

Amid the pandemic, family focused on school success

Katie Sullivan Borrelli and Kate Collins

Binghamton Press & Sun-Bulletin USA
TODAY NETWORK

BINGHAMTON – Sixteen-year-old CJ Brault shakes his head, annoyed by the roar of a motorcycle as it rips down Mather Street for the second time this afternoon.

From the wooden steps of their home’s front porch, CJ, his sister, Raelin Powell, who’s 13, and their mother, Davita Bateman, have a front-row seat to what they’ve dubbed “biker alley.”

Rumbling and growling motorcycle engines have become part of the soundtrack surrounding their blue building on the corner, one of many multifamily houses in the area that have been converted into apartments.

Davita casually dismisses the sounds with a wave as Raelin giggles and leans into her. There are much more important things on her mind.

Binghamton City School District’s plan to transition to in-person hybrid instruction is on hold amid a spike in COVID-19 cases in Broome County, but Davita has taken the district’s option to keep Raelin and CJ home for the entire school year. CJ, who also studies carpentry at Broome-Tioga BOCES, concentrates better at home, she says, and it’s his junior year.

her maroon bedspread to do some homework. Opposite her, Phoenix, Davita’s 3-year-old granddaughter, lies on the now-folded pullout couch where she and her mother, Davita’s 31-year-old daughter, Brittany Barnett, sleep beneath gold and silver heart-shaped wall decals.

On the largest heart in the center is a Bible verse: “Let all that you do be done in love.”

Davita reaches down to her granddaughter and grabs her ankles, swaying them as she starts to sing the ABCs. Phoenix merrily joins in, laughing.

“Again, Grandma!”

Davita’s job in one of Binghamton University’s dining halls is the family’s only income right now. She works as many hours as she can, scratching out math problems on scrap paper during breaks to help Raelin or CJ with their school work over the phone, talking with their teachers and guidance counselors to make sure they’re on track.

A deadline looms: The college students will leave campus in November, temporarily taking her job with them.

It’s not easy being the leader of the Bateman family right now, but in her life Davita has gained hard-won wisdom about dealing with adversity.

“You can go somewhere and be miserable, and it’s going to be a miserable experience,” she

hands and knees, but only for a moment.

Then she scrambles to her feet, smiles at her grandmother, and runs home like nothing can stop her.



Davita Bateman hugs her daughter Raelin Powell, 13, in front of the family’s home in Binghamton. Bateman has opted for Raelin, an honor student at West Middle School who works well independently, to complete her entire school year remotely. PHOTOS BY KATE COLLINS/USA TODAY NETWORK



“Keeping him home was to keep him focused,” Davita said, “so we can get him across that graduation line.”

Davita, who’s 47, knows too well what’s at stake. She has spent years chipping away at a cycle she refuses to allow her youngest children to be swept up in.

Once you’re in, it’s nearly impossible to escape.

Getting to the other side of obstacles like homelessness, addiction, grief and loss has taken years of work and partnership with community organizations who helped Davita firmly plant herself on a path to a new future.

“You just think, ‘This is what it is,’ ” she said. “And you don’t think there’s other ways out.”

Single income, singular focus

In the living room of their two-bedroom apartment, Raelin opens her district- provided Chromebook on

says. “Or you can choose to ‘fake it till you make it,’ and sometimes you just wind up being happy anyway because you’re like, well, you know, it’s really not that bad.”

Iron wills run in the family

In the coming months, Davita’s children will look to her to model that spirit and drive. The new reality they face is unpredictable, its stability teetering. It’ll take resilience and perseverance to get Raelin through the school year and CJ a step closer to graduation.

Davita’s life is a shining example of both.

As the sun begins to set, Davita pulls open the wooden gate and steps inside the community garden across the street. In addition to the line of planters bordering her front lawn, Davita grows vegetables here in a well-tended 8by-5-foot plot. She carries a deep blue bucket in one hand and clasps Phoenix’s hand in the other.

Later, as they’re walking back to the house with their harvest — a bundle of Swiss chard and handfuls of red and green tomatoes — Phoenix trips on the edge of the sidewalk and falls, hard, on the pavement. She pauses there on her

Bateman sits with her son, CJ Brault, 16, and daughter Raelin in front of the family’s home in Binghamton. Due to COVID-19 and the two teenagers’ individual learning styles, the family is balancing a combination of remote and in-person learning for the 2020-2021 academic year.