

LA's Grand Experiment in UBI

Last year, the city sent \$1,000 a month to 3,200 people. The Nation followed four participants throughout the duration of the program.

By Sasha Abramsky.

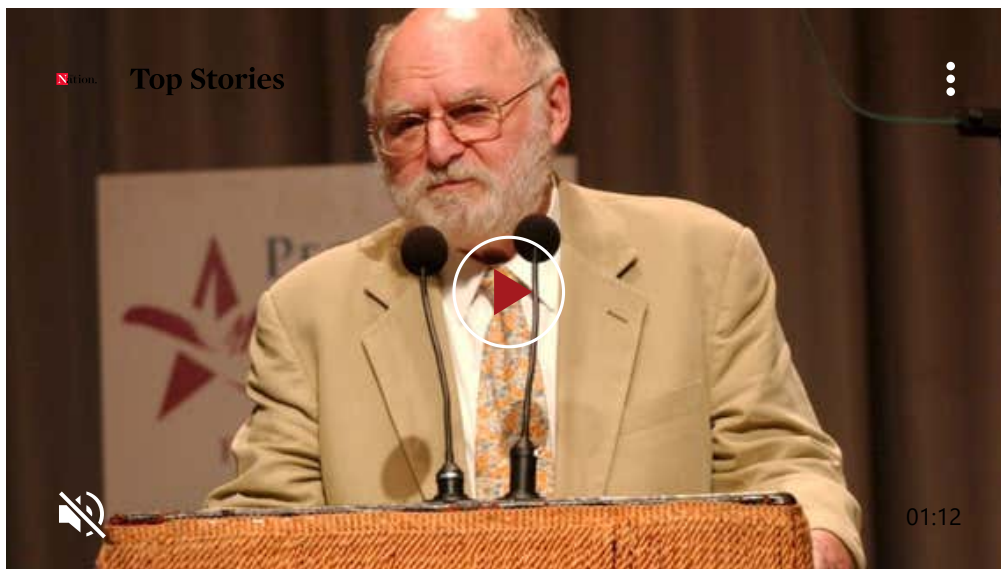
JANUARY 23, 2023



Alice Moore is sitting at a conference table in the headquarters of the Los Angeles Housing and Community Investment Department, near Downtown LA. It's Memorial Day weekend, and she had recently received

her fourth payment from the city's new BIG:LEAP program via the Angelenos Card, a prepaid Mastercard emblazoned with a decal of the LA skyline that she keeps in her wallet.

In late 2021, a friend had sent her information about the program, which promised to supplement the incomes of thousands of low-income families for a year. Feeling that she had nothing to lose, Alicea had filled out the online application forms and then forgotten all about it. A few weeks later she received an e-mail and then a phone call inviting her to come in for an interview. She was told that she met the criteria for enrollment in the program and that, with participants being chosen by lottery from the pool of qualified applicants, she had gotten lucky: She would receive 12 no-strings-attached monthly basic income payments of \$1,000 each.



Victor Navasky: A Generous, Mischievous, Endlessly Entertaining Genius

“I could not believe it. Nowhere in my mind could I fathom this was really going to happen,” Alicea says. “It was just such a blessing. I felt blessed, honored to receive it. I can’t describe the overall feeling of such a tremendous help. I can

see myself getting through the month, not just waiting till the end of the month. You can buy groceries. You can buy shoes.”

The Basic Income Guaranteed: Los Angeles Economic Assistance Pilot, or BIG:LEAP, was the brainchild of the Los Angeles Community Investment for Families Department and the former mayor’s office. It became the work of several City Council members from poor districts, along with teams of academics at the University of Southern California and the University of Pennsylvania. With 3,200 individuals and families enrolled, it is the largest of the roughly 80 basic income pilot programs in operation in the United States. Last year, I followed four of these families through most of the program’s duration. Their stories demonstrate not only the possibilities and limitations of a universal basic income (UBI) but also the depth of the problems such programs seek to address: inequality, poverty, and the enormous obstacles to social mobility in 21st-century America.



Before the leap: Richard Nixon and Daniel Patrick Moynihan proposed a UBI program in 1969. *(Bettmann)*

Debat
es
about
UBI
in the
Unite
d
States
date
back
to the

1960s, when a number of public figures, from Martin Luther King Jr. to Milton Friedman, began calling for the

government to offer all residents a guaranteed income. In 1969, newly elected President Richard Nixon, at the urging of the controversial sociologist turned politician Daniel Patrick Moynihan, threw his support behind the idea. Nixon's Family Assistance Plan, which would have provided cash benefits to all families with children below a certain income level, passed in the House but didn't make it out of committee in the Senate.

Five decades later, in 2019, the California Central Valley city of Stockton, under Mayor Michael Tubbs, introduced a much-publicized basic income program that gave 125 people \$500 a month for two years. The results were positive, with enrollees becoming more integrated into the economy, and in its wake many other cities raced to set up similar programs. New York City's Bridge Project, which launched last year, has 500 participants, according to Stacia West, director of the Center for Guaranteed Income Research at the University of Pennsylvania. A pilot program in Newark has enrolled 400 people, and one in Oakland has 600 participants. Now, with BIG:LEAP—funded by a few tens of millions of dollars diverted from the police budget, along with contributions from the discretionary funds of a number of City Council districts—Los Angeles has created the country's largest basic income project. Enrolled between January and April of 2022, 3,200 people are being given \$1,000 per month each, on a prepaid Mastercard, for 12 months.

“We're trying to figure out a way to test this,” says Elizabeth Kim, a professor of social work at the University of Southern California who serves as a principal investigator for BIG:LEAP research and is following the program's

participants as well as a number of families who applied but were rejected. “This could have huge policy implications.” Kim says it could prove the need for a livable wage rather than a minimum wage and could set the stage for systemic changes in how the country’s welfare programs function. “We first and foremost need to rethink how we redistribute wealth and how we give people the money they need to survive,” she tells me.

On February 25, 2022, the first \$1,000 arrived on Alicea Moore’s Angelenos Card.

When the pandemic hit, Alicea, the mother of five boys and three girls, had been struggling to raise her younger children. A child of the 1970s and early ’80s, she remembers having a “beautiful” life. Her mother and stepdad took care of her and her two sisters and brother. Then her mother became addicted to crack, and all semblance of a normal childhood disappeared. Alicea’s home in a public housing development at 55th Street and Compton Avenue was raided by police, and the family began drifting from one friend or relative’s dwelling to another.

When Alicea was 12, her mother told her and her siblings that they would be parceled out to different relatives. “We were transferred from school to school,” she recalls, sobbing. “I believe I went to six elementary schools before I became stable with my uncle and his family.”

Later that year, though, after Alicea graduated from the sixth grade, her mother took her to live with her in a crack house. “I had no supervision,” she says. “I got involved with other

kids. We began to drink, smoke cigarettes. It was so sad—this group of kids who were in a sense abandoned. I became entangled with gangs. I was just a kid living as an adult.”

By the time she was 14, Alicea was pregnant. Within a couple of years, she dropped out of school and became a stay-at-home mom receiving federal assistance from the Aid to Families With Dependent Children program. “That was the norm,” she says. She enrolled in food stamps and Medi-Cal, the state’s Medicaid program. “It was enough to sustain us. None of the adults in the household I grew up in worked. Everybody was home from sunup to sundown.”

Over the next six years, Alicea had four children. Eventually, she enrolled in a welfare-to-work training program and, hoping to improve her life prospects, started studying for the GED. She took a janitorial course and ended up with a job at the LA County Office of Education. It paid roughly \$1,200 a month, and although the money didn’t go far, the work made her feel independent for the few months she had the job. But she lived paycheck to paycheck and used expensive check-cashing services to access her wages.

Over the next several years, Alicea worked at a number of jobs and had four more children. She eventually enrolled in Los Angeles Southwest community college and, in 2016, graduated with two associate degrees, in administration of justice and in behavioral social sciences.

For the first time, Alicea felt that her life was coming together. She got a job, which included benefits, driving a bus for the LA Metro and worked there for a year and a half. But one day in 2019, she stepped off the bus and felt a searing pain in her back; it turned out that she had a bulging

disc. She went on unemployment while she tried—and failed—to navigate the disability system. “Again, there I am, not enough money to pay rent, to pay bills,” she says. “I ended up moving in with my daughter, who lives in an affordable-housing unit.” Alicea’s already precarious financial situation fell apart. Like so many others who would subsequently enroll in BIG:LEAP, she found herself bouncing from one economic calamity to the next.



A fresh start: Kameko Charles and Vaughan Luis with their son Jeremiah in their living room in South Los Angeles. *(Chad Unger)*

Belize, had been living with their four children in Kameko’s ailing step-grandmother’s house. Kameko, who was pregnant, was her caregiver. When her step-grandmother got too sick to be cared for at home and was admitted to a

K a
m
eko
Charl
es and
her
husba
nd,
Vaugh
an
Luis,
an
out-
of-
work
auto
mech
anic
from

hospital, Kameko and her family and their dog ended up living in a 2001 Ford Expedition. Vaughan, the family's sole driver, shepherded them between mall parking lots in South Central LA. They would shower at Kameko's sister's house. For restrooms, there was always Burger King or McDonald's. Lacking a kitchen, they would go to a little Mexican restaurant at Vernon and Central avenues and share cheap plates. When money ran too low for that, they'd rely on food pantries. Eventually they were able to enroll in a "hot meal program," which allowed them to use food stamps—normally reserved for groceries—at fast food outlets.

"The hardest part about being homeless is when night falls," Kameko says. "It's cold."

When the pandemic hit, the family was provided a room in a ramshackle motel in the town of Baldwin Park, outside LA. There, in that tiny, noisy room, the three oldest kids would log on to their Zoom classes, using computers and headphones provided by the school district. One of the children is on the autism spectrum and needed near-constant attention. For Kameko, who was in the final months of pregnancy and had numerous physical and mental health ailments, life became ever more exhausting. When she came down with Covid shortly after she gave birth, the experience was shattering. "It knocked me down," she says. "I was in a motel and had to stay away from my children and my newborn baby. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't taste."

Kameko's case worker at the mental health clinic she attended suggested she apply for BIG:LEAP, which she did in early 2022. In March, Kameko received an e-mail inviting her to come in for an interview, with instructions to bring

proof that the Covid pandemic had affected her—a positive test result would suffice. Shortly afterward, the family was told that they would be receiving the monthly payments. “I could breathe a little bit more,” Kameko recalls, “knowing I have a little bit extra.”

Britney Frost is in her mid-30s, the mother of a 9-year-old boy and a 4-year-old girl. This past summer, she graduated from California State University, Fullerton, with a degree in business management and a minor in public relations. Wearing skinny blue jeans and a denim jacket, with a stud in her nose and a pink Fitbit on her wrist, she is the epitome of the fashionable young Angeleno. Yet life has been anything but easy for her. When she was 27, Britney was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. In the years since, she has been cycling between treatment and remission. She would get various jobs—as a barista at Starbucks, as a nutritional rep at a large hospital, and others—before falling sick again and having to quit.

In October 2019, Britney was evicted from her apartment in Inglewood after falling behind on the rent. She moved in with her grandmother, which is where she was at the onset of the pandemic. She couldn’t find a job that would allow her to work remotely, and since she needed to stay home to help her children—who were attending elementary school via Zoom—she ended up switching over from disability to unemployment. All the while, she was trying to complete her own remote classes at CSU. In the summer of 2021, she managed to find a temporary job doing administrative work and started bringing in a little bit of money. But as a temp worker, whenever she fell sick and had to take time off, which happened all too often, she wasn’t paid.

When Britney found out she qualified for BIG:LEAP, she cried with joy on the walk back from the office to her car. For weeks, she couldn't stop smiling. When her son, Jace, asked her why she was so happy, she answered, "Because we're going to be OK." Her daughter, Harlee, suggested that because Mommy was so happy, she should buy her a princess bed.

Julio—not his real name—a 41-year-old father of three young children, was working for \$14 an hour in a textile factory in Los Angeles's garment district, an area that employed many undocumented workers. It wasn't much, but it was a steady job. Then Covid struck. "When the pandemic hit, the company completely shut down," Julio says, speaking through a Spanish interpreter. "The owner declared that they were closing temporarily and he would eventually call the workers back. They never called."

Julio, who grew up in a town near Mexico City, lived with his wife and children in a two-bedroom apartment in South Central. They had no savings and no bank account. Their rent was \$1,100, and the utilities cost another \$180. They paid \$50 a month for car insurance, but they had no health coverage and didn't qualify for government benefits.

"The bills just started to accumulate," says Julio, a large, muscular man with a shaved head. He began doing some basic mechanic's work on his friends' cars to try to pick up some cash during those first terrifying months of the pandemic. He borrowed \$1,000 from payday lenders—a loan that accumulated \$200 in interest and fees every month. He and his family cut out all discretionary spending. They started bringing home groceries from their church's food

pantry. Scrambling to survive, Julio began selling fruit on the streets around Downtown LA. If he was lucky, he could scrape together \$70 during a long day's work.

More than a year and a half into the pandemic, a friend sent Julio a link to the application for BIG:LEAP, and Julio decided to apply. "I got an e-mail back saying my application had been received and they would let me know if I had been chosen," Julio remembers. "I was anxious. Nervous. Hoping I would be one of the people chosen for the program." In February 2022, he was asked to come in for an interview. He gathered the necessary documentation and went downtown. "That same day, they told me I was chosen. They gave me a card. They told me it would have money on it on the 25th of the month." He immediately went home to tell his wife.

"Who gives you \$1,000 a month?" he asks. "It never happens."

t's allowed me to maintain cash in hand, get necessities my kids need," Alicea Moore told me three months into the program. "I can buy more; I have something to reach back to, something to grab. It's amazing. If you've never stood in these shoes, you won't know what the feeling is to receive it on a monthly basis."

Yet despite the additional income, with rents skyrocketing in Los Angeles, Alicea still hadn't been able to save enough to put down a security deposit on an apartment. As a result, she was still living with her daughter, eight people crowded into a small three-bedroom house. She had begun looking for jobs that wouldn't hurt her already injured back and had put her name on a waiting list for affordable housing.



The family line: Alicea Moore and her granddaughter Ju'Leigha Ward in their living room in South Central Los Angeles. (*Chad Unger*)

“ |

For the first time in her life, Alicea had managed to save some money—

\$1,20

0 over

four months, making withdrawals with her Angelenos Card each month at Wells Fargo ATMs—but she hadn't yet gotten around to opening a bank account. Her aspirations, however, had shifted. After 47 years, she was finally thinking about owning property. “My ultimate desire is to purchase a home through the First Time Home Buyers' Program. They only ask for a little bit of a down payment. One day I won't have to worry about paying a whole lot of rent money to someone; I'll just have a mortgage. It's more of a promise to me now: ‘You're going to do it. It's going to happen.’” BIG:LEAP had changed her sense of status. “It's an amazing feeling,” she says softly. “Like I matter.”

According to the Los Angeles Community Investment for Families Department, which manages the BIG:LEAP program and helped select the participants, the majority of those receiving monthly payments live in four impoverished areas of the city—Council Districts 6, 8, 9, and 10—all of which have put up discretionary funds to help float the program. Most of the recipients are either Black or Latino.

The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health tracks demographic data for each of the City of Los Angeles's 15 council districts, as well as for all of the cities in the county with more than 24,000 residents. In 2018, its researchers estimated that in District 6, which runs from North Hollywood into the San Fernando Valley, more than 70 percent of the nearly 300,000-strong population was Hispanic, 47 percent was foreign-born, and 23 percent lived below the poverty line. The median household income in District 6 was \$45,481, roughly 20 percent lower than the county's median income of \$56,196. In District 8, the median income was just shy of \$33,000, with 29 percent of the population living below the poverty line. In the densely populated District 9, in South Central LA, it was even lower, at \$28,614. The neighboring District 10 had a median income of just above \$40,000.

For District 9 Councilman Curren D. Price, setting up an intervention like BIG:LEAP is ultimately about “reimagining public safety.” It is also about stimulating businesses in poor neighborhoods by giving residents enough purchasing power to be able to “buy clothing, support children, transportation, the kind of responsible spending you’d expect. Paying rent. Paying the car bill.”

Of the 3,200 enrollees in the program, Price estimates that 800 are from his district. “It’s going to give us a chance to dig into the nuts and bolts,” he says. “To determine how it positively impacts the lives of participants.”

Once her payments began coming in, Britney Frost started to save aggressively. She was desperate to build up a nest egg so that, after she graduated from CSU and found a better-paying job, she could move her children to a larger home in a safer neighborhood. In the first four months, she’d managed to put aside \$2,000, and she set herself a goal to save \$8,000 by BIG:LEAP’s conclusion. But when she fell sick again, in the late winter, she had to use some of her savings to cover several weeks of lost income. Then her car broke down, and she had to dip into the money again to get it repaired. At least now she had the money for it; in the past, even a minor repair would have set her back months financially.

The monthly income began to change Britney’s sense of herself as a mother. In July 2021, when both of her kids’ birthdays came around, she couldn’t afford to celebrate properly. But now, thanks to BIG:LEAP, she had enough of a sense of economic well-being to make plans. She was going to take Jace to Legoland and Harlee to Sesame Street Place; she’d written down the ticket prices months in advance in the new financial planner that she carried in her purse. She was going to buy her son Pokémon cards and her daughter a doll house.

“This was the best thing that happened to me,” Britney says. “The BIG:LEAP has given me some financial stability.”



Where life begins: Family portraits hang on the wall in Kameko Charles and Vaughan Luis's home.

Sitting in their three-bedroom public housing apartment in South Central LA, for which they pay \$608 a month, Kameko Charles and Vaughan Luis reflect on how their lives have changed. During the first few months of the program, they found they had enough money to lease a more road-worthy vehicle—a 2014 Ford Flex—though they worried that once the payments stopped, they would have to return the car. They had some cash that they could put toward Vaughan's immigration paperwork; their biggest hope was that he could finally get his status in order and get a job as a mechanic, which might allow them to buy a home one day.

Kameko and Vaughan could now afford to go on occasional outings with their five children. They started taking the children to the Manhattan Beach pier to teach them how to fish, as their parents had taught them. They were saving a few dollars from each month's payment for a trip to Disneyland—it had been a dream of theirs for years, and it

would be the first family expedition of this sort that they had ever been able to afford. How long would it take to save enough? “Whooo!” Vaughan exclaims as he contemplates the mountain he and Kameko were attempting to climb. “It’ll take more than a year.”

For weeks, Britney Frost hadn’t been returning phone calls. The BIG: LEAP staff tried to reach her, but she told them she was too sick to talk. My calls and e-mails went unanswered.

Finally, Britney left me a message saying she was on the mend. But it had been a slog: another round of CT scans, a fierce cold that had laid her up for weeks, unexplained pains. She had a series of doctors’ appointments scheduled over the coming weeks. “One of the things about surviving cancer,” she said, is that “you try not to think every pain is something. But it’s hard.”

But by late August, the mother of two was feeling upbeat. Despite her challenges, she had managed to save several thousand dollars. During the remaining months of the program, Britney was planning to save enough for a security deposit and the first month’s rent on an apartment. She had just graduated from CSU and was starting to pay down her \$50,000 in student loan debt, and she was daring to dream of enrolling in an MBA program. After a lifetime of constrained possibilities, her horizons were suddenly expanding.

She had managed to properly celebrate her son’s and daughter’s birthdays. She had paid for Harlee to visit the Fun Jump bouncy house park in Torrance, bought her a doll house, and enrolled her in weekly gymnastics classes. She’d

taken Jace to the Orange County Fair, bought him tokens that he could spend on his favorite online game, Roblox, and given him a number of Pokémon cards to add to his growing collection.

“It feels good to have a cushion as a mother,” Britney says.

“It’s every mother’s goal, and sometimes it’s impossible.

BIG:LEAP, for me, it changes my stress levels. I don’t think I’ll ever get an opportunity like this again.”

Kameko Charles and Vaughan Luis are sitting with their children on the sand at Dockweiler Beach, as jet planes roar skyward from the nearby runways at LAX. Vaughan’s sister and one of her daughters are visiting from Belize. It’s early August, and they have brought blankets, boxes filled with picnic snacks, and bags filled with beach toys. Kameko and Jeremiah, who’s one month shy of his second birthday, are lying under a blue tent that they’ve just bought for \$10 from an itinerant vendor.

Vaughan, in long blue shorts and a black vest, can hardly contain his enthusiasm. He runs back and forth between Kameko and the water’s edge, where he and two of the other children have dug a deep hole. They sit in it and wait for the waves to rush in and cover their legs and torsos with water. Vaughan keeps laughing, a deep-bellied, sea-lion-like laugh.

Neither Kameko nor Vaughan can believe their good fortune, the opportunities they have been able to provide for their children using the BIG:LEAP funds. Their recent homelessness now seems a distant memory, even though, Kameko explains quietly, the place they are currently living in isn’t exactly an Eden—gangs frequently fight in and around their building, and the back window of their new car

was recently smashed in. As the school year nears, they have been able to buy the children backpacks and school supplies, a far cry from their situation in previous years, when they had to check their pride and count on giveaways.

Over the past few months, they have had real birthday celebrations for their sons Vaughan Jr. and Isaiah: parties with water guns, balloons, and cake. They are trying to calculate whether they have enough money saved to take the kids to Disneyland for Jeremiah's upcoming birthday.

Vaughan and Kameko want to live for the moment. There's been too much pain and hardship in their lives of late, too much despair, to do otherwise. When the money comes in, they spend it, despite knowing that in half a year the payments will stop. They go bowling; they put gas in the car and drive to the airport just to watch planes landing. They're pondering whether they can afford a couple of nights in Las Vegas at Circus Circus. They've gone out to a nearby oceanfront pier and bought tray upon tray of seafood. They took a tour of an old battleship. They're looking forward to renting bikes at Dockweiler Beach one weekend. Vaughan's planning a half-day open-ocean fishing trip with some buddies.

"We've seen other people doing things and said, 'I wish, I wish, I wish,'" Kameko says. "Now it's no more 'I wish.' We can do it. It's not an 'I wish' now, it's a 'Thank you.' My son said, 'It feels good to be out and not in the house.' This is life for us. We're not sitting looking at the same four walls. We're being a family, doing the things families do."

For Alicea Moore, things weren't going so well. She'd applied for a number of jobs without success. Her sciatica from her damaged disc was flaring up, and she still hadn't received all of the treatment she needed. She and her younger children were still living in her grown daughter's house, but they'd had to move out for a few weeks while the landlord did repairs, and now she was couch-surfing again.

Alicea was able to afford some new clothes and shoes for herself and her children, but she was treading water. During the giddy early months of her participation in BIG:LEAP, she'd been obsessively saving money to buy a home. But over the past couple of months, one unexpected expense after another had whittled away her savings. By August, the \$1,200 that she had built up was gone. Her home-buying dream is now, she says, in the "long-term future." She had resorted to prayer, hoping that a higher power would help her find a stable job and regular income before the BIG:LEAP payments ended. She was overcome with the blues. "I'm just winging it—I'm winging it," she admits, as much to herself as to anyone else.



In the neighborhood: A street corner in South Central Los Angeles, the area where many BIG:LEAP participants reside. (*Frédéric Soltan / Corbis via Getty Images*)

The last time I saw Julio, he smiled as he reflected on how his life had changed since BIG:LEAP began. “I started to immediately pay down what I owed—for electricity and gas. It came at a time when the utilities had sent letters saying, ‘You’ve got to pay up.’” He had begun to pay his rent again. He felt happy that he could take his children on little outings once more. They went to the beach and to parks. Occasionally he would splurge and buy them meals from McDonald’s.

“I feel less stress,” he told me. “I can sleep at night better. When my wife and I got Covid, she got very depressed and was very ill and would get panic attacks. Now, they’ve gotten a lot better. Having dollars is a big part of it.”

But as summer gave way to fall, the BIG:LEAP staff lost track of Julio. He stopped returning their phone calls and e-mails, and despite numerous efforts to find him, he didn’t reappear.

The other participants had begun contemplating what would come next.

At the end of October, with only three months left in the program, Alicea Moore was panicking. Her housing remained as insecure as ever, and for months now she hadn’t had any income other than the BIG:LEAP payments. Alicea’s bills were piling up—car insurance, cell phone, utilities, food—and her kids needed more school supplies, or shoes, or any number of other things. With inflation rampaging,

everything cost more today than it did yesterday. As 2022 wound down, she realized that she hadn't saved "one cent. Not one cent."

Some days, she couldn't stop crying. "You try to hold yourself together, because everybody depends on you to make everything happen," she says, the tears streaming down her cheeks, over a coffee at a Starbucks near the USC campus south of Downtown LA. "I feel very helpless. Where were the instructions? What did I do?"

Despite the tears, though, Alicea was feeling slightly more optimistic that day. She was dressed in a white Tommy Hilfiger shirt, blue and green plaid pants, a black jacket with shiny metal buttons, with her hair carefully pulled up and back into two braids and her ears adorned with braided gold hoop earrings. She'd just had an interview for a job as a janitor, cleaning restrooms at LAX. For the first time since she'd injured her back, she felt that a steady income was within her grasp. The job paid \$18 an hour and came with benefits. Yes, her legs and back still hurt, but she had decided, she says with just a touch of bravado, to fight through the discomfort and start working again. "I've learned how to cope with the pain. Because, if I stop, guess what? Life stops. If I don't do this, who's going to take care of my kids? I need a job, because when BIG:LEAP ends, I don't have nothing. I'm 48, and I look back and say, 'OK, I'm still doing the same thing: stressing, wondering where the next loaf of bread is coming from.'"

One moment, Alicea was bubbling over with confidence that she would get the LAX job; the next, she was catastrophically downbeat. "What I see in front of me is

blockages: brick walls, big iron gates, fences. I don't see a way out," she says softly, tearing up again. She was terrified about ending up in absolute poverty again once her monthly payments stopped and was desperately trying to talk herself into believing that she would cope. "I can't go no lower," she says. "So I have to stand 10 toes down, chin up, and convince myself I was built for it."

Kameko Charles and Vaughan Luis weren't feeling that level of anxiety. True, they knew the program was winding down, and their efforts to get Vaughan's immigration status sorted out had been derailed for the moment—they had paid an immigration attorney \$1,200, but he had apparently died before being able to make any progress on Vaughan's case, and federal immigration authorities had recently informed Vaughan that he would have to start the process over from scratch. He was trying to get a copy of his birth certificate from the authorities in Belize to forward to immigration.

But Kameko and Vaughan had gone from being homeless and on the edge of despair to having a home, and they could see their future a bit more clearly. They'd hung a sign in the small space between their front door and the refrigerator: "Family: where life begins and Love never ends."

The BIG:LEAP money had enabled them to pay down a number of debts, and they now had a car that actually worked. Vaughan had been able to buy two new pairs of glasses—since he didn't qualify for Medi-Cal, he'd been managing with old glasses and an outdated prescription.

More important, they had continued stretching the dollars to give their five kids as many life-nurturing experiences as they could—even if they hadn't managed to save enough to go to Disneyland or Vegas. They'd visited local museums, thrown birthday parties for each child, and bought them Halloween costumes. They were planning a big Thanksgiving bash and had dreams of decorating their entire apartment for Christmas—a big tree, under which would be toys they'd bought themselves rather than the giveaways they usually had to rely on. Vaughan Jr. wanted a scooter; Angel was keen on a hoverboard and a nail kit. "It's going to feel good to actually go to the store and purchase goods and say they're from Mommy and Daddy," Kameko says. The family members all agreed that they'd have lights hanging from the cupboards and fake snow sprinkled on the windowpanes. "I've been talking about it since September," Kameko says. "I cannot wait. I have it all planned out."

Both parents had noticed that their children were happier and calmer now that they could take them out on day trips and adventures. They fought with each other less. Kameko reported that her high blood pressure was going down.

They knew, though, that in some ways they were living on borrowed time. "Me, right now, I'm not much worried about it," Kameko says. "But in March, I'm going to be like, 'Oh my God, what now?' At the moment, I'm living in gratefulness." Vaughan agrees: "All we can say is 'Thank you.' What they did for the whole year was so helpful. You've got the money to pay the bills, don't have to worry about where the money is coming from. I get up in the morning, see their faces," he says. "Enjoy the little things. There's nothing to complain about."

Britney Frost hadn't had a major health setback since the summer. She was enjoying working—her temp job at the insurance company was morphing into something more permanent, and her boss had even talked about eventually promoting her. She was taking her kids to extracurricular activities: Jace was playing football and basketball, and Harlee was enrolled in a weekly gymnastics class. “It makes her extremely happy, and makes me the best mother in the world,” Britney says, laughing. She had recently taken the kids to a pumpkin patch and then trick-or-treating. For the first time in several years, the family had enough money to truly celebrate Christmas. They would be able to eat out once, maybe even twice, during the holidays.


They were also looking forward to a few days in Big Bear Lake in January. The trip had been a family ritual for years: They'd stay in the same hotel, order from the same pizza joint, visit the same bowling alley, and curl up on the bed together to watch the final college football game of the season. It was a tradition that anchored the family calendar. But in 2022, starved for cash, they had forgone the holiday. As 2023 approached, they were getting ready to go again.

Over the course of her participation in BIG:LEAP, Britney had managed to save nearly \$5,000. She'd hoped to save far more, but it hadn't always been smooth sailing. “Life comes at you,” she says. “I had car issues, emergency surgery.” But that \$5,000 would be life-changing. Come April, when she was expecting to add her tax refund to her pool of savings, she would have enough money to rent an apartment and maybe a little left over to buy some furniture. Now that she

had her degree and her work prospects were improving, she wanted to save money fast so she could buy a house in a few years.

Why, I ask her, was BIG:LEAP a good thing?

Britney, who has struggled for so much of her life, pauses to compose herself. “There are so many reasons it’s a good thing,” she says finally. “It went to low-income families, to people who genuinely needed it. It helps with the stress, allows people to put food in their mouths. It helped with my car. It helps so much with my kids. Why should we give people \$1,000? Because people need help. It’s hard out there. We give tax breaks for the wealthy, but somehow it’s wrong to give low-income people \$1,000 so they can feed their children.”

She stopped, thought about it some more, and then continued: “Not everyone has a village. Not everyone has a family to go to for help financially. So, I’m grateful. Very, very grateful.” 

Sasha Abramsky · Sasha Abramsky, who writes regularly for *The Nation*, is the author of several books, including *Inside Obama’s Brain*, *The American Way of Poverty*, *The House of 20,000 Books*, *Jumping at Shadows*, and, most recently, *Little Wonder: The Fabulous Story of Lottie Dod, the World’s First Female Sports Superstar*. Subscribe to The Abramsky Report, a weekly, subscription-based political column, [here](#).

To submit a correction for our consideration, click [here](#).
For Reprints and Permissions, click [here](#).

..... **COMMENTS (4)**

