

# Ms. Mama Mae

By Sarah Schulman · February 20, 2014

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## Summary

If Mama Mae were the subject of a country song, there would be lyrics about hard work and bad marriages; about tumors and heart attacks; about unrequited love; about enduring friendship; and about a pink \$3 dress from Walmart.

If Mama Mae were the subject of a government report, she'd be one dot on a graph of 4.3 million American welfare recipients. Getting Social Security, Medicaid, Medicare, Section 8 Housing, and food stamps. And yet still falling short a couple of bucks, every month.

Mama Mae's story shows both the necessity and the inadequacy of our formal welfare systems, and gives us a few clues about how to enable the informal systems that make the difference between living and good living.

## Cast of Characters



**Mama Mae** Age 71. Maker of darn good chicken enchiladas. Bird lover. Coffee drinker. Social security, medicare, medicaid recipient.



**Karen** Cat lover, friend, lifesaver. Karen and Mama Mae have been friends for many years, ever since they worked for the catering company making dolmas.



**Barista** Young, hip, provider of Mama Mae's free bottomless cup of coffee most mornings, at the cafe across the street

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Work, Work, Work

Mama Mae was born in Betram Texas, 71-years back. Her daddy worked for the railroad. She worked for the family across the railroad. By the age of 15, she'd left school and learned how to cook, clean, and look after two screaming kids. She hadn't learned how to read or to write. She never used that as an excuse. Ever.

★ Literacy programs in Texas are only serving 3.6% of the 3.8 million in need of adult learning. ([www.literacytexas.org/literacy\\_in\\_texas/facts\\_statistics.html](http://www.literacytexas.org/literacy_in_texas/facts_statistics.html))



**“I never asked my people for nothing. For nothing. I made myself. I made my own living.”**

At 20, Mama Mae was married and living in the capital of Texas. And that's all she really wants to say about the matter. (Other than the fact she heard from her ex-husband, out of the blue, a few months back. He was now in a wheelchair.)

By 30, Mama Mae had remarried. She spent 12+ years prepping food and cleaning dishes at a small catering business. Run by a nice Lebanese man. She'd never heard of, let alone tasted, grape leaves or hummus before. So tasty.

But the best part of the job was meeting Karen. Karen, the friend that calls twice a day to check-up on her now. Karen, the friend that takes her to all of her doctor's appointments and does her grocery shopping. Karen, the friend that is her lifeline when she's feeling down. As Mama Mae puts it: “When something goes wrong, I call Karen.”

A fair amount has gone wrong for Mama Mae. Though Mama Mae prefers to see the good before the bad. “I've had a good life, but a hard life.”

Seeing the good before the bad is a characteristic of optimism ([oxfordindex.oup.com/view/10.1093/obo/9780199828340-0108](http://oxfordindex.oup.com/view/10.1093/obo/9780199828340-0108)). There's dispositional optimism and also attributional optimism. Where the former is the general tendency to expect positive outcomes, the latter concerns explanations of past events. Mama Mae displays more attributional optimism. She's taken a lot of her crap past experiences and weaved them into a personal narrative about grit and survival. Were we to spend more time with Mama Mae, we'd want to learn about how exactly she's managed to construct such a narrative. So that we might be able to help others do the same.

Good was staying married for over 25 years. Bad was his cheating, and the miscarriage. “If I had my life to live over, I don't think I would have gotten married. I would have stayed single and been an old maid.”

**“I've had a good life, but a hard life.”**

Good was moving to the one-bedroom house she still lives in today. Bad was having to quit her job at the cafeteria 10 years ago to care for her husband. The drinking finally caught up with him.

Mama Mae benefits from Section 8 Housing ([portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/topics/housing\\_choice\\_voucher\\_program\\_section\\_8](http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/topics/housing_choice_voucher_program_section_8)). Section 8 housing was designed to ‘de-concentrate’ urban poverty - by giving people more choice on the private rental market. Mama Mae's landlord has signed-up to the program, and directly receives Mama Mae's subsidy payment. But subsidy payment amounts were recently changed, and there's now a gap between the subsidy and the rent price. You can read a critique of Section 8 here: [www.nhi.org/online/issues/127/section8.html](http://www.nhi.org/online/issues/127/section8.html)

Good was him passing away, and not having to suffer any more. Bad was how expensive the funeral was.

Good has been all the doctors and neighbours who've helped her over the years. Bad are the repeated stays in hospital.

Doctors, Doctors, Doctors

Mama Mae's medical history feels about as long and varied as a medical textbook. An 8-pound ovarian tumor; breast cancer; knee surgery; a heart attack; a pretty bad head injury. “If I didn't have medicaid for all this, I would never have survived.”

Each time she's been knocked down, she's managed to pick herself up. Much to the surprise of some of her doctors. After her heart attack, she ended up in rehab. The doctor thought she'd be there for months. She made it home in 6 weeks. Rehab was in a nursing home. That was the motivator.

Nursing homes may have the word home in them. But for Mama Mae that's where the similarity ends. Home is with her two birdies, her book case full of photos, her comfy grey chair. Home is close to the hairdresser, to the coffee shop, and next to some really nice neighbors. Like the lawyers next door who helped her make a living will. Like the people upstairs who invite her for bbqs and holiday meals (She can no longer make it up the stairs, though). Like all the folks “that come a knock'n when they haven't seen me for a while.”





The houses and apartments that surround Mama Mae are of mixed income. Some are redone, and yuppified. Others are basic, and subsidized. The people in the subsidized units tend to stay a good long while. After so many years, it's like an extended family.

We might say that Mama Mae's relationship with the community around her is an example of positive deviance ([inwithforward.com/resources/positive-deviant](http://inwithforward.com/resources/positive-deviant)) She's weaved together a natural support network like few others we've seen. What behaviors have enabled this? Well, Mama Mae's not afraid to pick up the phone and ask for help. She physically leaves her house, and puts herself in contact with other people. She tries to reciprocate as best she can - by offering dinners or just nice, down-home company. How could we help others learn these behaviors?

## A typical day

But even Mama Mae's adopted extended family have their own real families to attend to. Mama Mae knows that. That's why she spends a good chunk of her time, alone, sitting in her comfy grey chair, watching Young and the Restless, and chatting to her birds. "Mama, baby," she coos to the blue bird, "Stop that noise, you just gett'n jealous aren't you?" The birds offer near constant conversation.

A year ago, Mama Mae went through a pretty bad patch. Depressed. Crying all the time. The birds weren't lifting her up. The doctor told her she had to get out of the house even more.

So Mama Mae established a new routine for herself.

She gets up around 7. The coffee shop across the street opens at 8. She's their first customer of the day. She sits, and nurses one mug of black coffee. The owners have told all the girls that work for them, "Don't you ever charge Mama for her coffee. Isn't that real nice of 'em," Mama smiles.



Mid-morning, Mama heads back to her house. She might watch a few programs on TV. Or waits for Karen to call on her break (as a security officer at the airport). For lunch, she often makes a sandwich. Though in the summer she finds it's too hot to eat. Afternoons are much the same. Unless she's got a doctor's appointment, or Karen can take her shopping. Dinner is whatever she has the energy to make. Maybe a sandwich, again. Or chicken fingers. Perhaps some canned corn and peas. At night, there's a few good programs on TV before bed. "I like watching that show with Charlie Sheen. You know he's an alcoholic. Every time he meets a woman, he goes to bed with her."



Thursdays, Fridays, and Sundays are the better days. Thursday is bible study and dinner. A few years back, after her husband died, Mama Mae started going to church. It gave her something to do and somewhere to go. The ladies pick her up and take her to a restaurant Thursday nights. Or sometimes, Mama Mae proudly hosts. She whips up her famous chicken enchiladas. First, she cooks up a whole chicken. Then she rolls up a tortilla with the chicken, and bakes it with a red sauce and white cheese. On Fridays, Mama Mae gets her hair shampooed. For \$10. And on Sundays, she heads to church and sometimes to lunch afterwards. Saturdays are her least favorite day.

Mama Mae lives in an urban area where she can walk out of the house and have things to do - from the local cafe to the library to the school on the corner. In areas where there aren't so many resources nearby, what could we design? How could there be more pop-up type services & experiences?

**"It can be a miserable life, being all alone. I'm trying to make it."**

## A reprieve

For a while, Benny the mailman made life a whole lot less miserable. At 11am, rain or shine, he'd deliver a bundle of bills. So what if she couldn't read them. It was about the man, not the mail. Mama Mae felt Benny was different to other men. He listened. They laughed. He seemed to understand. His marriage didn't seem so hot. Mama Mae thought there could be some kind of future. Then, one day he stopped delivering the mail. No word from him. She tracked down his phone number. Called him once. That was over a year ago. Nothing since. The new mailman's alright. But he is no Benny. "Every time I see a mailman it breaks my heart."

"I sure did love him," Mama Mae says tearfully.

She's given up on love. "I don't need no boyfriend now. Them girls at church tease me about it all the time." She's sure they'll tease her about her new hot pink dress. That she got for \$3 at Walmart. "I can still look good," Mama Mae asserts.



Ideals

Mama Mae may had officially given up the search for love, but it’s clear she would love to be less alone. To have a constant companion. Who treated her well and good.

She’d like to be able to make ends meet. And not have to ask her friends for help. With a bit more of a financial buffer, she might be able to get beyond South Austin and maybe even see the world a bit. “With social security, it’s hard to make a living. You don’t get nothing much. I’m also on Medicaid and Medicare Section A. Of course, I thank the Lord for that. It sure ain’t enough to be able to do much. I’d love to travel.”

She’d like some better help around the house. “They’ve given me a maid to help clean the place. I wanted my stove cleaned. She said we don’t clean stoves. I asked her to clean the shelf. She said, I can’t do that. Not in the contract. The case worker came around here. I asked one time if they could help me cook. They said I don’t cook. So I don’t know what they do. The case worker just wants to know if they are friendly and respectful. They don’t ask me about nothing else.”

What Mama Mae is describing is unhelpful help. Where roles are so tightly defined that they constrain action. The difference between a professional and a friend like Karen is all the more stark. Rather than pay for a separate set of professionals, how might Karen and other friends receive incentives to help Mama Mae stay in the house on her own for longer?

Mama Mae’s also darn clear what she does not want:

“Oh no, no, no. I ain’t going to no nursing home. My momma and sister were in one. I don’t like ‘em. My brother had bought my mamma some new clothes once, and she never wore them. They disappeared. And nobody knew nothing. They really aren’t what they are all cracked up to be. No, I don’t like no nursing home, I sure don’t.”

She just hopes she’ll make it another year. “I’m praying there’s a next year. And I’ll have me a birthday party. Maybe with music? I like country and Western music, like George Strait. He’s a nice looking man.”

My Take-Aways

Past optimism - future pessimism

Whilst Mama Mae has been able to look at her past hardships through a glass half-full, thoughts of the future fill her with gloom. “I don’t want to think about what’s next” she repeatedly says. That’s because for people like Mama Mae there are few options. When she can no longer live on her own, a nursing home placement at a Medicaid facility might be her only choice. How could we tap into Mama Mae’s natural network - and support them to support Mama Mae more intensively? Right now, her friend Karen has to work another job to make ends meet.

Getting by - Looking forward

Mama Mae is so appreciative she’s survived. That she has a roof over her head, food on the table, and access to doctors and medicine. But, like all of us, Mama Mae wants a bit more out of life. She wants something to look forward to. She wants someone to put on her pink dress for. When Mama Mae didn’t have the mailman to look forward to, her mental and physical health suffered. How could we use her connection to the postman to bring along something surprising every day? A trip to the other side of

town? Something tasty to try? A movie to watch? How could we add a bit more spontaneity and richness to Mama Mae’s every day routines?

Helped - Helper

Mama Mae manages to shift between the role of being helped, to helping others. With her chicken enchiladas, and her smile. How could we draw on Mama Mae’s fluidity with both roles - and help her to model this behavior to other older folks who struggle to connect and to get what they need? And by doing so, how could we help to validate a behavior she founds uncomfortable?



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Sarah is a sociologist who likes to split her time between living rooms and state houses. She’s worked with governments in 6 countries to try and change how policy is made and evaluated. From 2010-2012, she co-ran InWithFor and worked with The Australian Centre for Social Innovation to launch 3 new social solutions, including the award-winning Family by Family. She’s got a Doctorate in Social Policy from Oxford University, and a Masters in Education from Stanford University. This is Sarah’s fourth start-up org. Get in touch at [sarah@inwithforward.com](mailto:sarah@inwithforward.com)!