



Witness

an online magazine

Unwed Teen Moms

A Way Forward

Photographs & Text
by

Richard Falco

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A solitary stream of light passed through the overcast sky as Geri Rainey entered the street from the alley that led to her apartment. There was a chill in the air. Winter was coming. In her arms were two children. The youngest, ten months old, was wrapped in a worn blanket. The other, almost three, was clinging to his mother's shoulder and neck. The last place he wanted to be right now was outside in the cold.

Geri looked up at the sky, clasped the children closer, and proceeded down the block. At her mother's building, she quickly turned into an alley almost identical to the one she had just left, pushed the door open with her foot, and began to ascend the rickety stairs. On the second landing, she knocked at a door with her foot. It opened, and she silently entered. Within a few minutes, she was back on the street. The sun, which had broken through before, was now engulfed in clouds again. She pulled her hands up into the sleeves of her jacket and headed off toward school.

Geri Rainey is nineteen years old. She is an unwed teenage mother. She is on welfare. Her life is not easy. She has a long road ahead of her if she is to break the cycle of poverty that engulfs her. Yet, she is not without hope.

In the state of Ohio, the Department of Social Services has developed an innovative program to help these teenage mothers. It is called LEAP (Learning, Earning, and Parenting). The program targets teen parents and pregnant teens. The primary goal is to keep these teens in school so that



Geri walks past a poster advertising Rush Limbaugh's radio program. Limbaugh is known for his extremely conservative views.



Geri with her two children, Brandon and Krystin.



they can complete their education. Statistics show that teenagers with children who are on public assistance stay on it the longest if they ever get off it at all. Once they quit school, the process becomes even more difficult. Thus, they create a cycle of poverty that tends to become generational. The program operates in all 88 counties in Ohio.

There are several reasons why LEAP should be examined. The first is its success over the short period it has been in operation. The second is that it is comparatively inexpensive, costing \$971 per teenager over three years.

Studies have found that the program's combination of financial incentives and deterrents, along with its package of social services, persuaded 5.6 percent more mothers to graduate from high school or to receive a high school equivalency diploma compared with a control group of mothers outside the program. "The results are sufficiently encouraging to suggest that other states consider this," says Judith Gueron of Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, a nonprofit group that has studied the program's results.

Researchers found that the program was most successful when it reached teenage mothers before they dropped out of school. The program requires that all adolescent mothers under the age of 20 and on welfare attend school or have \$62 a month deducted from their welfare payments. If they attend class regularly, they receive a monthly bonus of \$62. A previous study of the program found that improved school attendance was linked to these incentives and deterrents in combination with the services that it offers. These services include free childcare, transportation to or from school or a childcare center, and a social worker assigned to each teenager.



Geri Rainey at home with her children. Geri is the primary caregiver for the children. It is a source of constant concern and stress. She has a boyfriend, who is the father of one of her children, but he is not very involved in their daily care.



Gerri sits in the waiting room of the Department of Social Services.



Geri initiates the application process for the L.E.A.P. (Learning, Earning, and Parenting) program at the Ohio Department of Social Services.

Other programs also work in conjunction with LEAP. One program, called CASH (Career Action Starts Here), is designed to evaluate individuals for job placements that best fit their capabilities. It also attempts to instill empowerment and motivation skills, teach time & stress management, and learn how to communicate better with others. Geri has already completed the first CASH program and plans to take the second as soon as she completes her GED.

Induction & interview process. All applicants to the program must undergo a detailed interview before being accepted. Once they are accepted, they will attend an orientation that will inform them of the rules, obligations, requirements, program schedules, and procedures. They will then be assigned to a counselor who will oversee and help them through the program.





Geri talks with her assigned counselor. Periodic meetings will be scheduled to monitor her progress and address any issues that may arise.



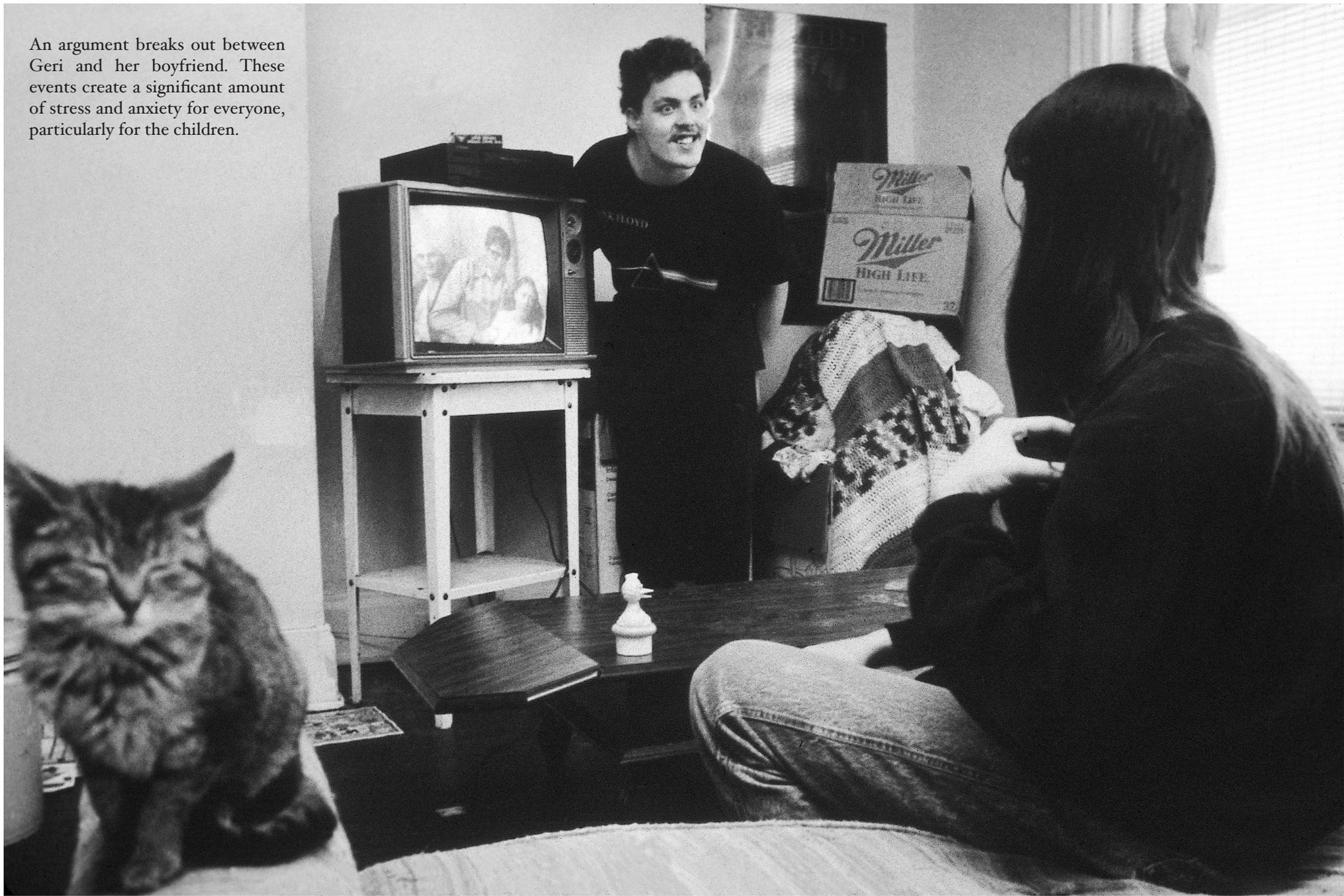
At home with boyfriend, Ron.

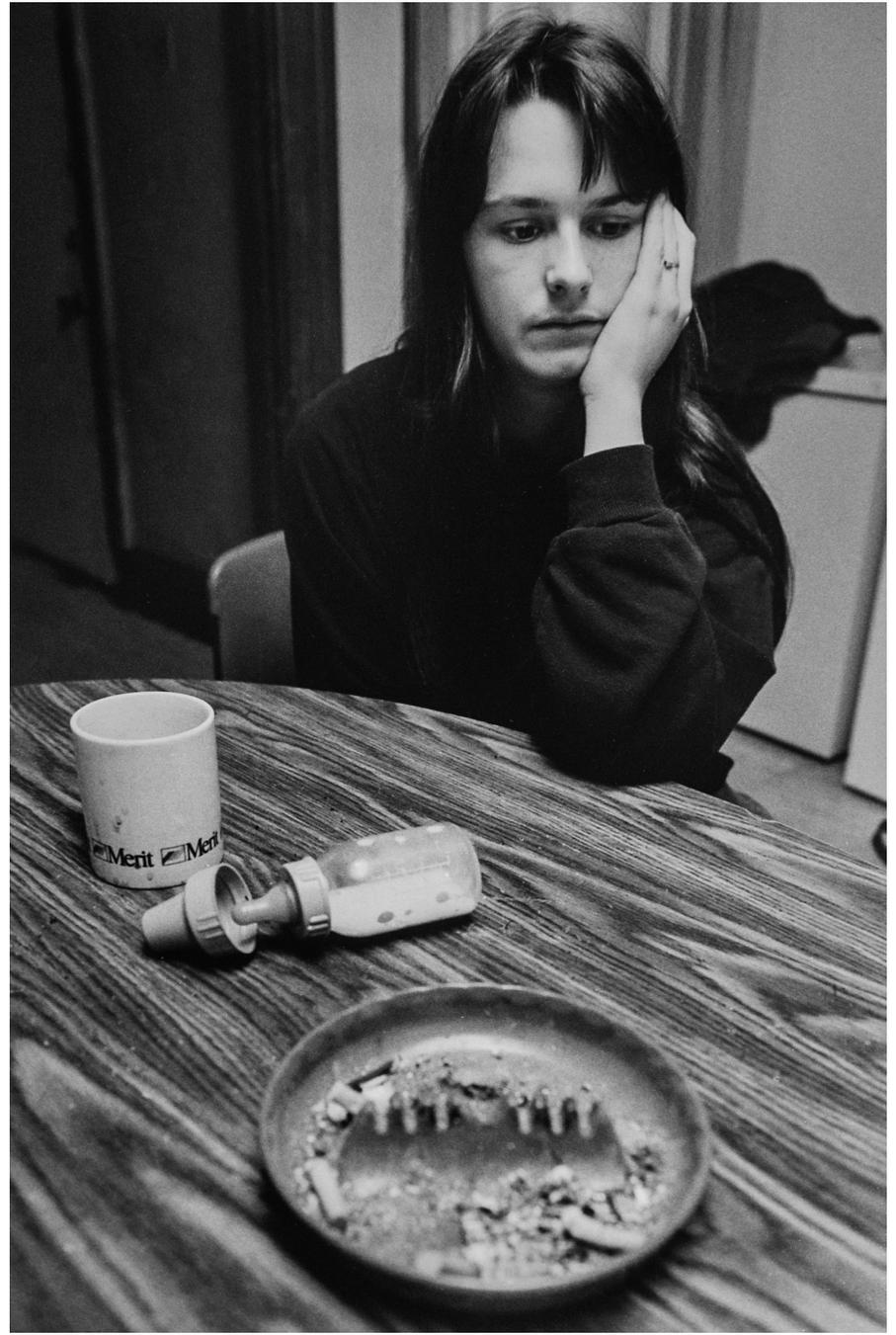
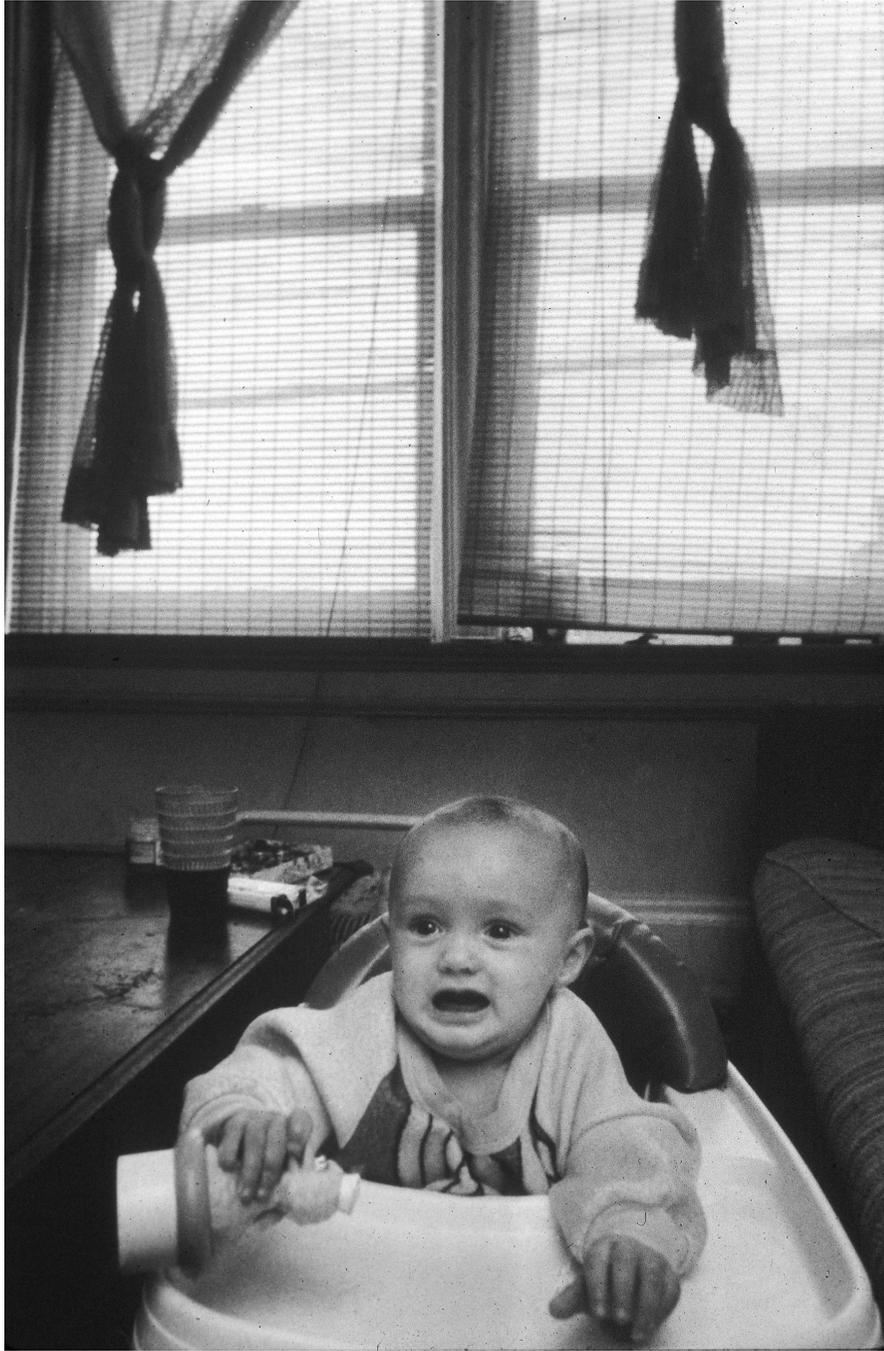


Geri's apartment is in one of the poorer sections of Cincinnati. When the weather gets cold, they turn on the gas stove to help heat the room. This can create a dangerous situation. Fires have often broken out when individuals are careless or neglectful.



An argument breaks out between Geri and her boyfriend. These events create a significant amount of stress and anxiety for everyone, particularly for the children.









The children are very attached to Geri.



Gerri relies heavily on her mother, who lives nearby. They talk about her daily concerns. Her mother also babysits when Gerri is at school.

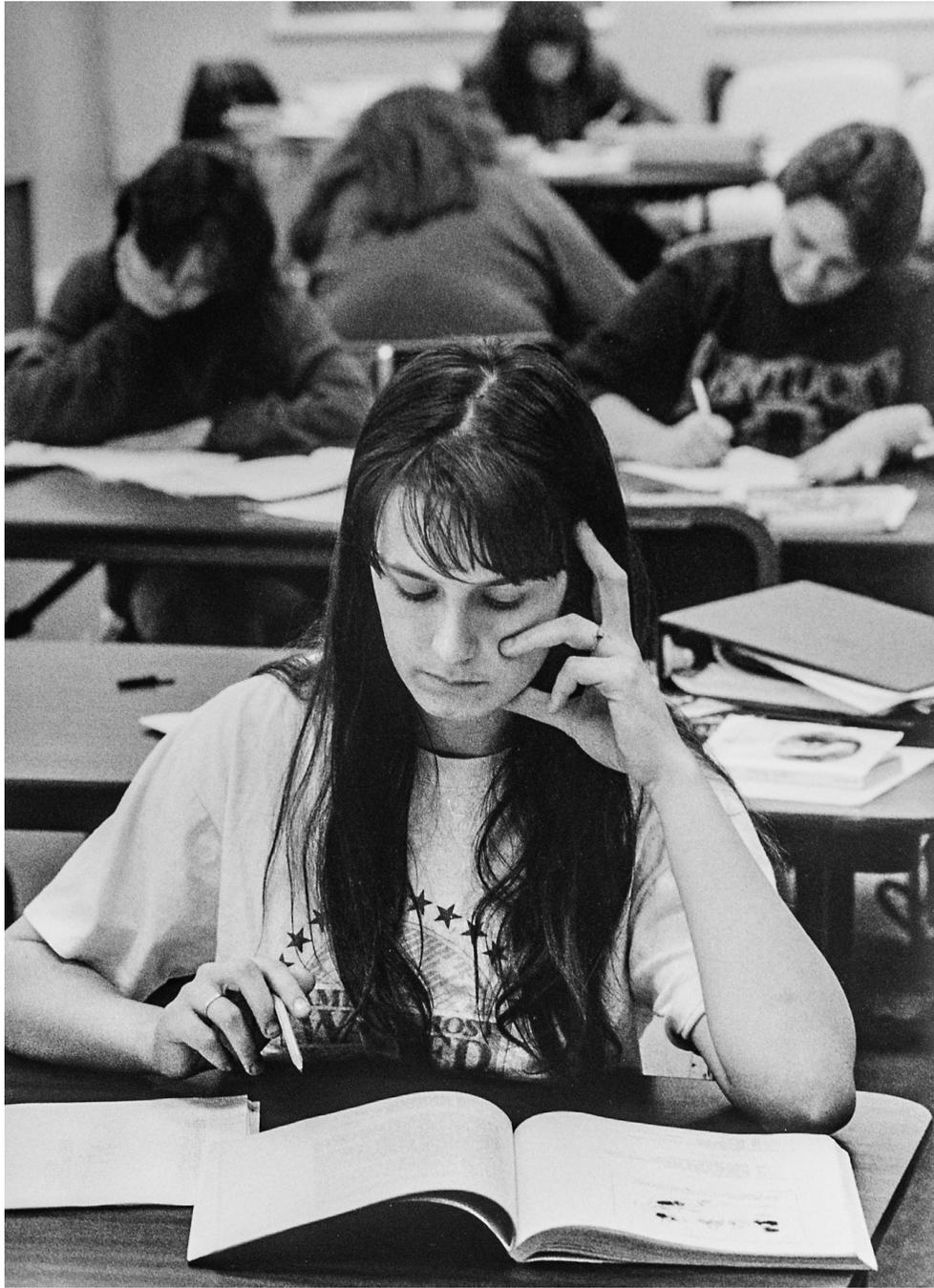




Geri's mother is often the babysitter.

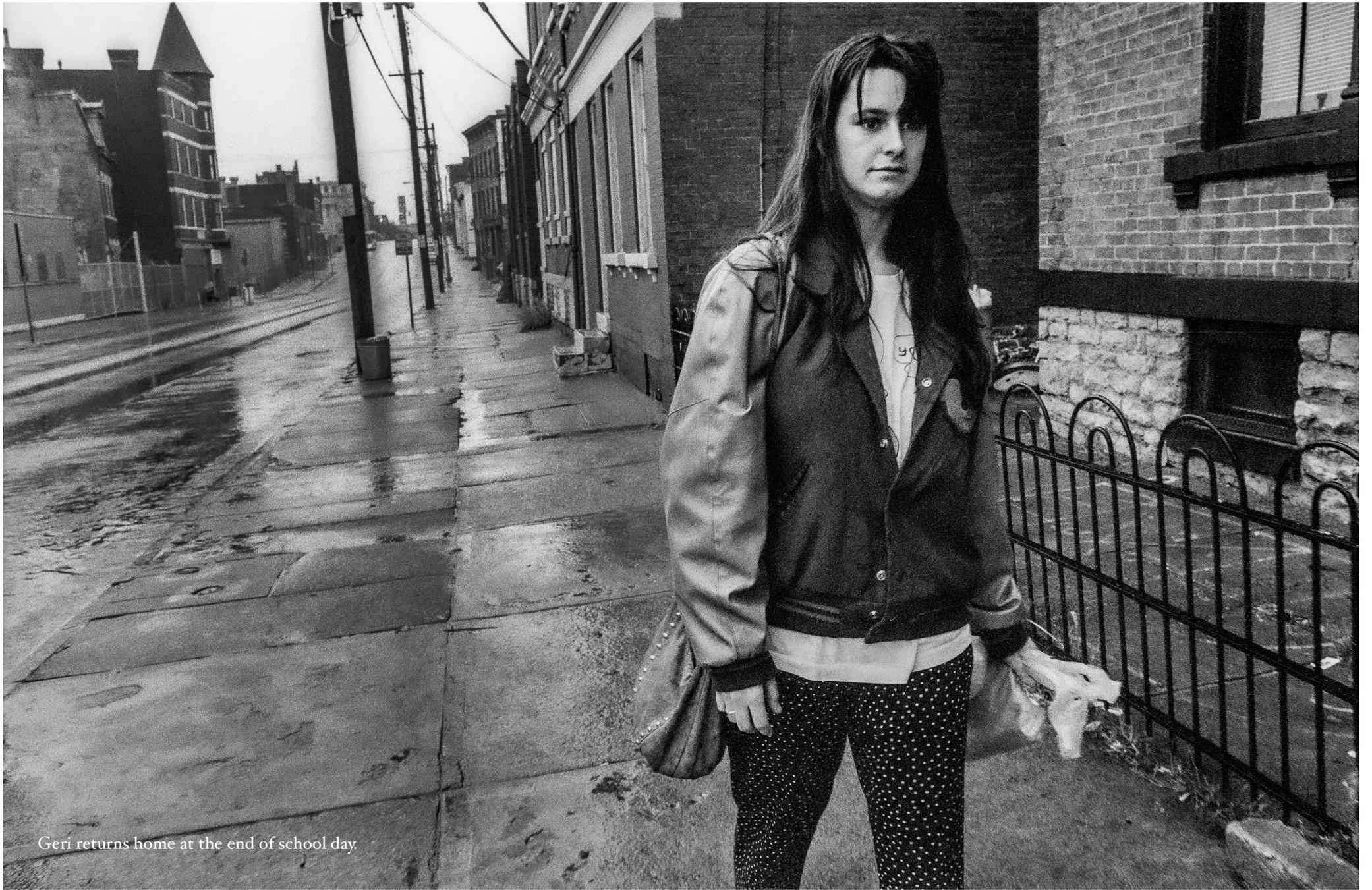


Gerri gets some help with her schoolwork from one of the school's staff members.



Gerri Rainey in the C.A.S.H. program class. This class is designed to evaluate participants' level of education, generate positive empowerment and motivational programming, learn time and stress management, improve communication skills, and assess individuals for work opportunities that best fit their capabilities.





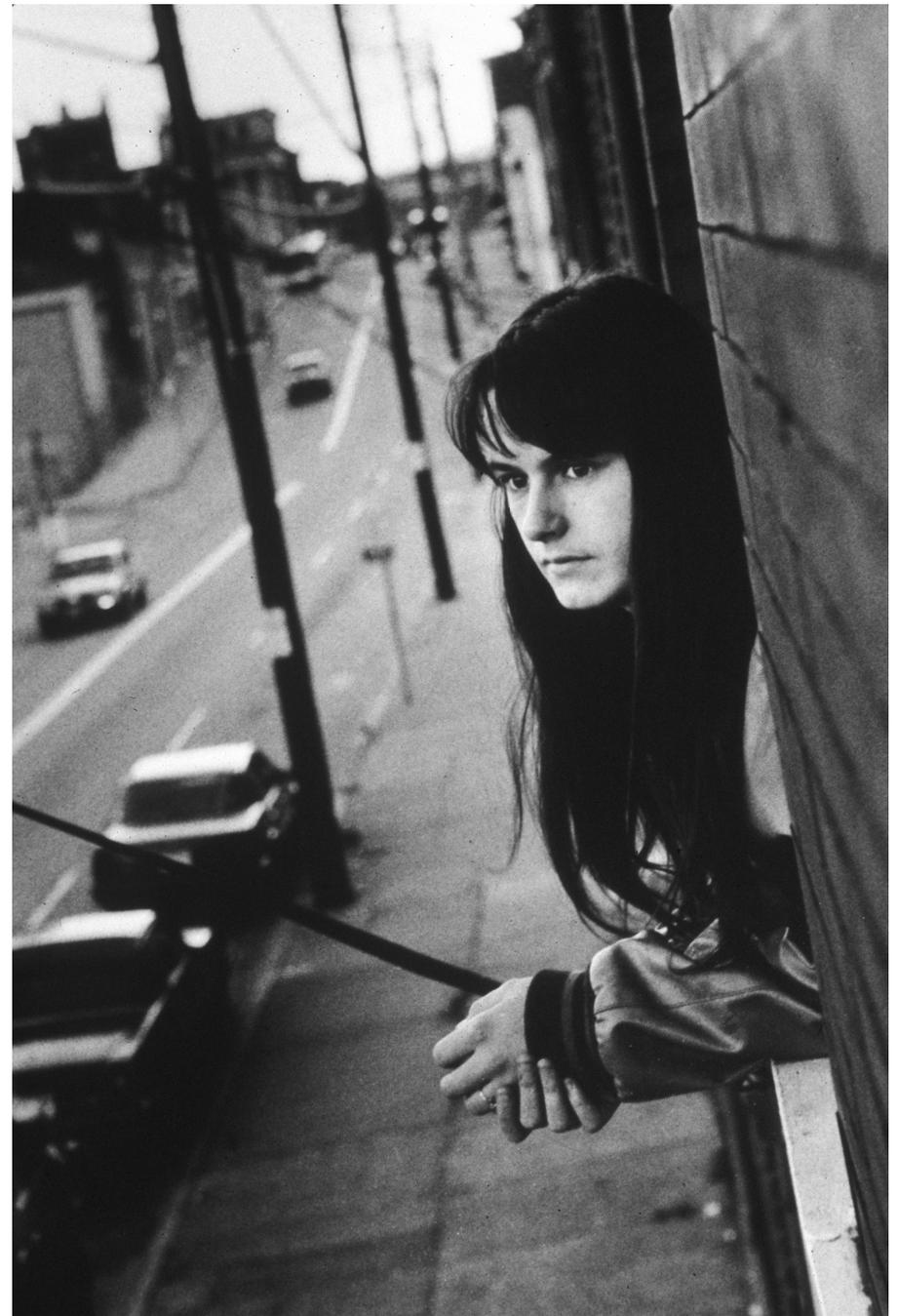
Geri returns home at the end of school day.





Geri is determined to complete her GED and pursue higher education. Her quiet manner conceals the consistency with which she applies herself to her schoolwork. Her attendance is excellent.

However, she has difficulty expressing herself. She is also extremely fearful that if she does not do it herself, she will always be dependent upon public assistance and the whims of the man in her life. Independence for herself and her children is her primary goal.



Richard Falco

For the past thirty-five years, Richard Falco has worked as a photographer, documentary filmmaker, journalist, and educator. He has traveled extensively throughout the world, working on assignments in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the United States. His photographs have appeared in major publications. Clients include *Time Magazine*, *Newsweek*, *Business Week*, *New York Times*, *Life*, *National Geographic Society*, *People*, *Geo*, *New York Magazine*, *Stern*, and *U.S. News & World Report*, to name a few.

There are six published books of his work: *To Bear Witness/September II*, *Medics: A Documentation of Paramedics in the Harlem Community*; *Hunger and Rice in Asia*; *Witchcraft: Ancient Traditions Alive in Salem*; *Water, Wild & Light: The Dingle Peninsula*, and *Autumn Madrigals*.

Mr. Falco is the director of the films, *Crossroads: Rural Health Care in America*; *Project Music: Not A Single Dissonant Note*; and *Holding Back the Surge*, and the executive producer of the films *Josie: A Story About Williams Syndrome* and *Dorothea's Tears: The State of Mental Health Care in America*. He is also the editor & chief of *Witness Magazine*.

He has exhibited in the United States and abroad. Exhibitions include International Center of Photography, NY; Corcoran Gallery, Washington, DC; Nikon Galleries, Tokyo; New York Historical Society, NY and others.

He is a winner of the *International Media Award*, a 15-time award winner for *Excellence in Journalism* from the Society of Professional Journalists, and an *Award for Excellence* from the Society of Publication Designers.

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Vision Project is an organization dedicated to the development of investigative journalism, documentary photography, multimedia, film, and education.

The goal of Vision Project is to produce documentary material and educational programs that encourage understanding and awareness about a broad variety of social issues. This information and programming are made available to the general public with a particular focus on members of the younger generation.

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