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# On the Right Track

These three sisters used to be homeless. But they didn't let that stop them from becoming track stars. **Page 4**



Tai, Brooke, and  
Rainn Sheppard

**Video**

Winning Runs  
in the Family  
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# On the Right Track

These young track stars were homeless for more than a year—but they didn't let that keep them down.

**N**early every afternoon, Tai, Rainn, and Brooke Sheppard lace up their running shoes and head to track practice. The sisters are three of the top young track-and-field athletes in the country. But for nearly two years, there was something they wanted even more than medals and trophies: a home. Twelve-year-old Tai and her sisters Rainn, 11, and Brooke, 10, were homeless. They lived in a homeless shelter with their mom in Brooklyn, New York.

Despite the difficulties, the family stayed positive. The girls worked hard in school and got good grades—and they excelled at track. Earlier this year, their running talent helped them get a new home.

## On Their Own

The family had lived in an apartment in Brooklyn for nearly 10 years. The girls' mom, Tonia Handy, had a job answering phones at a taxi company, but she wasn't making enough money

to pay the rent. In September 2015, the family was **evicted** from their apartment. They had no choice but to move into a homeless shelter, unsure if they would ever again have a home of their own.

"I felt embarrassed because the girls would have to carry this **burden**," Tonia explains.

## Words to Know

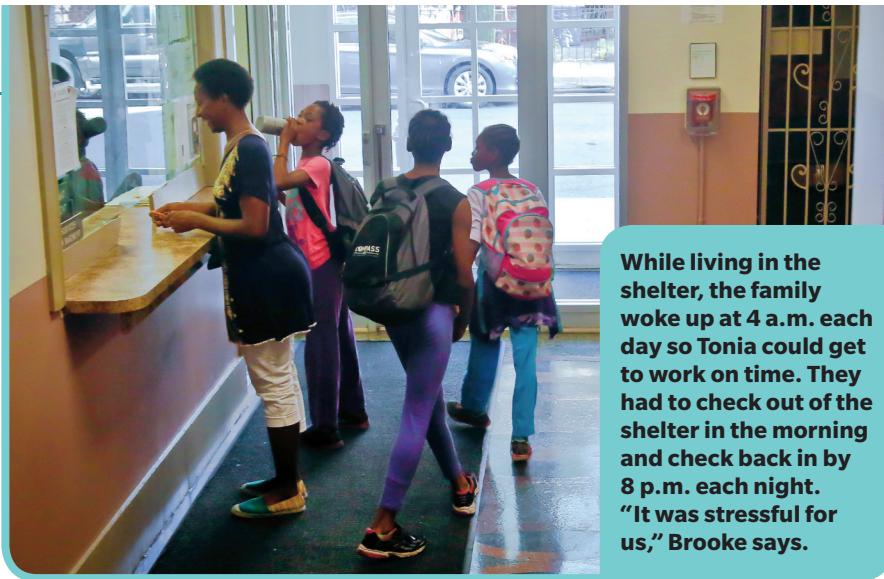
**evicted** *verb, past tense.* forced to move from a home, a building, or land

**burden** *noun.* a great source of worry, grief, or stress



Rainn, Brooke, and Tai Sheppard (left to right) practice at a track near their home.

COVER: M. ELIZABETH DIXSON (SISTERS), M. ELIZABETH DIXSON (RAINN, BROOKE, & TAI)



**While living in the shelter, the family woke up at 4 a.m. each day so Tonia could get to work on time. They had to check out of the shelter in the morning and check back in by 8 p.m. each night. “It was stressful for us,” Brooke says.**

Unfortunately, many other kids find themselves in a similar situation. In the United States each year, at least 1.3 million kids under the age of 18 face a period of homelessness.

Watching the Sheppard sisters run track, you would never have guessed that they were homeless.

“When you say ‘homeless,’ you think of people sleeping on the street,” says Jean Bell, the girls’ track coach. “You don’t think of a woman who is working and caring for her three kids.”

In fact, most homeless people aren’t sleeping outside. Instead, they are often moving around between motels, shelters, and relatives’ or friends’ couches. Like Tonia, many homeless people have jobs, but they don’t make enough money to afford a permanent place to live.

Moving into the homeless shelter wasn’t easy for the Sheppards. The girls say the place was crawling with rats and cockroaches. They had to share a bathroom with the other families on their floor. Plus, the three sisters and their mom all had to sleep in two beds that were pushed together.

“It was really hard sleeping with the kicks and snores,” says Tai. “It was terrible.”

## At Home on the Track

Though they didn’t have a place to call their own, the girls found a different kind of home on the track. They had joined the Jeunesse Track Club a few months before they were evicted from their apartment. It didn’t take long for them to start racking up awards. In the summer of 2016, Tai, Rainn, and Brooke each won medals at the Junior Olympics, a competition for the best young athletes from across the U.S.

The sisters began appearing on TV talk shows and doing magazine interviews. People all over the country heard their inspiring story, including the filmmaker Tyler Perry. He offered to pay the rent on a new apartment for two years. In April, the family finally moved out of the shelter and into their new home. The best part?

“We all have our own beds!” says Tai.

Also, Tonia got a higher-paying job at a local hospital, which will enable her to afford the rent after those two years are up.

The girls realize that many homeless families aren’t as fortunate as they are. They say they’re not going to take their new life for granted.

“We worked very hard to be where we are now, and we won’t stop trying hard,” says Rainn.

—by Joe Bubar with reporting by Nicole Tocco



**The Sheppard sisters in their new bedroom**

**Brooke**

**Tai**

**Rainn**