

FROM THE COVER



▲ As “Pacific Islanders we survive communally,” Tupuola said. She had planned to have 300 people at her baby shower, but narrowed the list to 80. “She just has a lot of love,” said Stevé. Because of COVID restrictions, Tupuola attended prenatal visits alone. During one, the provider, a white woman, said there was a city full of homeless pregnant women and suggested she take antidepressants. With support from her doula, Tupuola advocated for a more culturally competent midwife to deliver her baby.



◀ In April, Tupuola moved into a tiny one-bedroom in Concord through temporary assistance from the CalWORKS Housing Support Program. “I have been waiting this long to get resources I have deserved my entire life,” she said. On July 28, Tupuola went into labor. In the courtyard of her complex, Stevé and her doula guided her through hours of contractions. “Nothing can prepare your body for this experience,” said Tupuola. She and Stevé named their daughter Oshún after the Yoruba deity of light and fertility.

RECLAIMING HER SPACE

VISUAL ESSAY BY SARAHBETH MANEY

▼ In December, Tupuola started a new job with an organization that uses design to address inequity, making enough money to remain in the apartment in Concord after her assistance ends. “It feels good,” she said, “not having that worry to stay in a shelter.” Tupuola (left) and friend Gabriela Gonzales (right) look toward baby Oshún Rae'Lynn-Ku'ulpo Togiai-Stevé during her one-month celebratory dinner in Concord in August.

As Sophia Tupuola’s belly expanded last spring and summer, she and Dante Stevé nicknamed the infant growing inside “baby alien.” They played reggae music for the fetus, marveling at how it kicked and moved to the sounds of Bob Marley. Tupuola and Stevé didn’t care about the gender of their first child, so they decided it would be a surprise. Their only hope, and biggest fear, was delivering a healthy baby. In San Francisco, the rate of preterm birth among Pacific Islander women like Tupuola is 42% higher than for white women, and in the middle of her second trimester, the coronavirus pandemic arrived in the Bay Area, disproportionately affecting communities of color and limiting her access to prenatal care. “I have to fight every week, just to get seen at the hospital because of COVID,” Tupuola, a first-generation Samoan American, said as her due date neared. “Even during this length of pregnancy we need to fight for something.” For six months, Chronicle photographer Sarahbeth Maney documented Tupuola’s preg-

nancy as she navigated housing challenges amid the pandemic, marched for racial justice and prepared for the birth of her first child. Tupuola grew up in Hunters Point, living with a tight-knit extended family that “piled up on top of each other” in public housing. As a child, she shared a tiny room with four family members in an apartment complex overlooking the murky San Francisco Bay. Since 2015, she has worked for a nonprofit that provides job training for underserved communities, but struggled to find stable housing for herself. Displaced since 2017, she has couch-surfed with friends and family for years, staying in so many different situations she struggled to keep track. In January 2020, her older sister evicted her, and, nearly three months pregnant, Tupuola spent three nights in a women’s shelter. Still, as her pregnancy progressed, Tupuola was determined to give her baby a strong start in life. “I love (my child) enough to learn how to live,” she said, “and not just survive.”

▼ Tupuola and Stevé recently broke up, but are co-parenting Oshún. “The shift into co-parenting really put a fire under my ass to get back into the ring and start fighting for my life again,” said Tupuola, who started a new job that will allow her to keep the apartment. “Our support system has literally pulled us through the process. We have people to help us communicate, and we’ve been grounded enough to do the best and do right by Oshún.”

