



Kaitlyn Porter discusses how housing instability and health problems have affected her education while her friend plays with her daughter Luna.

| Photo by CALLIE SCHMIDT

Hard work doesn't cut it anymore

Many students in North Minneapolis believe their housing instability has set them up for failure.

By **MADDIE DEBILZAN**

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Kristel Porter knew the best bridges to sleep under. When she was in her mid 20s she was knee-deep into her political science degree at Augsburg University while providing for her three kids.

After her classes finished for the day, she might put the key in the ignition of her 1993 Chevy Lumina just to drive, just for the sake of passing time the way streetlights change from green to yellow to red. Sometimes she drove to lull her one-year-old baby, Gilbert, to sleep for the night. Other time she drove to give her two daughters, Kyla and Kaitlyn, a reason to forget what they were all going through.

She couldn't afford a \$1,400 apartment as a full-time student, and she couldn't find a landlord who would cut her a break. For seven months, they lived in their car. During that time Kristel's GPA fell from a 4.0 to a 3.1. Her daughters didn't have the energy to worry about school amid insecurity and inconsistency.

After those seven months, Kristel finished her degree and received the keys to her duplex, a humble spot on James Ave. N, right across the street from a playground, on April 14, 2013. It was just in

time for Gilbert's second birthday, so they celebrated on the hardwood floor and were "happy as hell," said Kristel.

Despite their current stability, Kyla and Kaitlyn say their education has suffered from the ramifications of those years when they struggled with housing. The Porter family's experiences are emblematic of a larger struggle experienced by many families in Minneapolis – how does one prioritize their education when their basic needs aren't being met?

During their months of homelessness, the Porter children were three of thousands of homeless children in the City. Minneapolis Public Schools' (MPS) most recent data from the 2016-17 school year estimates that 8.2% of their students are homeless, most living in shelters, hotels, and abandoned and public spaces. The majority – 74% – are black. Preschoolers are more likely than any other age group to be without a home.

These statistics terrify KerryJo Felder, MPS Board Member for District 2 (North Minneapolis). "If that's what they're experiencing, how stable is their future education going to be?"

Felder says she has encountered youth housing struggles throughout her life – both as a child growing up in North Minneapolis and as a public official in the district.

She says she recently met a North Minneapolis high school student who "sleeps from couch to couch and occasionally in abandoned homes." She says he is on the B honor roll but "should have been on the A honor roll." The stress of his daily life kept him from achieving his full academic potential. Fear of the system kept him from seeking help.

To support their families who struggle with housing, the MPS board recently passed two resolutions related to housing. "Resolutions are great, but resolutions are words," Felder said.

Solving housing issues will require addressing institutionalized racism, she urges. Families need jobs and stable housing for their children to be successful. Instead of IEPs and EBDs, she says students need "therapy, love, stable classrooms, stable schools, and teachers of whatever ethnicity they are."

"I think about things long term and I don't think we're doing that right now. We have to think long term growth," said Felder.

North High School history teacher Tom Lachermeier, a Northside resident, is frustrated with the gentrification that he sees swallowing up affordable housing opportunities and displacing many of his students. It doesn't matter if a kid has potential when they don't know where they're going sleep at night.

Every time a student moves, Lachermeier says, their education is disrupted. It's not right. And it's not fair for families to get to the point in which compromising their child's education is the only option.

Kristel's oldest daughter, Kyla, now 19, failed her freshman year of high school. She graduated with a 2.0 GPA. She spent her high school years trying to live up to the pressure of chipping in what she could to help her mom pay the rent. She worked more than a high school girl should ever have to work. And her grades suffered because of it.

Today, Kristel Porter is an advocate in both her personal and professional life for those who struggle to secure stable housing.

She is the executive director of the Cleveland Neighborhood Association (CNA), which hosted its third annual North Housing Fair on March 24.

She's also a landlord who owns a duplex and takes in homeless people for below market rate rent until they're able to buy a house of their own. So far, she says she has taken seven people out of homelessness, including one of her daughter's friends, a senior at North High, who lives with Kyla, and Kaitlyn, Kaitlyn's boy-

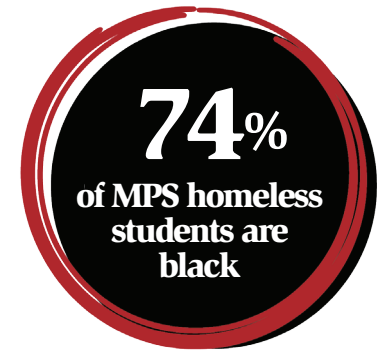
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"I feel like I was set up to fail. I work hard, and that's the only thing that would probably save me." – Kyla Porter

THE STATS



8.2% of MPS enrolled students experience homelessness.



Black students are more likely than any other racial group in MPS to experience homelessness.



Younger children are more likely to experience homelessness than older children in MPS.

MPS data from 2016-17 school year



Kristel Porter talks with a young man exploring the North Housing Fair at Lucy Laney Elementary School on March 24. Organized by Porter, who is executive director of the Cleveland Neighborhood Association, the fair connects community members with housing-related resources like construction demonstrations and information about loan programs. | Photo by KENZIE O'KEEFE

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friend Amadeus Cornejo, and their daughter, six month old Luna. They rent the space from Kristel, who bought the property for \$73,000.

Kaitlyn, who is Kristel's oldest daughter, loves school. She's a self-proclaimed nerd. An artist, like her big sister.

She has everything going for her, and quite a bit going against her. She's got a place to stay, with heat and running water and a stove. She's got Cornejo, and she's got a free daycare provider at school for her daughter, who is – without question – the best thing that's ever happened to her.

But her life is clouded with could-have-beens. If she weren't homeless for seven months, she could have developed better learning habits. If she had lived in the same home all her life, she could have formed friendships without worrying when the eviction notice would come. If she hadn't contracted a series of health hiccups – E. Coli and pneumonia and a kidney infection during her pregnancy – she could have had a shot at a dance scholarship that would have easily sent her floating towards a four-year college degree.

"I don't want to sound like I'm bragging... But I think I'd have good grades if I wasn't in the hospital all the time," Kaitlyn says. "I love school."

"That's not bragging, girl," her sister, Kyla responds.

"Yeah," Kaitlyn said. "Sometimes you have to throw things overboard in order to stay afloat."

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