Jazma's dream coming true

By Craig Schneider
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While some teens in her Marietta housing project were cruising for drugs or kicks, Jazma Parker would be driving slowly through some rich neighborhood, marveling at the way those people lived.

She was among the young people in Lyman Homes who did their homework, who stayed off the troubled corners. She liked watching TV cop shows like "Law and Order" and "CSI," and she dreamed of becoming an investigator.

In a few weeks, Jazma expects her dream will start coming true, as she begins a job screening the backgrounds of prospective federal employees for a company that works with a federal personnel agency. It's not the FBI, but it's a start.

"I did it," Jazma said. "I felt I made it out."

The AJC has chronicled Jazma's life for over a decade, writing about her several times. She has always seemed more mature than her age, having lived a lot of life for her years. Even as an adolescent, she had serious brown eyes. Her voice was strong, her opinions hardened by what she had seen.

When she was 13, the AJC wrote about her and her sister being adopted by her grandmother, Willie Mae Parker. Jazma's mother had drug problems and run-ins with the law.

When she was 17, the newspaper featured her in a front-page story called "Jazma's Dream," in which she said she did not want to be the third generation of her family to live in a housing project. At the time, she was a junior at Marietta High School and volunteering at the Marietta Police Department, mostly doing clerical work. But her endearing personality and bold assertiveness took her further. She also learned some fingerprinting and investigative skills.

She looked for role models beyond her surroundings in Lyman Homes, a place where officials barricaded streets to stop the drive-through drug trade. A security consultant once described the 125-unit complex as "an open-air drug market as bad as anything . . . seen in New Orleans, Chicago or Los Angeles."

It was a place, Jazma recalled, where she learned to "think on my own." When she saw friends turn to low temptations, she thought of her mother, and what that life provided, and took away.

Jazma, who recently turned 24, is quick to credit her mentors for her success, including former Marietta Police Chief Bobby Moody and Cobb Superior Court Judge Adele Grubbs. Grubbs gave her a $2,000 scholarship, one of many she received upon graduating high school. The newspaper was there then, too.

Grubbs said it has been a pleasure helping Jazma because she is so willing to help herself.
"She's a survivor," Grubbs said. "Even though she gets knocked down by life, she picks herself up and says what do I do now."

Lyman Homes eventually closed as the government moved residents into Section 8 housing. Jazma left several years ago to pursue a bachelor's degree in criminology at the University of West Georgia.

After that, when she told her grandmother she wanted to move to the Washington area, her grandmother became upset.

"Jazma, are you ready?" Willie Mae asked her.

"I want to get a good job," Jazma responded.

Willie Mae recalled it as a moment of realization: Jazma was getting older and must make her own decisions.

"I keep her in my prayers," said Willie Mae. "I miss her so much."

These days Jazma is working toward her master's degree in justice and security administration. She expects to start the new job in mid-March.

She's learned, she said, that dreams don't come true overnight. And some dreams may not come true at all.

Her relationship with her mother remains "touch and go." Her mother still struggles with addiction, but the two stay in touch.

Being on her own has allowed Jazma to see some things more clearly. Willie Mae, who raised her since she was 3 days old, has been strict but "strict in a good way."

She's come to face her own anger over her absent parents, and the insecurity that drives her impatience to reach her goals. Neither has gone away completely. After all, how can you forget when your mother took you along to a crack house? In a way these memories are the devils that haunt her, and the angels that drive her.

"I am a work in progress," she said. "Progress is a process."