

# ODYSSEY ORACLE

## SPECIAL MOMENTS



### In this Oracle . . .

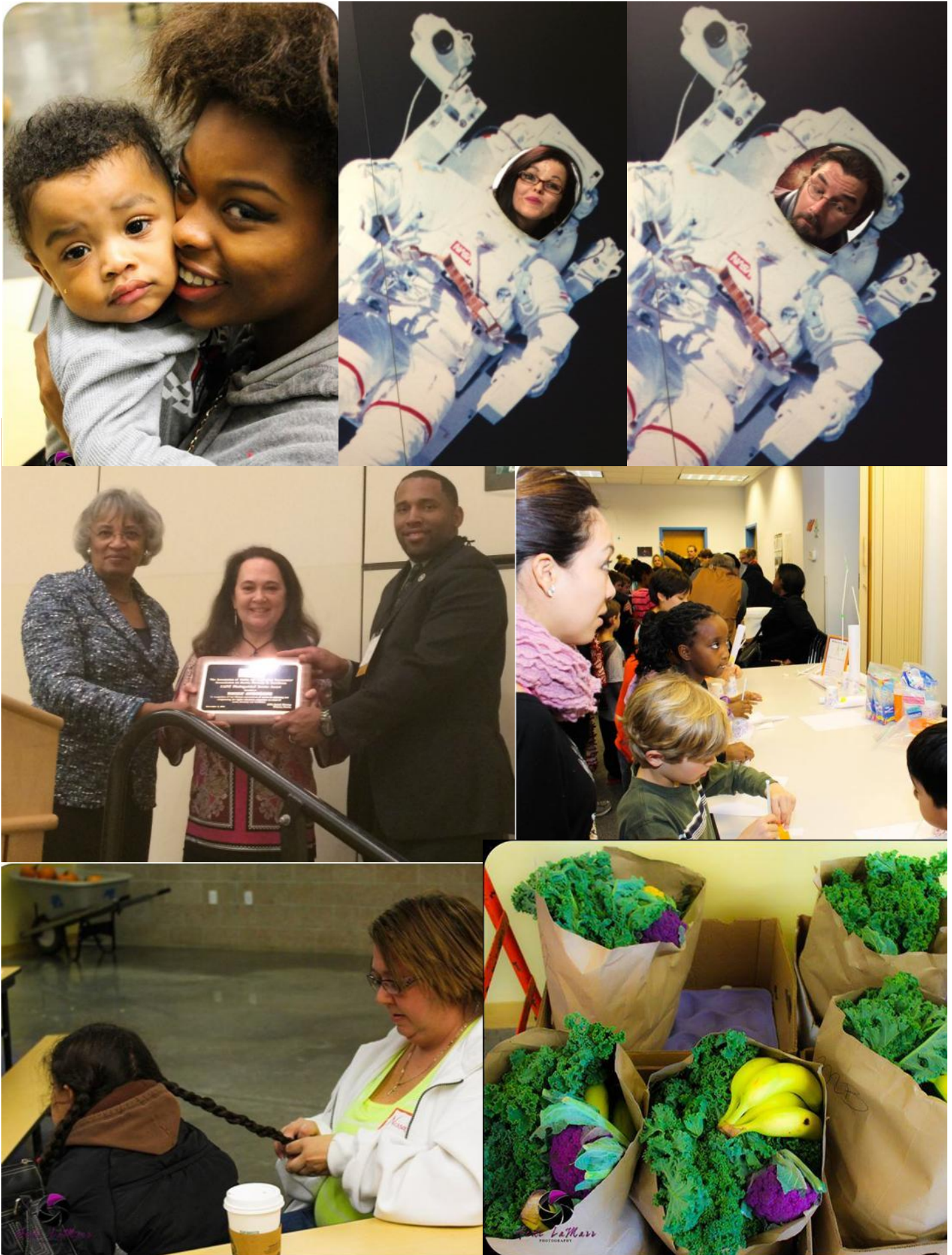
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# CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

## Memories from Mexico



My brother and I kept trying to deny what our friends had just finished telling us. “THE THREE WISE MEN ARE NOT REAL. THEY ARE YOUR PARENTS.” Our jaws dropped. Suddenly, my skateboard and my brother’s toys felt heavier—heavier than we ever remembered them being. Did our toys have any weight to them? I thought they were light and fluffy, like a feather, as the memories of all the years we believed in the Three Wise Men.

We started arguing with our friends. “If they don’t exist, then who eats the bowls of water and the cookies that we leave for them?” or “Maybe if your mom is the one who brings you the toys, it is because you and your siblings have been very bad this past year.”

When they convinced us 99%, we went and confronted my mom. She tried to break it to us gently, but I think that was the day our childhood was over. **(Sahira Rocillo Ramírez)**



When I was little we believed in “Los Reyes Magos” [The Three Wise Men]. It is like Santa Claus, but they come on January 6<sup>th</sup>. In our church they always did a play the night before, and the church was full of children and people. At the end they would give us an *aguinaldo*—a bag with fruit and candy. I was always so happy that day.

My brother and I would also always write a letter for Los Reyes Magos. The letter had a list of all the toys we wanted, and we put it in a shoe under the tree. The morning of the 6<sup>th</sup> we would wake up so excited, but they would always bring us just one small toy. What I really wanted was a big doll, but I



never got it because it was really expensive.

When I was about twelve years old, I already knew that Los Reyes Magos did not exist, and my mother gave me the money for the big doll. I decided that I did not want it anymore, and I spent my money on something else. **(Veronica Tinajero)**



I was about eight years old. On Christmas it was a cold night, and you could see the stars in a very clear sky. The whole family was there, and we were having a great time. I was running around and playing with my cousins, there was music playing, and people were laughing and eating my grandma’s homemade tamales. My cousin Maricela came and said, “The volcano is erupting!” I was so scared. I went outside to see and saw the fire on top of Popocatepetl (that’s the name of the volcano in Puebla, Mexico). As I watched it grow bigger, I was scared that the explosion of lava could reach us. But then it was also one of the most beautiful sights I had ever seen. **(Margarita Cid Luna)**



I happily remember when I was a child how much I loved to go to the carnival parade that we have in my hometown every year. Thousands of people reunite at *el malecon* (the seaside pier), waiting to see the queen's *carruaje* and watching fireworks reflected in the sea. That is a real party, where everything is enjoyment. That holiday is what I most remember about my hometown in Mazatlan, Mexico. **(Natalia Rodríguez Miramontes)**

## Nighttime Journeys



When I was younger I used to watch a TV show called *The Gladiator*. One night I fell asleep and dreamed I was on an obstacle course fighting a masked person to save my brother. While we stood on a beam with stick batons that looked like Q-tips, I looked down below and saw it was nothing but pitch black, like a point of no return. However, I was fighting my opponent, and I knocked him off the beam. As my brother was released to come to me, he got halfway and was pushed off. My heart dropped, and anger came over me. As I began to sweat and tremble, I went over, too, because I couldn't live without him. Before I reached the bottom to try and save or find him, I woke up crying. **(Michelle Conley)**



A memory I have is when I was four. My brothers and I got done eating pizza, and it was time for bed. I remember getting on the top bunk. The next memory I have was seeing flashing lights and hearing some man asking me questions. What I was told by my mother was that I was sleepwalking and I had sleepwalked outside, during winter time, when it was below zero out. I was all blue when my mother found me.

You ask, how did she find you? Well, she felt a cold

breeze, but even before that she woke with a mother's gut feeling that something was wrong. She got up in a chill and checked on her children—my brothers and me. She saw that I was not in the bed, so she proceeded to check the house. She felt that cold breeze coming from the door downstairs. Somehow I had sleepwalked downstairs and out the door, where I sat in the snow, crying and all blue.

What I now know is that I could have died of hypothermia for the length of time I was out there. Thank God my mother had that feeling, or I wouldn't be here today to learn with my beautiful classmates. **(Joseph Lentz)**



It was a rainy, windy night. My brother, mother, father, and aunt were asleep, and the storm had woken me up. I was really scared because the room was dark and it had a really deep closet. All I could think of at that moment was that someone or something was going to come out and take me away from my mom. It was a scary night and I was so little. Because I got too scared, I had to use the restroom, but it was really far away from my room. So I ran downstairs fast with the storm going on. I didn't make it to the bathroom—I got too scared and started crying. My mom ran downstairs. Because she was trying to get me, she tripped and hurt her knee. She started crying afterwards, too, and I started imagining that she was going to die. But after my father helped her, they told me she was okay. **(Brenda Juarez Cruz)**



This dream is so crazy! I remember having a dream about holding a newborn baby and dropping the baby. I don't know why I dreamt this, but it always frightens me. I love newborns, but I can only hold them for a moment. I always imagine how delicate they are. **(Patricia McKnight)**



## Childhood Terrors and Sorrows



I remember one time when I was in the sixth grade, I got suspended from school for three days for fighting. When the next Sunday got there, I got up and got dressed for church, only to learn from my grandmother that not going to church was part of my punishment. I was heartbroken. I literally cried all day Sunday in my room. I really loved going to church, and she took it from me. **(DeAngelo Hood)**



One of my childhood memories was when I was nine years old, almost ten. I was playing with some friends in a building across the alley from where I lived. There were a whole bunch of us—I want to say at least ten kids—so there were kids everywhere! We were all playing and joking around when all of a sudden one of my mom's good friends started screaming and running towards the building. What we didn't know was that the porches of the building were on fire. The boyfriend of my friend's mom was mad because she threw him out of the house, so he decided to burn the building, thinking that she was inside. When we looked out the window that led to the porch, the flames were crazy. We were so scared because we did not know if we were going to get out. The hallways were full of smoke to the point where we couldn't see the person in front of us.

When the firefighters arrived, we were relieved to know that they were going to save us. As they were getting all of the kids out of the building, one of the girls with us ended up passing out because the smoke was too much for her. She had to be carried out by a fireman. That was the first time I had been in a situation like that, where my life was in danger. . . . The ex-boyfriend was charged and locked up.

**(Melissa Dominguez)**



When I was younger, my mom worked fulltime at a daycare center, so my older brother had to watch me. Now, my brother was mean to me when my mom wasn't around and nice to me when she was. During the summer there wasn't much to do in Beloit, so my brother would find out things to do but make me test them out. One day he had this idea to put me in the dryer and turn it on. I was scared and told him no, but he told me if I didn't that I would be in trouble. So I stepped in the dryer, fearing for my life and praying for mom to come and stop him. Well, that never



happened. So I turned in the dryer, hitting my head, screaming and crying, and not knowing if I was going to make it. When I got out he said, “I told you it wasn’t that bad,” but he never got in the dryer!

The next “game” was roller coaster. I got on the table in the basement as it tilted from side to side, I fell on the hard basement floor, and then we repeated the process. I was a little bruised, but I would not dare tell my mom or it would be worse. . . .

Now, I remind you that my brother did not join in on the games. I felt anger because I couldn’t do anything about it and love because he was only being a big brother. I was so glad he didn’t babysit me anymore! I didn’t tell my mom any of this until I was grown, and my brother never recalls that this happened! **(Brandi Whitlock)**



I remember as a child when my family and I were living on 14<sup>th</sup> and Mitchell on the South Side of Milwaukee. At this time I was very young, and I think on a daily basis I was in constant fear. You see, my mother had a boyfriend that would get

belligerently drunk and beat the hell out of me for any little thing that I did! For as little as arguing with my sister, I would be beaten as if I were a grown man. These beatings would be a daily thing, so as much as possible I would be gone away from the house. To get me away more often, my mother would give me \$20 for my sister and me so that we could head down Mitchell St. and get away for quite some time. This as well was a daily thing and mostly when her boyfriend was drinking.

I lived in constant fear at this point in my life, all due to small troubles that a little boy would create with a consequence that was as if I broke

the law. Some beatings stand out more than the others, but in all each was just as bad as the last one. I never found out why or how a man over six feet tall could beat such a small child like that. I guess I don’t want to know. Those vivid memories still to this day keep me on my toes and my hair sticking up when I think about it. **(Christopher Villalpando)**



I remember seeing her hit the floor, and in that moment my heart fell below the carpet beneath my feet. I remember the screams that filled my Aunt Pamela’s two-bedroom apartment. I remember freaking

out and asking questions to understand why she was lying on the floor, looking as if her soul was anywhere but in her body. I was silenced, assured that everything was okay, and taken back upstairs to our apartment. I guess they didn’t want me to see the paramedics take her away to God knows where. This was one of the scariest moments in my life—I thought I lost my mother. **(Lakoyé Buford)**



When I was about six or seven, my mom went to the store and left me and my friends in the crib [apartment]. They lived upstairs from us and were assholes, but I loved them. We noticed *Candy Man* was on TV, and I was super scared of that

movie. So we started watching it, and I hid my face under my covers. They turned the TV volume up, snuck out of my house, and started beating on the door. I was terrified. I jumped and tried to run out of the crib, but they were holding my door from the outside. When they finally let go, I ran out of my house and was in the middle of the street, crying. It was almost dark out.

My grandmother's friend saw me and brought me in her crib. She let me chill at her house 'til she saw my mom walking down the street. My mom came and got me, laughed at me in a joking way, walked me home, changed the channel, and showed me Candy Man was not in the house. We ate junk food and watched *New Jack City*. Then I fell asleep. **(Shaneika Sanders)**



My uncle passed away when I was a child. After my family told me about it, the news came on and the story was about my uncle's murder. The news mostly told about all of the crimes and trouble with the law, and they

hurried through the part that he had been stabbed 17 times. After I attended the funeral, I was scared for more than three months to sleep in my room. I was terrified, and to this day I don't know why the murder happened.

**(Tenishia Bland)**



I remember vividly when I was young my mother being drunk. When I came into the room, the space heater was lying on her leg, and I saw the skin peeling off. Even though I was a young child, I knew that I had to save my mom, so I snatched the heater off of

her leg. I must have been six years old at the time, but I felt responsible for my mother.

**(Lenora Rodin)**



When it was 1999 I was scared that when it turned 2000 we would all die. The lights would shut off and it would be very scary. I literally thought when it turned midnight it would all be over. This stressed me more than any other childhood

thoughts. When it turned 12 o'clock I was so relieved. I know a lot of adults were going crazy, so I don't feel that bad. **(Janina White)**

## Childhood Joys and Laughs

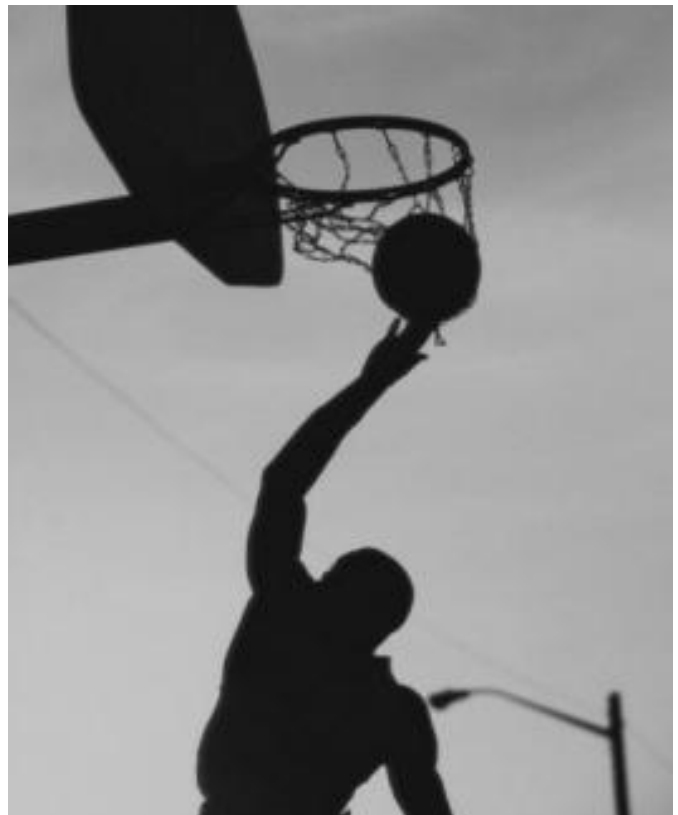


When I was a toddler and first learning to read, we were traveling down Highway 14 from Oregon to Madison. While we were driving, I would read the signs to help me learn. I remember flipping out after

reading a sign that said "FREEWAY ENDS IN HALF A MILE." I really thought the road was ending, but my mom kept driving. I came to find out that the freeway was transitioning into a city street—hilarious! **(Jessi Hodges)**



I remember a time when I was overjoyed making the basketball team, gaining the title of "undefeated" two years straight, and winning back-to-back championships. **(Derek Dodd)**





Have you ever felt so excited and curious about a specific moment that you had a tingly feeling, as if you had to tinkle?

Well, this same exact feeling came about on a cold winter day in 2003. My mom told my brothers and sisters and me to go in the room while they brought some things upstairs they didn't want us to see. By this time I was ten years old and clearly aware Santa Claus did not exist. I could hear the plastic from all the bags colliding with the walls and feel the wrapping paper being unraveled as I imagined opening all those gifts. The night before Christmas I was so eager. The simple sight of light awakened me, and I heard the Christmas bells one is used to hearing in Christmas movies. It was a bright Christmas day. So much joy filled the room. **(Prodajaé Huntley)**



It was June 17, 1990. It was sunny and the most perfect weather to spend a day at the lake. My mom, my two brothers (Nathan and Christopher), and I all got into the car and headed to my Uncle Bob's. My uncle lived in

Okatchee on the lake. . . . This trip was more memorable than the rest. My uncle and I were celebrating our birthdays. I had turned 10 and he 50. All of our family members were there, and it was festive throughout the whole day. We went swimming in the lake, fishing, and for a boat ride. I didn't have much luck fishing, but I was able to catch a water lily. **(Nissa Uriostegui)**



When I was a little girl I went from home to home, almost never with my mom.

Therefore, when I was afforded the opportunity to spend time with her, it was almost similar to a life-changing event. I'm still not

sure, 'til this day, if it was because she couldn't take care of me or because I didn't get to be with my mom often like a normal child, but when I was with her she always bought me things. Before Christmas, for about a week's duration (I was a kid so it felt like FOREVER), I asked for the Bratz mannequin doll. Every time we went to the store, my mom always said no with great emotion. When Christmas rolled around, I wasn't very happy because that was the thing I wanted. When I got to the last present, it was the mannequin doll. I hugged my mom with so much joy because she always knew the way to my heart. **(Nitia Johnson)**



# MADISON SYMPHONY CHRISTMAS

## A REVIEW BY MELISSA DOMINGUEZ

I was excited walking in the Overture Center with my aunt Socorro (Odyssey '06) for the first time. It was full of people waiting for the show to start. I've never been to something like this before, so I didn't know what to expect.

As we walked in we could hear the carolers singing so beautifully. They sounded almost like angels all in unison. After listening to them sing, we went into the symphony hall to take our seats and wait for the concert to begin. We sat in the balcony, so we had a good view from where we were sitting. My aunt was a little nervous since she's afraid of heights (poor thing).



As the conductor walked on to the stage, I couldn't wait for it to start. The orchestra started to play, and all the instruments playing together sounded so beautiful. I loved the way the violins sounded. It reminded me of when my cousins played the violin and they tried to show me how to play. As the orchestra played, the choir sang, and they triggered memories of when I was in the choir in high school. I got goose bumps.

Never did I ever imagine that I would be going to see something like this. Where I come from and where I grew up, you don't think that you can do these things. Me going to see Opera singers and to hear a symphony—never!!!! I am thankful to have the opportunity to experience this because I was able to see and hear the orchestra play in person. I enjoyed every minute of it.

# MUSIC TO FEED THE SOUL

## A REVIEW OF THE MADISON SYMPHONY CHRISTMAS CONCERT BY SHANEIKA SANDERS

### *Caroling in the Lobby*

I watched as the choir filled the second floor balcony in the Overture Center hallway dressed all in black with red scarves. It looked to be about 100 people singing, and they all varied in age—I'd say anywhere from 20 to 90 years old. Most of them looked more like folks in a corporate office rather than in a singing choir. For it to be so many of them, though, they all were in key, with everyone hitting the notes perfectly and no one trying to outdo the next. The melody of their voices was so soothing and humbling. They had a beautiful Christmas spirit about them. There were no instrumentals or microphones, just raw voices as they sang in the hallways.



As for the onlookers, the older crowd members had soft smiles on their faces as if reminiscing about their past Christmas moments. The middle-aged people looked sad, as if this music reminded them of something they hadn't quite made peace with. And the children . . . were just being children. A few songs sung were "Silent Night" (in German and English) and "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," just to name a couple. "Come all ye faithful" was beautiful, and they began singing it in Latin, then English. I thought that was pretty cool. A lady named Peggy in the choir was tired and needed to take a seat while they were still singing in the hallway, and she thanked me for showing up. I figured she wasn't used to seeing a lot of "black" people there, but she urged me to sing with her. I did. I became part of the choir before I knew it.



### *First Half*

As we took our seats for the concert, I noticed how spiffy everyone dressed. Although I was cute, they were church dressed. Eight-year-old girls had on pearls and shiny dresses. I loved the way the lights dimmed and showed up in certain parts of the songs and how they determined which lights cut on and off at which point. I must say I was more intrigued with the lights than with the first opera singer. Harold Meers, a tenor, grew on me as the show went on, but at first those lights had my attention.

The orchestra was amazing, though, and so was the choir. I loved the instruments, especially the violin and saxophone. But I do wonder how much the dude gets paid to sing opera because he definitely



looks like money. He looked like a cocky and sexy actor, but the singing threw off my image of him. The director looked confused, but my only knowledge of directors is what I've seen in church. In a black church, the directors have to be on point or folks will not follow. We were blessed with the presence of the youth choir, who did a wonderful job, and an all-boy choir. They were really good. They were soft spoken, and one of the boys had a very interesting and distinctive voice.

### *Second Half*

Alyson Cambridge, a soprano opera singer, also blessed us with her presence, and that girl was glistening. All the way from the balcony I could see her many different sparkly outfits, her jewelry shining all so bright, and her bright red lipstick. Her voice was AMAZING! I wish I could find a better word for it because it was truly something I've never heard before in my life. On TV or in person, she was amazing. I'd pay money to listen to her sing in person again, and I hate spending money.

Then the Mt. Zion Gospel Choir came and brought soul to the place. The vibes and energy they gave off made even the babies sitting next to me clap their hands. It was just beautiful, and they ended the night with all the singers and musicians on stage together singing "Let there be peace on Earth (and let it begin with me)," which says so much all by itself.

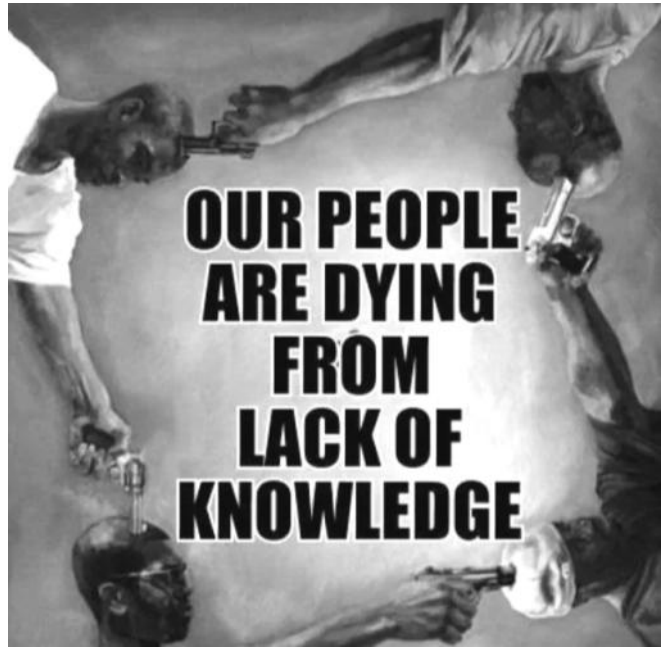
And of course the last song that also included the crowd was "Sing We Now of Christmas." We left as it came on so we wouldn't be in traffic trying to get out of the parking garage, but overall this was a great experience. I love music. It just feeds my soul. Being that I come from a family background of musicians, I can appreciate good art. I needed this experience, and now I have had it.



# BLACK LIVES MATTER

## BY SHANEIKA SANDERS

December 5, 2014, marked a historic moment of protest in Madison, Wisconsin. Whether we as Americans want to accept it or not, America is no place for a Black man. Although I'd like to say the justice system is broken, it isn't. It's doing what it was built to do. Friday I had the privilege of working with the group that made this protest possible. They are called "Freedom Inc." The protest started with a group of people marching from the old Taco Bell on Park Street to the steps of the police station across from the Southside library. They did spoken word/ poetry and heartfelt speeches pertaining to the incidents we've been encountering with the police vs. Black men. They also gave statistics about our jail system right here in Madison. We



marched and protested on behalf of all the Mike Browns and Eric Garners of the world. Even our young black children are not safe in the hands of the police as we bury our 12-year-old Tamir Rices in the world.

I loved and appreciated all the other races that came out and supported the "Black Lives Matter" movement. Black people only make up 5% of the population in Madison, yet we make up over 50% of the population in jail. The majority of those locked up are in there for looking for survival methods due to poverty. Madison has found \$800 million to build a new jail but has no money for building homes for our less fortunate. Something has got to change.

During our protest, we blocked off Badger Road and a chunk of Park Street to get our point across. As we sat in the middle of the







street, it was so quiet you could hear a pen drop. As we sat there, thoughts of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman filled my brain. Speeches from Martin Luther King and Malcolm X filled my heart. This march isn't about Blacks only or segregation: it's about recognizing that Blacks are human, too. We are all GOD's children. We are dying at the hands of those that should be protecting us. My children aren't safe playing outside because they're black. My thing is you don't have to like us, but we deserve and demand respect and the same justice for all.

Blacks have spent their entire duration in America fighting for freedom, and we will continue to

fight until we too can enjoy that freedom. There will be many more marches to come. I just hope that this go round we of all races and nationalities, whatever our beliefs, can march in love—love for the human race, no matter the shade, no matter the education status, no matter what. I know change takes time, but I do believe that time is coming and it's very close. Now I know why this meant so much to blacks in the '60s. And to think, this is only our beginning.

We are the new and improved generation of what some would call "Black Panthers." Though it is not our goal to only look out for the Black race or hold hate in our hearts for other races, until we love ourselves as a Black race and as human beings, we will only have hate to give. As long as the government continues to comfortably take our lives away for NO reason, hate will be the only thing produced. Hope and faith is all we have right now. Yes, I personally do believe that, for now, is enough.



# PROFILES IN COURAGE

**Risen from the Ashes**  
**By Sahira Rocillo Ramírez**

My brother and I were scared; my grandma approached us angrily and started hitting us. I can't remember what we did to make her so angry. My mom caught her hitting and yelling at us, and she stepped in. My mother gave my brother and me a look that said she was sorry, and then her eyes turned wild toward Grandma. They started arguing about our naughty antics, then about my mother's recent divorce from my father, and how we now were a shame to our family because we came from a broken home. My grandma could not carry our burden any longer and kicked us out of her house in the middle of the night. Grandma was coming after my mom, belt in hand, trying to whip her. We hurried toward the front door with nothing else than what we had on that night. Getting a divorce and finding herself and her children suddenly homeless would only be the beginning of an abrupt change in my mother's life. By surviving a divorce and starting a life as a single mother, my mom has proven to be a courageous woman, enduring the retaliation of her family, making difficult choices in order to evolve on a personal level, and improving her life through education.

My parents married in 1987 when Mom was just 20 years old. I was born in the middle of the hot summer of 1988, and my brother was born during the late spring of 1989, just 11 months after me. Their marriage would not last more than five years. After their divorce, my dad moved in with his dad. My mom, brother, and I moved in with her mother, my grandma. It was my mother's worst nightmare—her walk of shame—and it was not long before the three of us started to suffer from my grandma's retaliation and the humiliation coming from the majority of my aunts. My grandma and aunts looked down upon my mother, and there was a time that my brother and I were not allowed to talk to some of our cousins because we were children of taboo. Mother was the first person to get a divorce in our entire extended family.

After Grandma kicked us out, my oldest aunt took us in for only one night in her house. When we arrived at her house, my aunt made it very clear that we could not stay for more than one day. My mom had to find a job by the end of that week, and she had to pay rent as soon as her first check came in. For a period of two years, we moved to at least six different houses before my mom and her new partner found an



abandoned house. Since my mother couldn't afford to pay rent, we had to break into the house and make it "ours" over the years. When Mom found a better job, she started paying the mortgage of the previous owner and started to fight for it. She also learned to drive and signed the contract for a new house. She is still paying off that beloved house of hers back in Mexico.

In 2006 my mother made a courageous and scary decision. She decided to move to the United States. I still remember the last hug I gave her before I saw her disappear through the gate. My mother told me she thought she would have a better life there and that she'd be able to provide my brother and me with a better future. When she saved enough money, she brought us with her in 2007. She has been working really hard ever since. She did not know any English besides "Hi" or "Thank you," but she enrolled in school and completed her GED in Spanish a few years ago. Then she started taking English classes at MATC. She dropped them eventually to pursue a career as an Early Childhood Educator. When she was done with that, she got a job at the Dane County Parent Council as a Teacher Assistant in Head Start. She is currently taking more classes to further her education as an Early Childhood Teacher, and due to her last year's resolution to learn English, she is also enrolled in English classes and has now been assigned a personal tutor. She is also the founder of the first AA group for families in Spanish for the Latino Community here in Madison, WI.



When I think about my mother, Leticia, I always see her as some sort of conqueror, like a phoenix, a goddess, a warrior—yet tender and caring. I wouldn't believe that people can change had I not witnessed the blossoming of my own mother. Due to her brave quest for self-evaluation and education, my mother has improved tremendously as a parent, in her relationships, and on a personal level. She is now wiser, but she still manages to be fun and spontaneous. My mother is a very keen soul, always smiling and making jokes, always fighting and getting what she wants. I strive to be like her—to learn from my mistakes, to listen to my heart but, most importantly, to obey it. I want someday to make her just as proud as she makes me. I need, love, and admire that woman so much. Even with all our gratitude, we can never repay her for all the things she's done for herself, my brother, me, and the lives of those surrounding her. She is a natural and true leader, and for that, she is my person of courage.

## **A Beautiful Spirit and Soul**

**By Brandi Whitlock**

Courage: When I think of courage, I think of my mother, Cheryl D. Kenney, one of the kindest people I have ever met. I know it sounds weird to say that I ‘met’ her and she is my mom, but it’s true. She taught me how to love unconditionally in a bad situation and how to pull out the good in any situation or person. I can never complain about my mother being mean or bad. She was a special person who never really got upset, and she was a good listener and a loving person. Let me take you on a journey on how my mom taught me how to be a caring and loving person.

My mom was a quiet, shy person until you got to talk to her. Every person would talk to her about their problems because she had such a kind heart. Even though my mom didn’t get the love from her mom, she knew how to love—hard! My mom took care of her grandson, and if anybody needed help she was there. She never talked bad about anyone and had a beautiful spirit and soul. The love she gave me was irreplaceable.



My mom grew up the oldest of five girls. Her mother didn’t know how to show love or feelings to my mom because she looked so much like her dad’s sister, who her mother never got along with. My mom kept to herself and daydreamed a lot. She was an artist and didn’t think that she was very good. She didn’t think she was smart enough to do things or to have a great job like her sisters. My grandmother always was negative to her, saying that she would never get married like her sisters.

Well, she did get married—to my dad, Norman Kenney, and she was soon expecting a baby boy. My dad was in the service, and they moved out to Oakland, California. My mom was no longer the shy person. She didn’t have a choice—Oakland was fast-paced compared to little old Beloit. She took a few art classes at Berkeley College, met new people, and opened up more. She soon had two more kids—my sister and me. My parents ended up separated, and my mom moved back to Beloit. I think I was three when I came back to Wisconsin. My sister ended up having a baby at a young age. This time my mom couldn’t afford daycare, so she quit her job so that my sister could finish school. My mom put her life on hold to let my sister enjoy her life.

I watched how my mom was and how she carried herself. I learned from her how to be kind and think of others. After thinking about my mom’s life, all that she’s been through, and how she may not have felt love at some points in her life but still gave a lot of love back, I am amazed that she wasn’t bitter about life. She prayed, kept the faith, and lived life to the fullest. And this is what I think of when I think of courage.



## The Fight of a Soldier

By Jessi Hodges



Why is it the person we fight with the most in youth turns out to be our hero? My mom, Kathy Williams, and I could never get along. As she struggled to raise the three of us, we put obstacles in her way. My mom is a survivor, and even I am one of the many cancers that plagued her. From an early childhood full of responsibility, through years of service in a man's army and even amidst the struggles of being a single mom in the world, she still stands, pushing forward with the fight of a soldier at war.

My mom was born in 1956, the first child of Nancy and Jay Williams. She was followed six years later by two brothers and a sister. The family was poor, so both her parents worked. She was left to care for her siblings. She sacrificed many of her childhood events to pick up the slack, leaving her lonely and feeling incomplete. I remember the stories

about missed prom and other high school dances. She was never able to play sports because the practices clashed with her parents' work schedule. When she graduated from high school, she ran like Forrest Gump from home.

At 17 my mom decided it was time to join the Army. Fresh from boot camp, she was stationed in Germany. The struggles in the Army for a woman in the 1970s were real. There was constant harassment on all levels. The men would make fun of her constantly. She was sexually harassed and physically harmed. Ultimately she met my father, got pregnant, and was honorably discharged. She was 21 when she returned to the States. My father was still stationed in Germany. Ultimately he was dishonorably discharged for his drinking and drug use. When he returned, my grandparents forced them to act married, and they held a fake reception to avoid public ridicule. My dad was never really there after that, just in and out. He'd make a child, then leave to get milk and never return. My mother raised us on welfare and by working. We never saw her in another relationship.

As we grew, the challenges only seemed to get greater. She was a victim of rape in our home. Her attacker was a complete stranger. We were asleep in another room. Money was never enough, so we faced constant evictions. At times the utility companies would put change meters on our house or apartment to keep the lights and heat running. Yes, it was just like a parking meter. Then there was us, her children, a constant fight. We just didn't seem to know how to act right and follow directions while she was busy working to feed and clothe us. In 1996 my sister was involved in a robbery turned murder and then was murdered herself in 2000. At the time of my sister's death, she did have a two-year-old son. Of course, my mom stepped up to the plate and took care of him. Then I was sentenced to 15 years in prison, her parents died, and she was left to head the family.

For me, my mom is the epitome of courage! She never lets circumstances take control of her. She kept on truckin' through every hardship. She was the strength that bound us together. I am proud to be her child and blessed to have her as my example. I love you, Mom!

**Lady of Courage**  
**By Christopher Villalpando**

My daughter Trinity was torn away from her father at the early age of four, with no goodbye, no forewarning or preparation. One day her father was there, and the next he was gone. Later, she was also taken from her grandmother, who raised her alongside her father since she was born. At this time, her father was in prison far from home and could do nothing about the situation. Trinity's grandmother, January, was not blood-related, so she too was helpless. Moreover, while her father was away, Trinity was sexually molested, and her mother's efforts to keep her safe were minimal. Nonetheless, my daughter was still determined to keep a positive attitude, continue with school, and carry on in her life.



On the day that I was picked up, I hadn't seen my daughter that whole day. Regardless of the fact that class took up most of my day, I always made sure I went over to see her at some point throughout my day. I could only imagine that she was poking her head through the window that whole night waiting for me to pull up. Sad that I never showed up but also being the big strong girl I know, she just went to sleep. As the days went on and she didn't see her dad, I think it became apparent to her that something was wrong. Trinity was very mature about going on with her daily routine and just being a kid. Time went on, and when my daughter asked about me, she was told that I was gone and wouldn't be back for a

long time. Trinity held her head high but carried herself very silently.

Later in time, Trinity's mother would have it out with my godmother, January, because she was mad at her. Her mother denied Trinity the chance to ever see her again. Trinity would only ask for her grandma to go and spend time with, but because her mother was not happy with their relationship, Trinity was afraid of being yelled at if she asked. Although she was sad, she continued on without even a whimper. Trinity stood with so much courage that even though she knew her mom didn't approve, she stayed hopeful. When she saw her grandma, she would jump for joy. Trinity never cried when her grandmother came up and always stayed strong. She always acted like a little lady and did her best to not let it affect her.

After all of the above and more, Trinity was later sexually abused by her mother's boyfriend's brother. This happened to her at the age of nine years old. Trinity decided to stay and continue to live with her mother. She decided not to see a therapist and only wanted to move on from the situation. Continuing with school and her friends, Trinity never brought it up again. Still to this day, it's as if nothing happened to her. To me, I don't understand how she goes without talking about what happened. Even the question of why this happened never comes out of her mouth.

No girl, especially at such an early age, should ever have to go through what Trinity has gone through. I blame myself for her losses. I made those bad decisions that led up to my incarceration. I was gone, making it easier for Trinity's mother to take her away from her grandmother. Moreover, my daughter being molested is my fault too. Sometimes you never know when bad things can happen, but by me being gone, I wasn't able to fully protect this innocent girl the way she needed it. For that I blame myself.

Her courage to move on in life is amazing and, moreover, shows how genuinely tough she is. How such a little girl could be so strong at such a young age amazes me. Even at a little over four feet tall, she walks around with the demeanor of a giant. I am so proud and happy that, through all of this, she still loves me and holds me dear. Having my little girl makes my heart

grow bigger and stronger by the day. Trinity is what makes me resilient. She is the reason I strive day in and day out.



**From A Number to a Father:  
A Story of Courage  
By Nissa Uriostegui**

Maya Angelou once wrote, "If one has courage, nothing can dim the light that shines from within." Christopher Villalpando has shown this courage throughout his whole life, surviving the federal prison system for six years, coming home to prove to society that he's not just another

number, and becoming a father at 16 and embracing it with open arms. He sets an example for his daughter, my children, and the future generations of our family.

Christopher Villalpando sold drugs to provide for his family, my family and me, and his parents. Chris grew up in poverty, constantly watching his father work from sun up to sun down, and he made himself a promise to never live like his father. Chris didn't want to live his life with the reality of working for nothing and never having enough. Chris won't talk about life behind bars. However, every once in a while he gives bits and pieces of this ordeal. He once told me about a time when he was at Big Sandy in Kentucky, and he had to watch one of his friends being stabbed. Chris couldn't do anything to help him, due to the simple fact that his friend was African American and Chris was considered Mexican. Knowing your position and staying true to yourself are the secrets to survival, or as Chris would say, "Be a man and stand your ground."

While in prison, everybody is known by their number and not their name. As they come out of the prison system, most ex-convicts are still seen as a number, due to the high expectation of them returning to prison. Chris was released to the halfway house in the fall of 2013 and was able to come home the beginning of the following year. The halfway house in Janesville made impossible demands on him in order to prevent him from being released. A couple days before his release date, the Rock Valley Community Program called Chris to come back in to report to them. They threatened to send him back to prison if he didn't come in that same night. Chris was so sick and tired of their arbitrary rules that he told them returning to prison would be better than staying at the halfway house. This whole ordeal was over some mistake they made with a paperwork form that they had never notified Chris about. They also demanded that he work for certain companies and take assigned classes in order to be released from the center. However, they wanted to schedule him during his work hours. There were too many hoops for him to jump through, and they made more the longer he was there.

Instead of giving up through his hardships, Christopher fought hard to make it through and come home to his daughter. In early 2003, Chris picked up his daughter for the first time. He was only 17 years old at the time and had no idea what he was doing. He had never changed a diaper or made a bottle. With the help of his family, Chris learned what he needed to raise his daughter. He risked it all to make sure she had everything she needed and the memories any child could ask for. Trinity says some of her favorite memories are being gated into the kitchen with her dad and his dog and playing with them. Chris has also worked hard to make new memories with Trinity since he's gotten out. He's taken her up to Great Wolf Lodge, a Mallards Games, a Badger game, and endless one-on-one time. Also, Chris provided his daughter with a safe environment and surrounded Trinity with loving, caring people. He showed her what it was to have a parent love and care about her unconditionally. Even though he wasn't able to spend every day with her, he always set an example for Trinity and let her know how important she was.

Christopher has gone through many difficult trials throughout his young life. However, he has always showed courage and has stepped in and taken care of his family at all costs. Not only has he been a father to his own daughter, but he has also been a male role model for his three nephews and niece. He is the rock of his family and shows them the meaning of courage.





### **A Hard-Working Provider** **By Derek Dodd**

Ricky Dodd, my father who I admire, was a hard worker who overcame many obstacles in life. My father was born in the state of Mississippi, a place where racism and prejudice still exist today. I can remember coming in the house late after hanging in the streets all night selling drugs and drinking, and I looked toward the back of our house and saw my father making his lunch for work. I looked at the time and it was 4:30 am. At that moment I said to myself that I wanted to be like my father, a hard-working man who provided for his family. My father was a hard-working man despite the back problems he had due to constant work. As a young kid growing up in Mississippi, he received a tenth-grade education and worked until retiring in his early seventies. My father has endured many obstacles in his life. He raised my two oldest sisters and my youngest sister as his own children, though they are not his biological daughters. My father also provides for all his grandchildren when they ask him for help.



My father had and still has the desire to help when he feels it is needed. Almost to a point, it has to be very serious. My father at one point needed surgery for his back, which almost caused a problem for him from making it to retirement from work. My father was a man who had no room for mistakes: “No excuses, walk along and stay out of trouble, become something in your life, stay in school, and take care of your responsibilities.” My father showed love at times, but I can honestly say I’ve only heard him say he loved me about five times in my life. My dad didn’t have a good relationship with his dad, which explains the way my dad showed his love toward us by providing for us. I remember times my dad would get frustrated because he paid all our bills and provided money for food, but sometimes my mother would not pay bills on time. That caused problems in our household—my dad working as hard as he did, and my mom paying bills when she wanted to. My father just paid them himself as time went on. Even to this day, my father still provides for all his grandchildren, even at ages ranging from ten to thirty years old.

I love my father. There were times we didn’t always agree. My mom said we were so much alike, my dad and I. I’ve asked my father to forgive me for the wrong I caused in my life toward him. I want to have a good relationship with my dad. At times it’s hard because of the way he was raised, which at times means he will keep to himself or not express his feelings well. I love my father for the man he is and what he instilled in us.

## First Blood Relatives By Janina White

Tara Wilhelmi (Odyssey '08) isn't my mom, but she encourages me and gives great advice like a mother. The courage she displays makes me want to be a better mother—or more of a mother like her. Tara Wilhelmi is a role model of courage because of her work ethic and the way she basically devotes her life to improving her children's lives.

When I need some guidance, I can only go to Tara. I feel like she has the best advice because she has been through a lot. Basically, she has been there done that. Her wisdom is courage because she doesn't hesitate to use her trials as an example, whether they are good or bad. Not only does she do this for me, but she does this for her children as well. I feel like I can talk with her about any issue and she'll "keep it real." I love that Tara will let me know when I am wrong or right. I admire Tara's courage to help others with more than just material things—she helps with the inner problems. I think her ability to talk with others helps her relationship with her children.



Tara's courage as a mother has a strong impact on me. I am sure that she came a long way. I hope that I can parent similar to her in the near future. Because of the fact that Tara is adopted, she knew exactly what kind of mother she wanted to be. Her son Taran is her first blood relative. Because of this, her maternal instinct was strong. With this being said, she has a love for her children that goes a long way. In my eyes, a good mother is a queen, and that's exactly what she displays. Also her children know that she only expects success from them. Everyone says they want a better life for their children. Tara has the courage to enforce this with the right mixture of love, discipline, and patience. Tara has five children, and I think they all appreciate the dedication from their mother. I am almost jealous they have such a good role model.

Tara is literally the hardest working woman I know. I can remember a time of her telling her daughter she has one day off that month. I cannot believe that this was actually true. Her self-discipline to get up and go to work every day on top of being a single mother amazes me. Either I have no clear vision of work ethic, or Tara is a "super mom." Her children do not realize it yet, but they are very blessed to have her and to be raised by such a strong and beautiful woman. I am sure all work and no play is no easy task. Tara is courageous enough to know without it, though, the bills will not get paid. Her courage to keep fighting for more gives me hope for my family to be able to live one day without government assistance and to have independence.

Tara is a mommy robot to me, but in reality she is just hard working and knows what needs to be done, not only for herself but for her children as well. Her courage comes from struggle, pain, and the not knowing. There are no measures she wouldn't take for her children, also known as her first blood relatives.

## **My Woman of Courage**

### **By Lenora Rodin**

The woman of courage that I chose to write about is my daughter, Ms. Tonya Marie McBride. The reason I chose her as my woman of courage is because of all the things that she has endured just to get to the age that she is now. Tonya was born on February 22, 1970 to a young girl (me) who was just 14 years of age. Tonya's grandmother was an alcoholic. Tonya also dealt with abandonment, drug addiction, six children, and eventually the loss of five of her children before she later regained them.

Tonya's birth was hard and long. She was pulled out with forceps, which left a scar on the right side of her face until she was about six months. The reason for her hard birth is because her mother was so young. . . . We were poor, very poor, and we could not afford this baby, but my mother felt this was her chance to make up for all of the mistakes that she had made with me, and I was more than willing to oblige her.

Tonya's abandonment took place very soon after her birth. My mother insisted on taking over and, because of my age, we had to go to court. They gave my mom custody of her. My mother got the check, the stamps, and whatever one got at that time for children, and I got my freedom. I realize now that freedom comes with a price, especially if you do not use your freedom wisely.



Tonya's grandmother was an alcoholic. She drank hard and we moved often. I always used to say, "Well, I never abused Tonya, beat her or mistreated her," but as I grew older I realized that I did abuse her because I was not there for her. I did not protect her from the alcoholic mother that I grew up with. "The apple don't fall far from the tree, does it?" My daughter Tonya dealt with drug addiction, and by the age of 25 she had six children. When the baby was born in 1995, five of the children by then were already in the custody of D.C.F.S. Tonya went to court faithfully, and the both of us ended up getting custody of them. That was a beautiful day.

I chose my daughter Tonya Marie McBride as my woman of courage because she has earned the right to say that she is courageous and fearless. She has endured

lots and on some levels she still does. She survived abandonment, alcoholism, drug addiction, and the loss of her children to the system, only to regain them. Yes! Presently she lives in an area where the living isn't easy and the life expectancy is low. No, she is not on crack or heroin, but all you really have to do in that area to be a statistic is to wake up. I am very proud of my daughter. The only regret that I have is I wish that I had spent more time with her because time is something that you can never get back. Once it is gone it is gone, and it waits on NO-ONE. My daughter is a survivor, and I love her dearly.

### **Survival: It Takes Courage**

**By Lakoyé Buford**

It was January 13, 1971, and the labor was long and painful for her seventeen-year old body. The midwife said the baby was dead and the cord around her neck was the reason. She looked just like my grandma: head full of straight hair with big brown eyes. She held her and wept for her loss, but God blessed her with four more beautiful lives within the matter of five years. When I think of someone who embodies courage, the first person who comes to mind is my grandma; we call her Bay. I have no idea where she gets the strength built within her 5 foot 2 inch body, but with it she has conquered anything that came her way. She has survived taking full responsibility of her nine brothers and sisters while her mother battled demons and alcohol, moved away from home and across the country with four kids, and took on full financial responsibilities after my grandpa's sudden death.



As a child my grandma saw things that would make someone want to go blind and heard things that would make someone want to go deaf, but it was those same things that sparked up the fight in her to keep her going through hardship. It wasn't easy watching a young beautiful mother drowning in pain from her mistreatment by her family and my grandma's father. The depression, alcohol and abuse left my great-grandmother too weak to care for her own children, and my grandmother had to pick up the slack. She would bathe, cook for, and dress and take care of her younger brothers and sisters and even at times her mother. A child still herself, she was forced to grow up, drop out of school, and experience the hardship of parenthood of her siblings. My grandma always speaks highly of her mother regardless of the hectic past with her. She would say her mom was a young woman robbed of her innocence and belittled by those who should have had her back. She always tells me, "You only get one mom," and, "God says honor your mother and father or your days will be shortened."

There she was at the age of 32 with four children moving from the South to the Midwest. The days of picking cotton in the hot sun, being cheated out of money she worked hard for, and painful childhood memories were put away somewhere in her back pocket, and she was now on an odyssey to provide a better life for her kids. With more resources, better education, jobs, and other opportunities, Madison seemed perfect compared to the small town life back in Arkansas. With no job or credit she had to live with a “friend,” but she soon realized that staying in someone else’s home wasn’t worth the trouble. After mistreatment from those she considered friends, she finally was able to get her first place. From that day on, she refused to ever stay with someone else. She always says, “Never depend on anyone,” “your place is always better than anyone else’s” and “If you want something you have to go out and get it yourself.”

With just one phone call, a 30-year-old relationship came to an end. Bay recalls on January 3, 1996 my grandpa got drunk but didn’t wake up after falling asleep. With adrenaline and panic rushing through her body, she made a call to the paramedics with a cousin and me by her side. He arrived at St. Mary’s Hospital and got hooked up to a breathing machine, but on January 14 he left us. His heart stopped from an aneurysm he couldn’t recover from. It didn’t end there: Bay later found out she was laid off from her job and was facing eviction. While dealing with the feelings of loneliness and sadness, Bay had to wipe her tears and make a way to not see her family on the streets. I ask about my grandpa from time to time, and I still hear the pain in her voice when she reflects back on him. I asked Bay, “Did I see my grandpa when he was in the hospital?” She said, “No,” but I have this vision of him lying in the hospital bed with a white gown on. He looks as if he’s sleeping peacefully, with a straight facial expression and frozen. I used to hear him and see him whenever I said or did something bad as a child, but I never mentioned it to Bay or anyone. I assumed he only came to visit me after my grandma told him how “bad” I was being.

I reflect back and regret anything I’ve ever said to take away from her character out of anger and confusion and things I’ve said that may have broken her spirit. I never understood certain things about her when I was younger, but, man, I’m finding out that she’s the truth and means well. I’m so fortunate and grateful that she’s still around and my children are able to have her a part of their lives. As I grow older, I respect her more. As she grows older, I fear the day that she won’t be around. She is a very humble, giving, accepting, lovable, and irreplaceable woman; qualities I pray to take after. It will take a lifetime to repay her for all that she has done for me, but I’m willing to try. I could never fill my grandma’s shoes, and I’ll probably never go through half of what she did; I just hope I become just a piece of who she is.

Bay, you’ve been through it all and it wasn’t for nothing. God doesn’t make people like you too often. Times might be rough and you might not be where you want to be, but you’re here for a purpose. I now realize you’ve always been there for me when all else failed. Keep your head up and we’ll see sunny days eventually. My Bay, you amaze me every day and I thank God for placing you in my life. You’ve shown me what it is to be a truly genuine woman, mother and person. Just promise that if you do become a genie, like you love imagining, you’ll take me wherever you go!



## **Music for Family and Community**

### **By Patricia McKnight**

I remember my mother, Lois McKnight, playing the piano at Christmas time and other holidays. We may not have always had presents or money, but we always had music. She was a brilliant pianist. She played for the church every Sunday and directed the choir which met at the church every Saturday to practice. She raised six children by herself, worked a job, and was still able to attend church and direct the choir. She never missed a Sunday and was well-known throughout the community for her musical abilities.

My mother raised six children as a single parent. She made sure that we were always at church with her. I'm sure with six different personalities it was not always easy. Making sure we attended church helped her in raising us. She had help with structure and discipline, as well as with the teaching of GOD'S word. We grew up understanding what was expected of us both from GOD and my mother.

My mother used to say, "You need to get down on your knees and pray until GOD hears you. And you will know."

My mother was very well-known throughout the community. She played at a tremendous amount of funerals in the African-American community throughout Madison. She also directed some musical plays and attended many musical events. My grandmother, who was a classical pianist, taught my mother and her siblings to read and write music at a very young age. Those skills helped with her musical career.

Everything my mother has taught me is embedded in my heart and mind. She instilled in our family that music can bring togetherness, happiness, and tradition. I come from a traditionally musical family. For my mother, it was a sense of family and community alliance, and something she dedicated her life to. For me, it was one of the things that helped our family through rough times.





### **Titi Socorro's #1 Fan!** **By Melissa Dominguez**

My Aunt Socorro Lopez (Odyssey '06) wakes up every morning ready to take the day. Having gone through what she has been through, most people would not even want to get out of bed. I find her to be a person of courage because even though she comes from a big family, she chose to move out on her own for a better life, but she did not expect what would happen next—the loss of both her son and her husband!



Titi Soky comes from a big family, with five sisters and two brothers, and that's not including the ones that we don't know about. Let's just say that we had a few surprises when my Aunt Millie was working on our family tree. Titi Soky grew up between Chicago and Puerto Rico. She was very active in school and other activities in both places. As she had her children, she decided that she wanted to leave everything and everyone she knew to escape the violence in Chicago so that she could give her kids a better life in Madison, Wisconsin.

Living in a state and not knowing a soul, she struggled to provide for her family by herself. She worked two jobs and went to school while raising five children without any family to help and give her some type of support. I salute her because it wasn't easy, but she managed to do it. She always loved to learn. Still until this day she yearns for knowledge, and she tried to instill her love for learning in her children.

Her greatest test came to her after she had lived in Madison for a few years. Losing her son when he was 13 was hard enough, but a few years later she lost the father of her children. It wasn't easy losing them the way she did. This would have been enough to break down a weaker person, but she was able to take the punches that were thrown at her and use it to make her a stronger person.

Her courage gives me strength! In spite of everything that she has been through, she wakes up every day with a BIG smile on her face ready to take on the day. She inspires me to be a better person and to never let anything get me down. She is always encouraging and pushing me to do better, not only for me but for my children. She is the reason why I am part of the Odyssey Project today, and I thank her for that. It brings her joy and pleasure to help others by volunteering her time and donating things such as clothes and food to the needy. She is a remarkable person, and I love the way she sees the world. Thank you for inspiring me and others with your bubbly personality and your outlook on life, Titi Socorro!

