

Every month, you'll meet teens whose unique experiences might make them seem like they're from a different world—but in reality, you'll find that they're just like you.

"Every family goes through tough times. My best advice is to stay strong and smile on."



PAGES 20-21: DAVID FRANKLIN/GETTY IMAGES (BACKGROUND); TIM SCOTER PHOTOGRAPHY (ALL OTHER PHOTOS)



Different  
Like You

# Kevin Was Homeless

Each year, 1.6 million U.S. kids experience at least temporary homelessness. Kevin, 17, was one of them.

BY KEVIN LUI,  
AS TOLD TO JANE BIANCHI

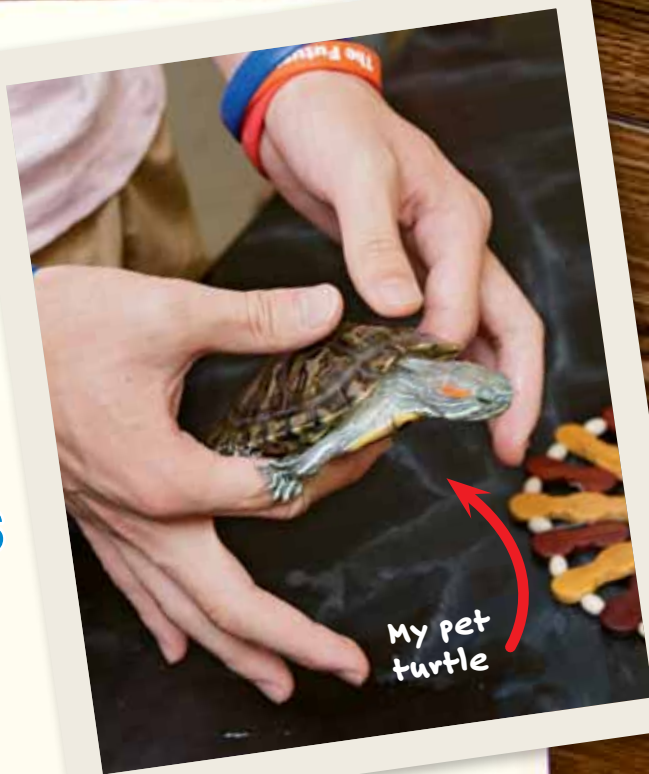
**I**n elementary school, I didn't realize how good I had it. I was living with my mom, dad, and brother, Ka-ren, who is about a year younger than I am, in a rented apartment in the Chinatown neighborhood of Manhattan in New York City. The apartment was above my parents' store, which had groceries and an arcade for kids.

Ka-ren and I weren't allowed to eat the candy or play the games in the store (my parents are strict!), but we did work there and learn how to be cashiers, making

change for customers. At the time, I never thought of myself as "happy" or "comfortable"—it was just the way life was.

Everything changed just before I started the sixth grade. Our landlord told us to gather our belongings one day, then he kicked us out without any notice. We lost our business *and* our home all at once. Stranded and broke, my family had no choice but to move to the Life Family Shelter, a nearby homeless shelter in lower Manhattan.

I didn't fully understand what was happening, but



My pet  
turtle



My brother, Ka-ren, and I are  
close. We share a bedroom.

after a few weeks, it finally sank in: I was homeless. It was humiliating and **humbling**, because I never thought that something like that would happen to me. I wondered if people would look at me differently—and



respect me less.

My family had a private room to sleep in at the shelter, which housed 90 families, but it was a quarter of the size of our old living space and had bunk beds, so we always felt crowded.

We also had to share a bathroom with everyone else on our floor. That was gross, because a lot of the immature kids thought it was funny to wipe their poop all over the walls—seriously! Or they'd turn the lights off while you were trying to take a shower. I can still hear them laughing

in my head—that would annoy me so much.

## SHELTERED LIFE

I felt so embarrassed that I lived at a shelter that I didn't tell anyone at school. You know how kids are in middle school—I didn't want anyone talking trash about me. Sometimes kids would ask, "Where do you live?" and instead of telling them, I would intentionally be **vague** and say the general neighborhood. Other times I would flat-out lie. I felt like I could never truly be

myself and open up to friends, because I always carried around this secret. It was a lonely time.

The only good part about living in the shelter was that I got to go to an after-school program that was run by the Coalition for the Homeless. It was a quiet place where I could do my homework or play music, dance, or do arts and crafts. It was an escape from all the craziness of being in a hot, cramped shelter with a lot of people I didn't know.

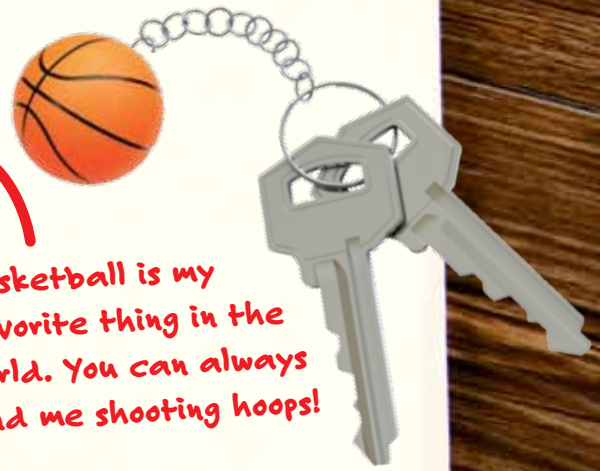
## MOVING ON UP

Just before I started high school—after three long years—my parents finally found affordable housing. When I found out we were moving, I was so relieved

*The best film I saw recently was **Fast and Furious 6**. I'm really into action movies! And I never miss **Hawaii 5-0** and **CSI** on TV.*







Basketball is my favorite thing in the world. You can always find me shooting hoops!

and excited that I practically jumped up and down. We have two bedrooms now, one bathroom that we don't have to share with strangers, and our own kitchen, so we can cook our own food. It's so much cleaner than the shelter, and it's so nice to have privacy again. It's funny—you don't realize how much you appreciate stuff until you're forced to live without it. Now everything feels **luxurious!**

## GIVING BACK

When I turned 17 this past April, I started feeling different about my experience being homeless. For the first time, I didn't feel ashamed. I don't know what changed, exactly—maybe I just stopped caring about what other people think of me, or maybe I grew up. But I decided that it was time to tell a friend, so I told my

friend Jason. I thought, "If he turns his back on me, then he isn't a true friend." But he was awesome about it. He was shocked, of course, because I had kept it a secret from him for so long. But he was supportive and didn't treat me any differently because of it. The whole conversation went so well that I began telling even more friends.

I also started volunteering at the after-school program I went to, because I want to help other kids who are going through the same thing as I did. Sometimes I'll help them with their homework or play basketball with them. It makes me feel good inside.

I tell them how I'd like to either go to college someday or try to become an actor. I hope they look at me and see how well I'm doing now and think: *I can do that too.*

## 3 Things Kevin Wants You to Know

**1 IT COULD HAPPEN TO YOU.** You may live in a nice home now, but in a rough economy, you never know when your luck might turn. Don't think you're above it and look down on homeless people.

**2 MORE PEOPLE ARE HOMELESS THAN YOU THINK.** You probably walk by them every day, but you don't know it, because they wear clean clothes and take showers. Most look like people who have homes.

**3 VOLUNTEER.** To find a homeless shelter near you, visit [homelessshelterdirectory.org](http://homelessshelterdirectory.org)—then call and ask how you can help.

## TEENS FOR JEANS!

The #1 item that teens request at homeless shelters is a pair of jeans, so DoSomething.org and Aéropostale are looking for donations. Find out how you can hold a jeans drive at your school at [dosomething.org/teensforjeans!](http://dosomething.org/teensforjeans!)