapes turmoil, blossoms on hardwood

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Monday, August 17th 2009, 8:26 PM



Harbus for News

Marquis Barnett witnessed mother's abuse and lived in two shelters during 2008-09 season.

Far Rockaway is easily one of the roughest neighborhoods in the city. But after all that Marquis Barnett has been through, he is proud to call it home.

Right now, the former St. Raymond HS forward is thankful just to have a home.

"I'm happier," Barnett said. "Things are looking better than they were."

Barnett has good reason to be optimistic. He, his two younger siblings and mother spent seven months living in two different shelters before settling into their current three-bedroom apartment in Far Rockaway in May.

Before that, Barnett had to rescue his mother, who was involved in a physically abusive relationship.

The situation came to a head last fall, when Barnett heard screams and commotion from his mother in the Bronx apartment in which they were living. He frantically followed the noise, only to find his mother's then-boyfriend choking her. Barnett pulled him off of her, and it was then that Francine Baker knew a change had to be made.

"I told myself, 'I can't have my child in jail over this situation,'" said Baker, Barnett's mother. "I dealt with five to six years of abuse in that relationship. My kids didn't know that because I tried to hide it so well. But it was time to get up and leave. I had to finally wake up and pull my kids up out of that."

Baker removed her family from the Bronx last October and enrolled them in a domestic violence shelter in Far Rockaway.

"I was an abused person, but my story was nothing compared to the residents of this shelter," Baker said. "There were burn victims ... I mean, I'm so proud of myself and relieved to make that move and pull myself and my family out of there."

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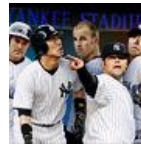
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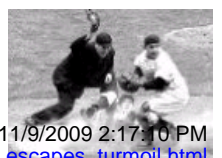
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Barnett was, too, although the ordeal forced him to grow up quickly.

"I was the man of the house," he said. "I had to make sure my mother was alright. She had no help."

The move to Far Rockaway also forced Barnett to change his daily routine.

Barnett would set his alarm for 4 a.m. every day to get ready and make his two-hour train commute to St. Raymond HS, and get there in time for his first-period class.

On game nights, Barnett would make it back to Far Rockaway as late as 11 p.m.

"The next day, he'd wake up at 4 a.m. and do it all over again," Baker said. "That's the kind of kid Marquis is."

But the commute began taking its toll.

"When I moved into the shelter, I lost confidence in my game," he said. "I never experienced that before. It was real tough."

Knowing that Barnett was naturally a quiet kid, Baker sought counseling for her son to try to help him express himself.

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