

HANGING ON

"I pray for a house for my mom," says James (with Melanie outside the motel). "I don't like living here. I hear gunshots at night. I hide under the covers. If I see someone I'm scared of, I stand behind my mom."



A Motel Kid with **BIG DREAMS**

OUT OF A CRAMPED SINGLE ROOM ON A BLIGHTED STRIP IN ORLANDO, JAMES FORD, 8, EARNS A'S IN SCHOOL, LOOKS AFTER HIS BABY BROTHER—AND HELPS PUT FOOD ON THE TABLE

BY JOANNE FOWLER PHOTOGRAPHS BY RON HAVIV



PROUD BIG BROTHER

JAMES (left, with brother Caleb, 5 months): When my mom's inside cooking, I take care of the baby. I smile at him and he smiles back. My mom lets me feed him a bottle. **MELANIE:** James watches how I take care of the baby and mimics it. He thinks on a deeper level than other boys. He has \$51 in the bank and says he's going to buy a house for me. He really is the backbone of the family.

Eight months ago James Ford was living in a three-bedroom house with a basketball hoop in the yard. But when his mom, Melanie, exceeded allotted time off when one of James's brothers broke his arm, she lost her job as a customer service rep. Evicted after missing rental payments, the family took refuge in a seedy motel believed to be frequented by prostitutes and drug dealers. "I thought we'd be here a week," says Melanie, 39. "I never thought we'd sink so low."

Determined to pull her family out of poverty, she's now

looking for work and keeping standards high for her precocious second grader. One of only three students at his elementary school to test into a nearby gifted program, James is bringing home straight A's—and much-needed food for his family with the help of the Louisville, Ky.-based nonprofit Blessings in a Backpack (see box). At night the serious boy with the bright smile reads the Bible and biographies of his heroes: Jackie Robinson, Martin Luther King Jr. and President Barack Obama. "I am," he told his mom, "ready to leave here."



FUEL FOR SCHOOL

MELANIE: I get food stamps, but they run out. I'll use carrots [from the backpacks] for dinner or take tuna and mix it in with mac and cheese. It's a nice meal for the whole family.



DAILY STRUGGLE

MELANIE: It takes a long time to cook dinner on two burners. If I start at 4:30, I am done by 7:45. I will never take a kitchen or washer-dryer for granted. I hate it here. I never let anyone inside to see how we live.



HOMEWORK TIME

MELANIE: I'm very proud that James tested into the gifted program. I was on the honor roll but had to drop out of school at 14 to take care of my mom. **JAMES:** My favorite classes are English and recess. When I grow up, I want to go to college and win a scholarship.



A SCHOOL THAT CARES

Every Friday, James and brother Edward, along with 250 other students, collect their food-filled packs. “I love my backpack because it helps my family,” says James (above, left, with Grand Avenue Primary Learning Center principal Lino Rodriguez and, right, outside his classroom). “I love the cheese and crackers and usually eat the apples right away.” In class, “James is my star student,” says his teacher Audra Morris. “He just gets things and has the best work ethic. I really think he could go to college and break the cycle.”



PLAY TIME

JAMES (playing ball in the motel parking lot): We used to live in a house [with] a yard. I miss my basketball hoop at my old place. I miss having space.

MELANIE: My dream is to go to school, get certified as a nurse associate and work around the kids’ schedule. This is the first and, God willing, the last time we’re living [in a motel]. One night James was sitting on my lap. He told me, “Mom, I don’t want to be unappreciative of all the blessings God has given me. But I am ready for a new home.”



Blessings in a Backpack

After launching the PEOPLE First: Help Feed a Child initiative in January, we’ve raised nearly \$150,000 to fight childhood hunger.

HOW YOU CAN HELP 1. Donate a backpack. 2. Give just \$80. That’s enough to buy a year’s worth of food for one child. 3. Get involved: Adopt a child or school in your hometown. **For more information, go to blessingsinabackpack.org and follow the PEOPLE FIRST buttons.**

**People
FIRST**