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WOMEN OF COURAGE



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Eighty-seven Words per Minute: An Ode to Mildred Molitor

By Adrian Molitor

"Gypsies dress in red, Adrian. Always wear red." My grandma stated this fact with an unspoken warning, the type of warning that has sculpted our non-linear emotional landscape. Over the years of joy and pain between us, we always knew we were different from others in the community. Mildred Molitor displayed a calm and upfront power in the ways she guided three generations of her children, me, and my sons. Her gypsy heart pumped with a survival instinct beyond the reach of our family judgment. Mildred Molitor is power like a comforting maternal force of nurturing presence but still discursive like uninvited truth in times of denial. Power is different like that; my grandma's power is found in an unwavering truth found in labor. My grandmother has power because my great-grandmother escaped Nazi Germany as a penniless Czechoslovakian immigrant. My grandma is a woman of power because of her unwavering faith.

Mildred fought her entire life and never gave up. To say that she came from abuse would be to understate her experience altogether. Her mother once forced her to kneel on a heat vent for around two days before she was ten years old. She told me her legs bled, but she stayed kneeling in observation and shame. On another occasion, my Great-grandmother Polakovic had a mental episode and chased her through their one-story farmhouse with a loaded .38. Mildred told me as clear as day that her mother wished she was dead because she wanted a son. As a small boy, I can recall my great-grandmother's snarling face. She hated all of the other grandkids except for me because I wasn't afraid of her. I should've been.

Humility for Mildred is found solely in God's power; she didn't have a choice but to survive. While Mildred raised her five kids, she rarely had money for food. She had to beg the neighbors for food to feed my father and my aunts and uncles. Mildred worked two, sometimes three, jobs while my grandad blew their tiny paychecks as tenant farmers. My grandmother nurtured her children during wartimes and during post-Depression times. She also fumed with resentment, offering a prayer and piece of unsolicited advice. No matter how dark it got for her, she stayed close to God and carried the weight of the family. She raised us the very best she knew how. She knew she was different. Granny knew she was tough as nails, but she never acted with anything but humility.

When I was a boy and even as a man, she would grab my wrists and marvel at the way I had the



same hands as her husband, Leo. He died of cancer in 1981. She told me he was the toughest fool and most handsome man God had ever created. After he passed, she began to mother me full time while my mother and dad weathered their own respective storms. She taught me how to stand up and express myself in school, and that being different doesn't make a sound. When I was a boy, we kneeled together, and she taught me how to pray. Mildred would keep you down there for a good hour or so, just praying for people you had mostly never met.

Mildred has always told me that I had the hardest lot in life compared to the other grandkids. She felt it was her duty to stand by my side with the same prayers she taught me. We survived my twin sons' birth, a violent divorce, bouts of homelessness, psych ward stays, endless calls from correctional facilities, drug addiction, and total moral devastation. Mildred is just the truth. She was the only family member that stuck with me in my darkest days. That gypsy love she carries saved my life as the rest of our family prematurely mourned my death for over a decade.

I asked her what the hardest thing was she had ever endured, and she humbly told me that learning how to use computers at 70 years old was the hardest. One of her favorite sayings is that pride is the mother of all sins. That would make her nearly a saint. In writing this, I know she can live forever.



Letter to Grandma
By Alexis Law

Grandma, nothing that has happened to you put fear in your heart or stopped you from moving forward. Being born and raised in Chicago, IL, with four brothers and three sisters was kind of hard. You were the second youngest with a little brother you adored. Wearing a wrap around your head trying to be fully covered because of your religious views made you different. I admire you because you embraced your religion, overcame your addiction, and survived your sickness. We call each other our best friends, and our bond is unbreakable.

Being born into a Muslim family and going to the temple was different because everyone else went to a church and believed in a Christian God. Kids around your school and neighborhood made fun of you because you had to dress a certain type of way. You made sure not a body part was showing and wore a hijab to secure you were covered from top to bottom. By being a Muslim, you did things differently than Christianity. Certain holidays weren't celebrated,



especially Christmas. You couldn't enjoy seeing the lights on the Christmas tree and opening gifts while in the Christmas spirit. Going to school hearing what all your friends had gotten for Christmas made you sad, and you cried often. You eventually started to get comfortable with your religion, though. You started being creative by decorating your hijab and clothes to be more fashionable and cute. You embraced being different, and no one could take that away from you.

Your little brother was your pride and joy because he made you a big sister. You guys did everything together. Doing some kind of drug and being high was a trend for you guys while growing up, so you and your favorite sibling decided to try cocaine. The feeling it gave you led to your addiction, and it became something you and your brother used daily. You just liked the feeling it gave you, but you didn't know that the feeling could be deadly to you and someone close to you. You always tell me you remember this one specific time like no other because of the way it changed your life forever.

You came home from school and waited for your brother to walk through the door so you two could smoke before your momma got home from work. During your same smoking routine, you hit it and then your brother did. Your brother hit it for a second time, and that is when he started shaking and his eyes slowly started to close. You were freaking out and put water on his face while shaking him. You then checked his pulse and he wasn't breathing. Your brother was dead, and it was all your fault. You regret every moment of that day. His death took a big toll on your life, but you were a recovering addict.

When I was younger, you always watched me, and I always wanted to be you. You took me everywhere, and we always vented to each other. You were very active and healthy. However, one day I got a call saying my best friend was in the ICU and was going into surgery. You had a brain arteriovenous malformation and aneurysm. AMA is a tangle of abnormal blood vessels connecting arteries and veins in the brain. The arteries are responsible for taking oxygen from the heart to the brain. This caused you to get a brain tumor. You kept telling me you didn't think you were going to make it. I thought life was over; what was I going to do without my best friend? I talked to you every day about all of my problems. You were finally out of surgery, and I was praying for a speedy recovery. You were out of the hospital within two weeks, but this sickness caused you to no longer have the ability to talk. You had to take a therapy class to learn how to talk again. You were scared to talk to people because you didn't want them to talk about how you were talking, which made you feel embarrassed. Now you are back to your normal life and taking medications for seizures.

Grandma, you motivated me to overcome anything that comes my way. Throughout all the obstacles and problems in your life, you never gave up. You show courage by continuing to move forward by any means. You inspire me because you can get through anything.



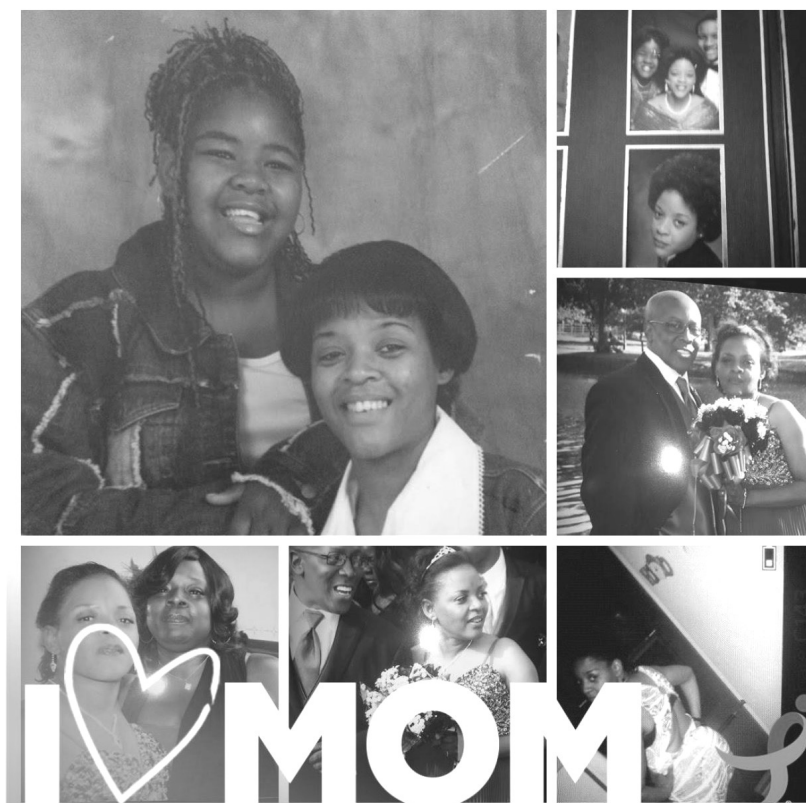


Four Feet Ten and a Half Inches and She Stands Tall

By Ameshia Turner

In Newark, New Jersey, on July 7, 1957, my mom was born to Juanita Bernice Hall and Junis Randolph Arrington. She was named Denise Regina Arrington, and she was born second of six children between the two. Grandma decided to put her husband out because, while married to her, he had also married someone else and conceived other children. My grandmother had two more children after their split. Even though my mom's dad was never around much because he relocated to Michigan, he helped when my grandma asked him to. My mom was 16 years old when her mother passed away from a brain aneurysm. With her father so far away, she had to figure out the when, what, where, and how for all eight of the kids. Fortunately, my grandpa (Crabb) came back, paid for the funeral, and flew them all back to Detroit with him, where he would attempt to take care of them. My mom said that Crabb was not very helpful, which was very hard for her because she had to become a mother at such a young age. My mom continued to face many challenges throughout her life, such as the death of her first child, and a long relationship/marriage that ended in two divorces from one man.

My mom had a horrifying experience with her first baby. She had her first child at 19 and it was a girl, Juanita Bernice. If alive today, she would be 41 years old, but she died as a baby. My mom doesn't talk about it much, but from what I know, Juanita died from third-degree burns to her body. I find this to be very scary, and it is still hard for me to ask questions because I feel like I'm interrogating her. I know it hurts because it's not something that she has ever discussed with us. Baby Juanita was left with my mom's boyfriend briefly while she went across the hall to get a diaper from my auntie. She left the bathwater running for the baby so she could give her a bath and put her to bed. Once back in the house, she found the baby crying with third degree burns all over her body and her boyfriend nowhere in sight. I was relieved to find out that my mom was questioned and cleared by the police. Honestly, I don't know how she survived this tragedy. It takes a strong person to conceal their true feelings about something so painful. One of my mom's best qualities is her strength.



My mom married and divorced my dad two times. They met each other while in their early twenties. They got married for the first time in 1995 in Jackson, MI. He was incarcerated and had just received a four-year sentence for strong-armed robbery. Once he was released from prison, my dad struggled with drug addiction and infidelity, and he mentally and physically abused my mother.

Throughout her misery, she stayed with him, wanting us to have the family she never did. They ended up divorcing in 2002 but remarrying in 2007, when he

was released from prison again but did not have a destination. Again, my mom had her family's best interest at heart, no matter the cost. They mutually parted ways in December of 2011.



My mom's favorite quote of all time is, "I'm your mother and your father." I am grateful that she was able to play both roles and that she did it so well. She made sure we had everything that we needed throughout the years of my dad's absence. My mom worked many different jobs through temporary services to make sure she could make ends meet until she was finally

offered a permanent position. She maintained her mortgage, car note, and insurance. On top of it all, she had a husband who was locked up and unable to help provide. My mom made it happen, and I am so proud to call her my mom. She has been through more than I could ever imagine, and she is still standing with the heart of a tiger.



As of today, my mom carries the name Denise Regina Keys, and she has conquered more than any one person could take on. My mom is my superwoman, my strength, my light, and, most of all, my number one supporter. My mom is courageous, fiercely independent, smart, and little, as well as feisty as hell. She is powerful in my eyes and is the true definition of courage. My mom is caring and has shown me that she has the ability to conquer any and all of her fears and despair. I carry my mom's strength with me everywhere I go, and I am proud that we share so many of the same qualities.



Pushing Past Pain **By Angela Carpino**

My mother was a very kind and loving woman who had to deal with some difficult situations. Throughout Carol Ann Peek's life, she had to overcome the obstacles of child abuse, domestic abuse, and homelessness, yet she still managed to walk through life with a beautiful smile on her face.

Growing up the eldest of three, she was usually left to watch over her younger brother and sister. Almost taking on the role of a second mother, she was forced to mature faster mentally than other kids her age. During that time while her mother worked long hours, her father started physically abusing Carol. Sadly, when the horrible incidents came to light and the police were called, everything was swept under the rug. Carol was sent away to live with relatives out of state and for the most part forgotten. She had to deal with great heartbreak and feelings of abandonment, from her mother choosing to stay with a monster.

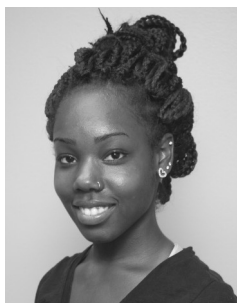
She was married by 18, and during that time two children were born. Also during the marriage came alcohol and physical abuse from her husband. She realized she'd had enough of the abuse and managed to escape. A few months later, she met a man she described as her knight in shining armor, and they also conceived a child together. Still, like her former relationship, this too started to come undone. He started taking drugs and soon became addicted. The addiction brought on verbal and mental abuse. She could no longer put up with his problems and knew she had to come up with a plan for the children and her to leave quickly and quietly. Unfortunately, when the time came, things did not turn out as expected, and she was forced to leave alone. The kids didn't want to leave behind friends, extended family, and the security they felt by staying home. With their grandparents promising to take care of them, Carol decided the best decision was for them to stay. She promised the children and herself she would be back for them when she was settled into their new home.

She ended up in Madison and became pregnant by the new man in her life. While staying with him and his family, she was saving money to send for her kids and to get a place of their own. Then suddenly her boyfriend passed away in a house fire. At first his family was grieving with her and telling her she was welcome to stay with them as long as needed. They helped her out



for a few weeks, but then their feelings started to change. They dropped her off at the local homeless shelter, and that was the last she ever saw of them. She found herself alone, homeless, and pregnant. Her days were spent searching for jobs and housing. To make matters worse, she no longer had the money for her children to be sent to her. It was becoming harder and harder for her to stay in touch with them. After the baby was born, she eventually befriended two women who later introduced her to her future landlord. The lady spoke with my mother, felt for her situation, and agreed to let her rent out an apartment. Carol struggled as a single mother but managed the best she could with what she had. Over time, she got back in contact with her children so they could be reunited. Unfortunately, by that time they were set into the lifestyle and routine they had become accustomed to. She again had to make the hardest decision of her life by allowing them to stay in California.

Throughout my mother's lifetime she had to deal with some major downfalls. What I admire most about her is her ability to push through those painful moments and still have a positive outlook on life. For that she will always remain my heart, my soul, and my best friend.



Love, Pain, and Sacrifice
By Arioun Jones

"When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time." –
Maya Angelou

My mom is one of the strongest women I know. She's been through a lot and still keeps a smile on her face. My mom's strength shows in her stepping up as both a mother and a father to her six children, leading by example, and balancing her marriage while still raising us.

Since my mom had her first child, she was always there for us. For example, she put aside her wants and needs for what was best for me. Growing up, she was our mother and father. She had a way of talking to the boys to make it easier for them to come to her and feel comfortable. Challenges my mom had to go through included accepting my dad's absence, which made her a stronger woman.

Being a single mother of six kids is hard, and it takes a strong woman to raise them and lead by example. One way she led by example was by not drinking or smoking around us. Another way she leads by example is by going to church every Sunday to practice what she preaches.





Lastly, my mom is a woman of courage because it takes a lot to take care of six kids and a husband. There would be times that we all would disagree with our stepdad, but she would step in and solve the problem. To solve our differences, she would sit us all down and make us talk it out by saying what we feel about the situation. What she does to keep her marriage strong is communicate, and after all this time they still manage to talk everything out.

In closing, I am glad to call her my role model. In the future, I plan on using a lot of the strategies my mom used to better her marriage. One thing in particular that makes my mom a woman of courage is the big step she took in raising six kids by herself.



My Mother, My Courage **By Bao Thao**

“As second wife to my husband, I have been mentally and emotionally abused. I bore him eight children with the hope that they would all be sons to gain the favor and affection that I yearn for from him.” Coming from a traditional culture where men held the status and reputation of their family, my mother keeps the existence of her marriage and the presence of our

biological father in her home to maintain acceptance by the Hmong community. A neglected single mother of eight, she managed to raise them all in a small two-bedroom apartment. My mother is a woman of courage because she was raised in a traditional culture where women were supposed to be submissive, she stays in a miserable marriage to protect the reputation of her family, and she has fought hard to become independent and support her kids.

My mother was born and raised in a very traditional Hmong culture. As she grew up, she let go of all her own values and ethics to ensure the people she loved around her were happy. She never dreamed of becoming someone's second wife, but it was what she chose. When her marriage was younger, she was selfless to the point where she tried to hide how horrible our father had verbally and emotionally made her feel. He would only allow her to feel as





beautiful as he wanted. He tried to make her incapable by not allowing or teaching her how to drive. She was taught that traditionally sons are very valuable to the family and husband. To try and gain his favor and prove her self worth for him to love her, she bore him eight children with the hope that each pregnancy would allow her to present sons. She ended up giving him five daughters and three sons. It wasn't until 30 years later that she came to the realization it was a myth that giving her husband more sons would make him love her more.

My mother was very young when she married, and she has stayed in a miserable marriage for 32 years. As second wife, she had to learn quickly how to wear a thick skin. Even though this is a common practice in the culture, the Hmong community still disapproves and frowns upon the second wife and her children. She does her best to respect her parents' values and wishes. She wants nothing bad to be said about her family, so she stays married to him even though she is miserable. He provides no help or support. Each time she asks him to help, she has to nag him. She keeps this person around because she wants a father figure to help guide her children. This is also to maintain acceptance from the Hmong community and help keep the gossip to a minimum.

In the years of being neglected by her husband, she unknowingly became independent. She managed to raise all eight of her children by herself in a small, two-bedroom apartment with only one bathroom to share. She started to become more independent by having the courage to seek help from a friend to teach her how to drive. Shortly afterwards, she signed up to get tutoring in English once a week for a year. By the end of the year, she went from not reading or speaking English to a seventh-grade skill level. She would only advance from there by herself. She got her very first job with the state as a housekeeper and is still working there today at a very low pay. She let down her pride and found no shame as she sought any resources for





financial assistance. This was to help her keep up with her utility bills and rent. She did what it took to feed all of her children. In order to keep food on the table, she would go to a few local food pantries each week and take what her kids would eat home to make meals out of it. Aside from all of this, she was very fortunate and was born with a green thumb. She keeps and maintains a minimum of two community gardens for fresh herbs and vegetables each summer. If it were warm all year, she would

garden year round by choice. This is not just because she loves gardening, but she knows gardening would help cut the cost of having to put food on the table.

With my mother's many years of being emotionally neglected by her husband, I once overheard her crying on the phone to very close friend about her misfortune and abilities. She said, "Why couldn't I be born a son? I would then be able to provide, do more, love more, and be stronger." Before hearing this, I hadn't realized how much this had impacted my mentality. At that time my brothers were babies. I was overwhelmingly saddened by this and really wished I could have been born as one of her sons in order to help her. After almost four years, I managed to climb over that tall, thick brick wall that I built up for myself. I tore it down, and I stopped feeling sorry for myself for being incapable because of my gender. To my mother I silently answered, "Actually, why do you have to be a male to be important? You've been providing and have done more, loved more, and been even stronger!" . . . Little did she know she did a phenomenal job as a full-time mother and a full-time father to all of her children. She may have felt she wasn't able to provide as much as other parents, but not once did we as her children grow up having the slightest clue that we were living in poverty. People saw that we didn't have much, but we didn't see it in that way. We had each other and still do today. My mother is truly an inspiration. It's because of her I want better—I want to do better, I want to provide more, and I want the independence of willpower. I want a better education, knowledge, and financial stability as an individual. By being able to take care of both her and my own family, I will show her how much I love her and appreciate her. My mother is my courage.

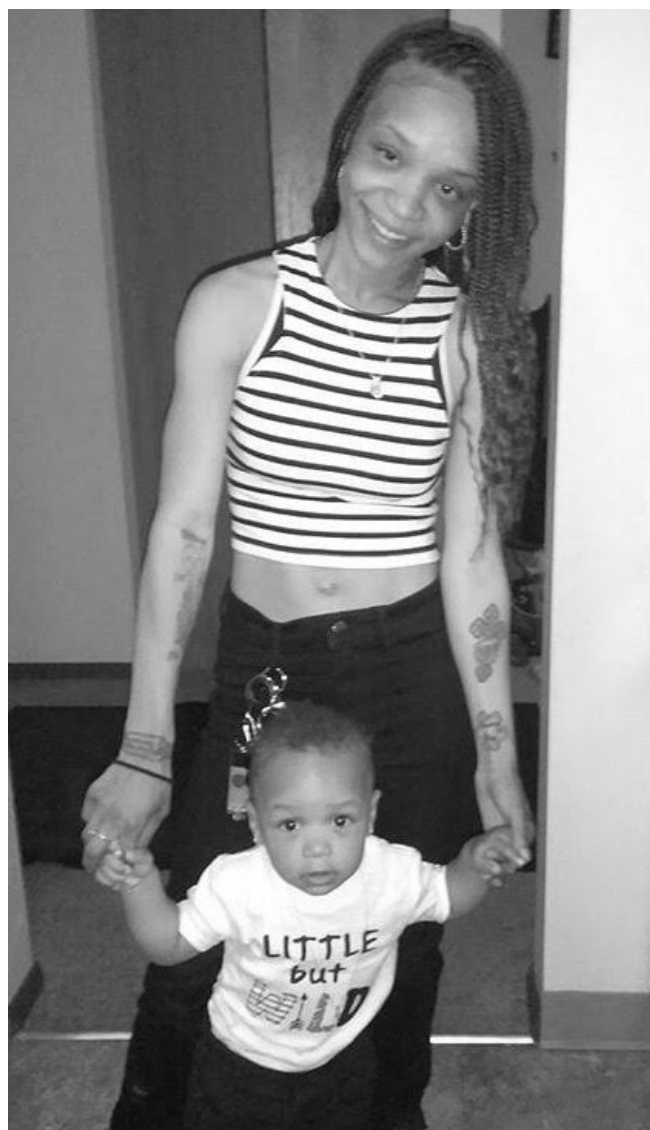


Soul Sisters **By Barbara Rodgers**

Whenever I'm down or worried, Shae always says, "Barbara, God don't always come when we want him to, but he is always on time." My sister survived a difficult childhood and unexpected pregnancy, making her a role model and my rock. When I'm in need of a listening ear or shoulder to lean on, Shae's there without a doubt.

Shae is my oldest sister; we share the same father. Helen was only 15 when she gave birth to Shae. Immediately after giving birth, she had her mind made up that she wanted to move from Chicago to Memphis and raise Shae on her own. Helen's grandmother Alzola refused because Helen was too young and irresponsible to raise a baby on her own. Helen was still a child herself, living life as a rebellious teenager. Alzola took on the responsibility of caring for Shae on her own while Helen moved back to Memphis to live with her mother. Alzola raised Shae in a strict church setting. Since a child, Shae loved to sing, especially at church. Alzola was sick with diabetes; at the age of nine, Shae gave Alzola her first insulin shot, and by age 12 she had taken on the role of caring for Alzola. She would help her with her insulin shots, be an extra help around the house, and call for help whenever seizures would occur. Shae went off to college for a year, then took a semester off and moved to Wisconsin to live with her father. Shortly after moving to Wisconsin, she got a call saying she needed to get to Chicago to say her last goodbyes to Alzola. Although Shae thought Alzola would be in a better place, free from pain and suffering, she was about to lose the only mother she ever knew.

Shae's parents have always been reachable, but because they didn't raise her she felt a lot of sorrow. Losing Alzola was a tough pill to swallow. Shae's life became unbalanced, and she was no longer focused on school. She started living for herself and doing what she loved most: making music. At that point, nothing else mattered—not continuing



education, responsibilities, or checking in with family. Faith was really tested in 2015 as Shae's life was about to make a big change. She found out she was seven months into an unexpected pregnancy. This was a big shock to her since she didn't plan on having any kids. That was when she realized everything she did from that point on was about her and her unborn child; she no longer was living for herself. Shae set goals for herself to complete in a short period of time. Less than a year later, she had an apartment, her own transportation, and a start at establishing some credit. No



matter how hard things got, she knew giving up wasn't an option. On February 6, 2016, Shae gave birth to her pride and joy: Lance A. Carter. Shae was able to gain responsibility, independence, and stability for her and Lance.

Shae is more than just a big sister; she's my best friend, the yang to my yin. She has given me the courage to face my fears and whatever life throws at me. Having someone close to me that is motivational, supportive, and goal-driven means the world to me. The love we have for one another is unconditional. We have laughed together, cried together, and prayed together. We would go to war for one another, no questions asked. Every day our bond gets stronger. There are times when our bond may have bent, but we would never let it break. She has impacted my life in many ways which I am very thankful for. I feel my sister has helped me to make better life decisions. There are times when I would find myself feeding into negative things, wanting to give up because I was tired of taking two steps forward only to get pushed back a step every time. My sister and I would sit and talk for hours, listening to music, singing songs that touched our souls. Those are the moments I cherish most and wouldn't trade for anything in the world.

Shae is my woman of courage because even after a difficult childhood and unexpected pregnancy, she never gave up. She is a strong, independent woman who is responsible, ambitious, and a mother before anything. She taught me to never settle for just anything. Work to be your own boss. I would say I am different because of Shae because she has been an amazing role model. She has set great examples for me not only as a big sister but also because she's everything I want to be as a future mother and more.



Woman of Color: Mary Moore, My Mother

By Bruce Moore

Mary Moore was truly an awesome mother, wife, family member, friend, parent, cook, storyteller, and more. She helped shape me into the man and father I am today. She sacrificed so much and asked for nothing in return. She cared for so many people and gave so much of herself; I still have difficulty comprehending the depth of her ability to give of herself. In most ways, my mother influenced and shaped my life as a man and a dad by simply being my mom. My mom was this lady who seldom complained about her life and lived by example.

My mom was born and raised in Marks, Mississippi, a short time before the Great Depression. Her family sharecropped, so everyone who was old enough picked cotton on the farm, including Mom. She told me that she did not like picking cotton at all and said, “I would have to do it all day, with the sun sweating the life out of me.” When she got the opportunity, she chose to learn to cook for her brothers and sisters. She didn’t even have to think about it: she just chose to cook. My mom was the oldest girl in her family and also had to help raise her siblings, nieces, and nephews. I’d ask my mom about my grandfather, but all she would say was that he was not around much—then, not at all. My mom didn’t complain about her life as a young girl but would say, “Cooking for two families, cleaning, and taking care of family was what I needed to do, so I just did it. But sometimes, it seemed like all the work and all the caring never ended.” When she became a young woman, she came up north with some of her siblings for a better life.

I believe that early on in my parents’ relationship, my father really loved my mother. I know that she loved him until she died. Later in his life, he regretted how mean and disrespectfully he had treated her. My dad was a good provider and a generous man who helped a lot of people, but after he lost his business he changed. He became mean, drank, and ran the streets. I remember one evening when he came home after drinking. I was eight at the time, and we didn’t get along well, so I gave him his space. He went into the bedroom where my mom was, and I heard them getting loud. He pushed my mom against furniture, and my mother pushed him back. In a few minutes it was over. My dad went to the



bathroom, and my mom went downstairs into the basement. A few minutes later, my mom came upstairs with the World War II rifle we had in our



basement. She was crying and angry as she kicked open the bathroom door, where my father was sitting on the toilet. She took her foot and stepped into his pants, pushing them to the floor, and then took the rifle and placed it in his private area. He started to talk, but she cut him off and said, “Rufus Moore, if you ever, ever, again choose to lay hands on me, drunk or sober, God is my witness, I will blow you away. Do you understand me, man?” A deafening silence followed. Then he started to apologize and pleaded for her to take the rifle away. She hesitated for a moment, then lifted the rifle up slowly, then away. I followed my mom into the bedroom and sat with her, and she placed the rifle in the corner. I sat with her on her bed, and she was shaking, crying, and holding me.

After a while, my father got up off the toilet and walked past us into the basement. My mom got up and cooked and took his meal downstairs to him, but they didn’t talk. They didn’t talk the rest of that weekend, but eventually they made up. He continued being a womanizer and a good provider, but my father never talked badly, threatened, or abused my mother ever again. In that situation, my mother displayed courage, strength, love, and resilience. She chose not to be victim, and in doing so showed me what it would take for me to not to be a victim.

Raising Me and Being My Friend

When I was eight years old and in third grade, I had difficulty with comprehension and keeping up with my peers. My teacher scheduled a meeting with my mom to discuss my progress. That morning, my mom took her braids down and picked her hair out into a beautiful gray-and-black afro. She wore a royal blue, bright yellow, bright orange, and lime green dashiki, large, circular gold earrings, and a long royal blue skirt. She was beautiful and powerful! She walked me to school and listened as my teacher told her, “Your child is unable to be educated here. He needs remedial help that we cannot provide. He needs to be in a slower class.” My mom took in all that the teacher said to her, then looked at me and smiled; I smiled back. Sometimes, we knew what the other was thinking without saying a word. After that, my mom stood up, put her hands on her hips, and told the teacher, “You’re wrong. I know my child and I know he works hard. Maybe you’re the person who should not be here. But I’ll tell you this—my child no longer goes to this school, OK!”

She took me out of Washington Elementary School and enrolled me into a Catholic school called Saint Suzanna. My mom had a fourth or fifth grade education, and she wanted better for me. She was a stay-at-home mom and a foster parent who worked part time. She got my father to help her pay my tuition through elementary school. I struggled in school and I’ve repeated some college classes, but I’ve always found a way to learn what I needed to know, thanks to my mom.

Aunt Mary: The Provider, Cook, and Baker

My mom would take me to rummage sales to get clothes for our pantry. She would find clothes and leave me to watch over them so nobody would take them. Some of those old ladies would take your stuff if you didn't pay attention. She would get clothes for girls, boys, and women. We would wash and fold them and then store them for needy families, along with food and canned goods. Sometimes, we would spend most of Saturday doing clothes. I'd be tired and want to play, but I still had to help. I'd also help my mom give the food and clothes away to single moms and their children. I would watch while the mothers talked about their situations. Sometimes homeless, facing evictions, abusive relationships, job loss, not making it or just getting by, the ladies' expressions as my mom listened to their stories moved me. She would cry, laugh, and listen to them. She was very empathetic. She would always encourage them, and I would watch. She was everybody's Aunt Mary, and I shared her with the community.

To this day, I don't know how she was able to do so much with so little for so many for so long. She did not expect anything from them except that they keep trying—for themselves and their children. I think every aspect in our lives had something directly or indirectly to do with cooking. My mom would talk and explain cooking and baking instructions while combining stories, processes, and life lessons. She would give the meal a story and presence of its own while including me in all parts, in one way or another. Watching my mom cook and bake and helping her was a totally awesome and inspiring experience in many ways. I remember when I was a child, my mom would wake me up early in the morning to help her cook a meal. One morning, I asked her, "Mom, why do we have so many children in our house, taking up some of my time with you? I'm supposed to be spending time with you." My mom smiled and replied, "For different reasons, son, these children don't have moms to love and care for them right now. God gave them to us so we can show them what love is, what love does, and that they deserve to be loved. Our job is to love them, look after them, cook for them, and let them cook with us." My mom said, "Imagine, God forbid, he took me away from you, and you had no mom, how do you think you might feel?" I told her my heart would just break into pieces. She said, "That's how some of your foster brothers and sisters feel." At that moment, I understood her response completely and said, "Mom, we need to bake tea cakes as a family today." My mom helped us understand that cooking is a labor of love. To me, one of the best ways she showed her love was through her cooking. Like combining the ingredients of a meal, the entire process was, for me, just like lovingly raising a child: wholly and completely.



She Shaped My Life as a Man and a Dad

As I reflect on my life as a dad, I think about some of the ways my mom shaped my life. She always, always put her children's, family's, and community's needs first. I think about the kind of man that I've become for my kids. I think about some of the times when I was a surrogate father in neighborhoods where there were not many dads around. Even now, when I talk to young men about getting a job, a better career, I tell them that being a dad means being consistent and explaining difficult situations with children while changing and growing through situations as a family and putting family first and foremost.

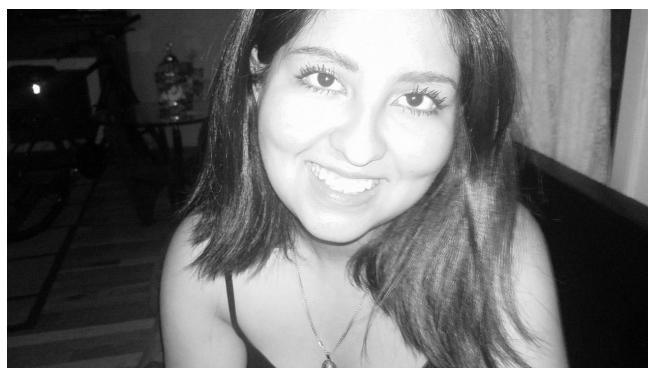
I like my career choice, mental health nursing, because it's a caring and advocating career. I think about how I intend to be able to do more to help in my community. I see myself, and I see my mom's influence in all of those areas of my life—parental, professional, emotional, nurturing, and spiritual. I've got more work to do because I'm not done with me. I like what I've become, and I look forward to the next phase of my life. My mom truly shaped and influenced my life, as a dad and as a man.



My Inspiring Sister By Carla Herrejon Tinajero

If I were to follow in someone's footsteps, it would be my sister Karina's. She is a brave and lovable woman. As a child, she suffered since birth, and as a lovely young woman today, she still suffers. What makes her special and admirable is that she does not give up. All throughout her sufferings as a child, and all through her difficulty of learning how to read and write and now with her vision, she's the woman I would love to be.

Although nobody knew, my sister was born with dislocated hips. No one knew until she wanted to start crawling and walking. She always had a lot of difficulty when trying to do these things. No one thought it was a problem until one of my cousins, who was a bit younger, started walking before her. Karina would want to imitate our cousin, but, sadly, she would fall. She wouldn't give up, though! She would keep trying and trying but wasn't able to. Finally my mother decided to take her to a clinic and have her checked out, and that is when we





discovered her hips were dislocated. She went through one surgery, and it didn't turn out how they wanted it to, so she had to go through a second one. Both of these surgeries were before the age of five. Through all the surgeries and recovery, Karina was a very happy child that kept our moods up.

When she was growing up and started going to school, she had a lot of difficulty learning at the same pace as her peers. She would often cry and ask, "Why me?" She would not give up, though. She always asked for extra help. She would promise herself that she would learn how to read and write properly. She took classes that helped her with that and never gave up. Through all her struggles, she was bullied, too. I was sad when she'd tell me, and I was mad that I couldn't do anything

about it. However, what she never lost was her smile or her desire to learn. Because of all her hard work, not only has she reached her classmates' level, but she has become one of the top students in all her classes. I am so proud to say that.

Karina's vision has always been a problem that has made her not learn as fast as others, but since she knows of her problem, she tries to fix it. She was told that her vision was not going to get better and that it would only get worse. This upset her, but she didn't care and looked up remedies and foods for better vision. Of course she succeeded and got her vision better! Her eye doctors could not believe it, but she did! Her faith and her ability to overcome and go through everything is what helps her succeed in whatever she sets her mind to.

Karina, my best friend and my sister, is a true inspiration. I want to have the same desire to learn and become a better person. Although she went through all the things she's been through at such a young age, she has become a woman that is an inspiration. Nothing is impossible to her, and that is why I chose her to be my woman of courage.





The Definition of Strength **By Charnice Anderson-Morris**

She looked at me in fear; she was terrified. Here we were at three o'clock in the morning at our local hospital. She was doing great. We were seconds closer to meeting Za'Mour. We spent many days imagining what she would look like—if she would have long side burns like her mom, or maybe she would be stubborn like her aunts. Ultimately, it didn't matter. We just wanted to shower her with love, enough love to cure the heart defects the doctors said she would be born with. Love and prayers cure everything, and Galeca had faith so strong and a heart so big that she could heal the world. "IT'S TIME!" the nurse said. They began to break down the bed; nurses were everywhere. Med Flight was on standby. Everyone was ready for Za'Mour to make her grand entrance into this cold world. First, her head popped out, and then the rest of her body quickly followed. She was perfect, and she was breathing on her own. I looked over at Galeca in amazement. In this beautiful moment, her face hid a sadness. This was the same sadness that I would see as she cared for her child through the hospital stay, lost her child, and welcomed a new daughter.

The doctors ran their tests on Za'Mour and determined that she did indeed have a heart defect. She would need to undergo surgery within the next couple days. The next time we got to see her was in a protective box that allowed us to stick our hands in to feed, touch, and rub her soft shiny hair. Galeca even had to change her through these holes. Mothers, can you imagine the only way to bond with your child is through a box? Nevertheless, Galeca did it with much grace in her new mommy glow. Once again, her strength and faith overcame any fear, hurt, or pain she may have been feeling. The next couple of days Galeca spent in the hospital, she prayed and prepared Za'Mour for her surgery, never getting the chance to take her home. She was then transported to another hospital in the area that specialized in caring for children.

The day finally arrived and it was time. Za'Mour was being wheeled off to her surgery. The next eight hours Galeca spent worrying, although no one could tell by her demeanor. She spent a lot of time ensuring the ones around her, "Everything will be all right." She often said, "My faith is my strength." Za'Mour did make it out of surgery, but we didn't have her for much longer after. A day later I received a text that said, "She's not going to make it." I rushed to the hospital and when I walked into the room, Galeca



looked at me in fear. Tears coated her face, yet she was consoling the ones around her. Za'Mour was making her exit out of this cold world.

Many would have been mad at God. How could one go on after losing a child? Mothers, can you imagine? The next couple months, Galeca used her faith to strengthen her. On her good days, she prayed, and on her rough days, she prayed harder. After a loss so big in your life, you will never be the same, but each day I see her growing from the pain. Today, about a year and a half from the tragic event, Galeca welcomed her baby girl, Zoelle, into this world. Za'Mour was a testimony of strength. Galeca is strength. Zoelle is the rainbow after the storm.

I am grateful to have witnessed strength firsthand through Galeca. At her darkest moment, she comforted others. In the scariest times, she didn't fold on her faith. If anyone were to ask me my definition of strength, I would simply reply with, "Galeca."



A True Heroine **By Derrick Allen**

How do we define strength? Is it in how much we can bench press, or is it something else—something that comes from within? My sister is my hero because she has displayed courage and strength in surviving single motherhood, abusive relationships, and homelessness.

My sister has five girls, and she had her first child at fifteen. I remember when our mother found out she was pregnant and all hell broke loose; my sister was afraid and so was I. Kiara Allen was born April 2, 1993. When they finally brought her home, we noticed that she cried a lot; something wasn't right. We later found out she had a cyst on her kidney, which caused her pain. This was hard on my sister because this was her first child and she felt helpless. Two years later, my sister had another girl, Brianna Allen, born with a rare bone disease in her legs. My poor sister was affected by this because she was running back and forth to the doctor with her baby. With all of this going on, I was shocked to learn she was pregnant again! Veronica Allen was born on April 22, 1997. Now Veronica's father seemed like a nice guy and stuck around, unlike the others. My sister was happy, and a year later they had their second child, which is my sister's fourth child, named Ashley Allen.

After a year had passed, I began to see a change in my sister. She seemed sad and always quiet, and I began to hear rumors that her kids' father was abusing her. When I asked if she was ok, she told me that everything was fine. One day I came home and heard arguing. As I walked through the door, I saw this dude punch my sister in the face, so I rushed toward him.

He jumped out the window! My beautiful sister lay there on the floor crying. Enraged, I went to the closet to get my .357 Magnum, and my sister screamed: "No!" At this time I stood motionless and didn't know what to do. Honestly, I was ready to put a bullet in this guy's head. But my sister begged me not to kill the father of her children. I did give him a good beat-down. However, because of that my sister got evicted. She blamed me for her being evicted and beating the crap out of her kids' father. So she didn't speak to me for months, but I heard from a friend of hers that the beatings went on.

For two years my sister went from shelter to shelter with her four kids. She remembers one shelter being really bad. When all the families had to sleep in one large room and her personal items were stolen, she had to sleep with one eye open. She also said the last shelter she was in was very helpful: they took the families to church and helped them look for jobs. When I came back home to Chicago, this is the shelter I found my sister in. I told her, "Pack up, you're coming home with me," and she agreed! At this moment I found out that she was pregnant with her fifth child, and we together named her after our mother, Lillian Allen.



Within three years, my sister found a job and an apartment. I was so happy to see this amazing woman who has been through so much yet courageous enough to leave Chicago behind to seek a better life, so I said to my sister, "You have shown me how to forgive, to show compassion, and the true meaning of strength. You have changed my life seeing courage through yours. Thank you from the bottom of my heart."



Courage Written All over Her
By Guadalupe Hernandez Nuñez

"Don't build a wall around your own suffering or it may devour you from the inside." --Frida Kahlo

Sometimes life doesn't seem to be fair. You may face so many struggles in order to overcome what you want to achieve in life. My mother had to overcome many obstacles in her life. From a very early age, she was denied a right, one that is very essential in life—the right of an education. She had to overcome prejudice against women. Fighting for what she deserved was not an easy task. It took every piece of courage she had to find the strength within her. My mother has always been an extraordinary example

of courage. Not only did she go through hard times alone, but as a single mother of five she became a woman to look up to and the best life teacher that any kid could have.

My mother was born in a small town in Mexico. By the age of seven, she had more responsibilities than a child her age should have. She had to help her mother around the house, from making food to cleaning the entire house, but that was not all—she also had to take care of the animals and crops. The only time she had to be free, to feel like a child, was during school. She was always happy in school just being around



other kids her age. Even though she had no notebook or pencil, she always made sure she carried a plastic bag with a few pages her friend would give her. Her dream was to own her very own backpack and her own notebook. One day she approached her mother and asked her to buy her school supplies, and her mother immediately told her that it was time for her to quit school because there was no money and she could use more help around the house. I could only imagine what my mother felt, but what she said next was even worse. Her mother told her that she was going to end up marrying some boy and having many kids, so school was just a waste of time. And just like that, without making any effort, my mother was given a different path, a path where education was denied.

Living in a small town ruled by men was not easy. When my mother was ten years old, she asked my grandmother to allow her to go back to school. She saw it as a possibility and wasn't going to lose anything by asking, but my grandmother's response was even worse than before. She said, "Why do you want to go to school? You don't need it. What you really need to do is learn how to be a woman so that you can be a good wife." Being a good woman meant knowing how to cook, clean, and take care of kids. You had no value as a woman if you didn't know how to do these things. My mother knew she could not live there anymore, where a woman had no word or say. Like they say, "Small town, big hell." My mother was not the only

one—many women in her era were going through similar situations. So she did what most women did and ran away from home. She ended up working in Mexico City, the place of opportunities for people from small towns at that time.

Being only ten years old and with no education, she found that looking for a job was not easy. It took a lot of courage. She finally found a job as a servant in a wealthy house. She worked six days a week, and on Sunday she would go visit her parents and bring money and food to them. She was finally showing her parents that she could help them more than they thought she could. My mother had courage written all over her.

Time went by, and she was finally a “señorita.” By age fifteen, she was considered a young adult in society. Like many others, she met a boy and fell in love with him. She now had a reason to stay in her hometown with her family. She kept her boyfriend a secret for some time, but once her parents and brother found out, she was punished. They told her she could no longer live with them—if she felt she was old enough to have a boyfriend, she could go live with him. She did and immediately got married to my father. Soon after, she got pregnant with her first child, and everything began to change. She soon found herself in an abusive relationship. She ended up having five kids, one after another. Once again, my mother fell into a deep hole with no one to help her. My father was living with us, but we had no help from him, so my mother found a way to feed us. When she had the chance, she would go work in the fields or in people’s houses just to have enough to make soup. She didn’t have to tell me this because I have such a clear memory of it. No matter how hard she worked, it was never enough. One day she took all the courage she had with her and made a decision, the biggest act she would ever do. She had to come in search for a better life, leaving us behind with an aunt and promising to take us with her soon after. She worked three jobs, and a year later she made her dream come true.

The American dream has never been easy, even though we were in a better place, away from the violence. The fact that she was a single mother had not changed. She was still working three jobs to pay rent and for food. She worked so hard, and all she asked for in return was that we got good grades in school. Even when things got very hard, we always made it through because we had a great woman by our side.

Courage . . . we all are born with it, and we just need to find it and bring it out at times when it is needed. My mother is the perfect example of courage—my example. I admire her not only as a mother but also as a woman. Even though she didn’t have an education, she has achieved things that people with education have not. She didn’t finish school, but she did her very best to learn what she could, and she still is. “Even if things seem to get hard, there is someone who would be willing to trade places with you,” my mother once told me. Every time I feel hopeless and that the world is against me, I always remember everything my mother went through and that she still managed to be a great example for my brothers and me. “Te amo, mami.”



Dorothy's Courage

By Hailey Sjuggerud

I used to do my grandmother's hair. My grandmother Dorothy would take me at dinnertime and keep me overnight through most of the week so my mom could work the third shift. My grandma seemed tired and wanted to keep me busy, so I guess my doing her hair and setting it in rollers was killing two birds with one stone. She may have felt tired from cancer—at the time she had uterine cancer, and later it was Hodgkin's Lymphoma. She faced a lot of challenges in her life from her careers in nursing and owning hair salons, raising her five children while working, and keeping it all together while both she and her husband became very sick.

Dorothy Mae Sjuggerud was born in northern Wisconsin to Frank and Lu Lu Drake. My great-grandfather Frank was a farmer and the local postman. From what Dorothy has told me, she grew up in a very hard-working, self-sufficient family. My grandmother and her three sisters would often get a dime on their dinner plates for their birthday to sew clothes. They made everything from scratch—even candy. Even while they were living on a farm, they were encouraged to get an education at a time when a lot of women just got married and raised children. Dorothy went to college and became a nurse.

She worked in nursing for a few years before meeting my grandfather, Milton Sjuggerud, and getting married. Milton was already married to a Catholic woman who would not divorce him, feeling it was a mortal sin. So they got married anyway, and at one point Milton was put in jail for bigamy for six months before being released and finally granted a divorce. Eventually they would have five children, and Dorothy took care of them mostly on her own because Milton worked as an engineer and often traveled. I guess feeling the pull of family life and time, she started a new career where she could make her own hours. She got a cosmetology degree and opened two hair salons while being pregnant and taking care of children. She had one daughter and four crazy boys.



Around the time my grandmother was 45 or so, Milton suffered a series of strokes and could no longer provide for the family. He lived out his remaining ten years in a residential care facility. Dorothy was diagnosed with uterine cancer in her fifties and went through a hysterectomy. During this time, they lost most of what they had, but my grandmother still worked and took care of her children.

I admire my grandmother's perseverance in the face of adversity. She remained cheerful to the end. It takes a lot of strength and courage to take care of a sick husband and five teenaged children while being sick yourself, and yet she enjoyed life.





Overcoming Obstacles

By James Davis

My woman of courage is a great example of how to overcome obstacles and prevail when all hope seems bleak. Her name is Sadie Davis. You guessed it—Sadie is my mom. She was born one of 11 kids, the youngest of the girls, third youngest to last.

By the time my mom was eight, her mom had been left to herself to raise all 11 kids. It was a rough and harsh upbringing for her. She had to settle for hand-me-downs and was told school



was not important—that she should worry about getting a job, instead of dreaming of going to college. Hell, she was encouraged to not even finish high school. Fortunately for her she didn't listen; in fact, she excelled at Phillips High School.

She was offered an internship at the Hilton Hotel in downtown Chicago. She worked for them for 21 years straight, then retired at the age of 38. She underwent many trials while working for them. She only took off work

for a period of two weeks in all of those years, and that was due to having me. Sadie was also a single parent raising me and also attending school. She worked almost every position for the hotel.

One position that sticks out to me was when she was a secret shopper and was sent to Texas to observe hotel staff. I was on summer vacation and was able to attend the trip with her. When we arrived at the hotel, oh, you could tell we were not welcome. It started when it was time to check in. We were skipped in line twice when another customer insisted they were to be helped next. The front desk clerk was rude and said, “We don't have you down for a room, so maybe you can try down the road where ‘your people’ tend to go.” Sadie remained calm and asked for the manager. He was even ruder. He said, “Nigger, you will never get a room here.” She still was calm. She left and went and called her supervisor to give a verbal report. She was instructed to go back to the front desk where security would be waiting for her to assist in removing the manager and any other staff she deemed fit to be fired. She was to take over the hotel manager spot until one was appointed.



Sister's Keeper **By Keziah Bester**

Being the youngest of six (four boys and two girls), I've always felt blessed to have a sister born three years ahead of me that I can look up to. My sister, Mariama Fabu Bester, is one of my biggest inspirations, my best friend, and at times my enemy. If anyone tells my sister that she can't do something, she will do it and she will do it the best because my parents have always told us we can do anything we want to do. Mariama is intelligent, caring, loyal, and feisty. She's everything a sister should be and more. We might argue at times, but if anyone messes with me then it's all over for them. Not only is my sister courageous, but she taught me how to have courage as well. My sister is a woman of courage because she's always there for me, she's academically successful, and she's fought to be independent.



Growing up I have always been at my sister's side and in other times right in her shadow. We wore matching outfits, had the same hairstyle, and even talked the same. Even now, we can look and sound just alike and still be the opposite at each other at times. I remember as a child there was a girl that kept picking on me, and I honestly have no idea why. As soon as I told my sister that this girl wouldn't leave me alone, well... let's just say that girl never messed with me again. Mariama always stood up for me even though I knew how to stand up for myself. I felt proud to have someone by my side. Being the first born girl and having four older brothers, Mari always felt she needed to be number one at everything. She absorbed the competitive attitudes of our brothers and excelled at becoming her own strong person. My brothers made

sure we would never be weak or afraid of anything, and she has all the scars to prove it.



In high school Mari was a straight A, 4.0 student. When I was a freshman, she was a senior, which meant whenever we were at school together she thought she was my mom.



She took honors classes, and a lot of the time she was the only person of color in class. No matter how hard things got at home with my dad being sick and having open heart surgery, she stayed focused and succeeded beyond expectations. My dad had a total of five heart attacks, and it just seemed as if they wouldn't stop coming. Every day was a guessing game where we would come home after school and hope for the best. Despite it all, she graduated with honors with a full ride scholarship to UW Madison, plus she got almost every scholarship she applied for. We aren't the richest when it comes to money, and life had its ups and downs—going a couple years without a car, dealing with family issues, having a dad needing to be cured of kidney cancer, having

school counselors doubt you and your intelligence, and more—, but she was so focused during school she just knew how to block out everything but learning and accomplish her goals. To me, that's courage.

Mari now goes to UW Madison and will soon graduate, and she is studying to be either a pediatrician or doctor. She works, tutors, and volunteers, all while going to school full time. Through high school she participated in the PEOPLE program so she goes back and volunteers to be a tutor there to younger kids. She spends her free time mostly studying. She's always studying no matter what time, through all hours of the night. I should know since I spent 15 years of my life sharing a room with her. I don't know how she can do it and can speak Spanish almost fluently. When it comes to my sister, I love to brag about her because she makes me so proud every day. She shows how a black woman can succeed in this world. She is the definition of a strong, independent black woman.

Mari really inspires me to be a better me everyday. Her courage shows me that you can be in control of your own future as long as you put in the time and effort. Nothing comes easy: it's something you have to fight for. Especially being a black woman in this world, sometimes you feel you have to prove yourself to people, but you don't: the only person you need to prove something to is yourself, and it takes courage to do so. She doesn't let anything stop her from accomplishing her goals, and she strives for greatness. No matter what obstacles she faces in life, she will always end up on top.





They Never Said It'll Be Easy Ladaro Taylor

"Life's a bitch. You've got to go out and kick ass." —Maya Angelou

No woman I know speaks to this quote more than my choice for a "Woman of Courage." How can a woman face an abusive home and tragedy yet manage to graduate with her future illuminating others around her? A woman did just that.

Her name is Nedra Wilson.

Unfortunately, Nedra was subjected to verbal and mental abuse growing up. Nedra's mother despised her because she looked like her father. Every day as a child, she was told by her own mom how ugly, dumb, and useless she was. Her mother told her she was nothing like her more attractive sister. Her mother saw her ex-husband in Nedra's face, and her mother blamed her for her failed marriage. How can anyone grow in that environment? Nedra was devoured in that environment. Nedra grew up in that environment and saw herself as ugly. Even worse, she blamed herself for the failures of others. She easily quit everything she did, including medical school. Sadly, the tale doesn't end there.

The worst loss a parent can experience is the death of a child. Everyone can agree that this can shake any parent to their core. The mother of two, Nedra was unfortunate to lose her oldest child to gun violence in Chicago. Any progress that had been made was suddenly gone. School, work, and happiness vanished on the night she laid her son to rest. A few months later, her father passed away due to cancer. If it is not one thing, it is another in this woman's life. That tragedy would cause anyone to go into a drinking frenzy, but the story doesn't end there.

The tragedy of Nedra Wilson would be a fitting title if this wasn't a story of triumph. Triumph is the perfect word to describe Nedra's second breath in life. She resumed school and graduated as a delivery nurse. She is there to support her grandchildren through their tragic loss of their father. She leads a support council for victims of gun violence. Last but not least, she works for the biggest hospital in Chicago—Rush. Tragedy is not to be associated with this woman.

Who is this woman, and why did I choose her? How do I know so much? As you should have guessed by now, I am the youngest of Nedra's two children. Watching my mother's struggles has been hard. Growing up with her has taught me never to complain and constantly battle throughout life, no matter the challenges that face me. I could sit here and brag about her forever, but I'd rather close by saying her favorite quote: "The cheap comes out expensive."





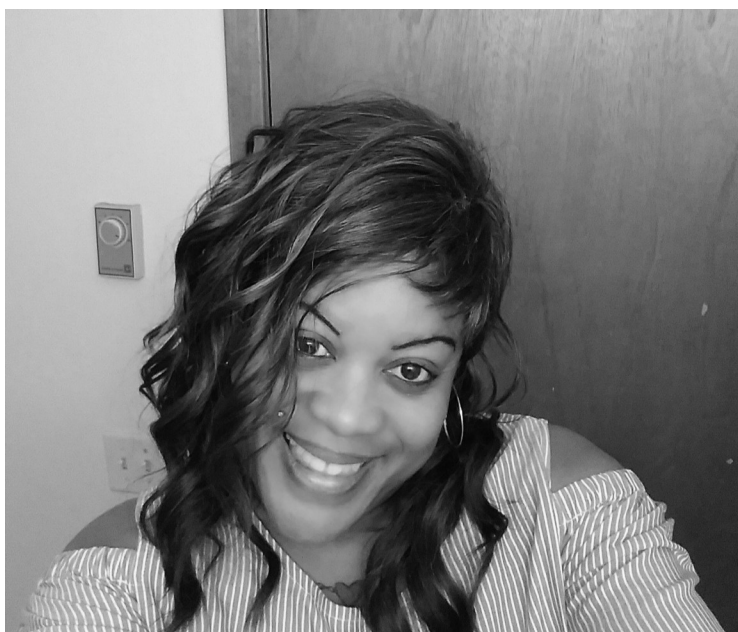
Angie, My Hero **By Lisa Simmons**

There's always that one person in your family who's like a second mom to you. If not, then I don't know what to tell you because my cousin Angie is a hero. Angie has been there for me since the beginning. Angie's life was not easy – she had struggles and had to overcome obstacles. She showed her courage by being a second mother to me, raising three kids on her own, and always staying positive, even when she has been hurt.

Angie had kids of her own, but she still took the time to help raise me. When I was six or seven years old, my mom was going through a phase, and I didn't want to be around it because I didn't know how to help her. So I called up my cousin Angie and asked if I could come over for the summer. She took me in, and I remember she took me shopping and got me fettuccine. I feel maybe she only knew that fettuccine was my favorite because I ate it a lot, but she still took the time out to notice. It must not have been easy for her to take me in and still raise her kids, but she displayed courage throughout the whole process. Angie was there for her kids. She was there for me. She worked two jobs, cooked every night, and made sure our homework was done. Angie got everything done that needed to get done. Angie raised me like a daughter, and her son became my best friend. To this day, I hang with him mostly every weekend. Angie's life was already busy, but she still took me in no matter how busy she was. Angie was really like a second mom to me.

Angie has always shown courage when it comes to raising her own kids, too. Her kids' fathers were inconsistent, and she pretty much raised her kids on her own. She protected her kids from getting hurt or having to see and hear all the bad arguments that were happening. When their dad would lie or make false promises, Angie would be strong for them and tell them the truth. Angie would take them out to do something fun, like to see a movie, or buy them something that they really wanted, so she could cheer them up. Donte wanted the whole set to *Guitar Hero*, and he got it because his grades were perfect. She must have been hurt to see her kids hurt, but she wouldn't show her emotions. It takes a courageous woman to stay strong for her kids like that.

The thing I love most about Angie is her personality. She's funny and honest, and she never lets anybody



bring her down. I think her positivity is courageous because all the downfalls that she went through in her life just made her stronger. The way she talks to me, you wouldn't even think she's my cousin. She sounds just like my mom. She's always giving me advice, but she knows how to make me laugh about it, too. Angie's optimism brings up my standards for myself so I can become my own woman. She builds up my confidence in a way that she might not understand, and she makes me want to work hard and see the bright side, just like she does. Her courage to keep going is inspirational.

So if your teacher asks you if you have a family member that's legit your best friend... mine is my cousin Angie. She might as well be my mom's sister. She inspires me in so many ways and shows me a courageous way of living. She has led the way so that when I get older I'll be already prepared for my next adventure in life. Angie took the time to teach me to follow my dreams, that I shouldn't let the negative energy around me bring me down. She was right. I was going to give up on drawing and painting because there were no good programs in Madison. Angie told me, "Don't give up yet. Find the right program that's best for you and you will know if you made the right decision or not." Until I find a good program for drawing and painting, I'll just continue to do it at home. I'm not giving up, thanks to Angie's lessons.



Woman of Strength
By Nathaniel Robinson

My godmother, Barbara Ann Theilke, was born August 20, 1947, and died September 14, 2016 of ovarian cancer. She was married to John Thielke for 43 years, went to Pulaski High in Milwaukee, and went to UW-Whitewater for Arts. She ran a successful jewelry company called Babalco Designs.

She was involved in many charities. Her mission was to share the message of Jesus Christ. She said, "Trust in the Lord. Surrender to Him."

Barb was a woman of strength. I witnessed her stay positive and hopeful and supportive while her husband and daughter fought an addiction. Most importantly, Barb was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in 2014. She fought and beat that. It came back in 2016. While she ultimately lost that battle, she never lost faith as she was fighting. She always stayed positive and encouraging.





Angel of Mine
By Maya Rasheed-Bracey

"I believed it had to be and so it was." —Pamela Bracey. She has caramel brown skin with the most angelic smile that my eyes have ever encountered. She is so sweet like cotton candy and soft spoken. She is the true definition of Superwoman! She is a survivor of an abusive childhood, she dealt with two miscarriages, and she was married to an alcoholic / drug abuser. Still to this day, she is standing strong with all that has been thrown at her. She is my beloved mother.

My mom says she remembers the abuse started when she was at the tender age of five. It was her father abusing her mother; her father was a police officer in Washington D.C., where she was born. My mom was the only girl out of four brothers. Her mother was a stay-at-home mom because she had young children. My mom being the only girl, she did not get abused but only got two beatings. Her father would apologize after and tell her that he loved her. She would watch her father beat three of her brothers with golf clubs and thick leather straps. She even witnessed her baby brother get handcuffed to a furnace because he got ahold of matches and burned my mom's room down. My mom never physically saw her dad beat her mom because he would take her upstairs and wouldn't allow anyone to come upstairs. My mom told her mom that she needed to leave to save herself, and my grandma did just that. However, my mom and her brothers were left to stay with their father and got visits with their mother. That went on for one year until the school found marks on her brothers' bodies. Twelve by this point, my mom had witnessed so much abuse and moved to Wisconsin to live with her mother.

Going into adulthood, my mom met my dad. He had been in and out of at least ten different drug and alcohol abuse treatment programs and was in and out of prison. It was something that she saw in him that made her fall in love. "I knew a different David than everybody else," she said. My mom



ended up getting pregnant within a year of dating my dad and ended up having a miscarriage, but it wasn't long until she was pregnant again. She felt as though something was wrong with this baby. She was talking to her baby and said, "If you are going to have troubles and be suffering when you get here, you can leave now." All of a sudden, she felt a quick pain, and she instantly knew that the baby was gone. She mourned for about a week but had to shake it off and be strong since she still had a son to care for (my older brother by a different dad). My parents ended up getting married when my mom was 32. She had my brother Malcolm and then me two years later. My mom was still dealing with and trying to be supportive to my dad through drug relapses, but it was still such a struggle for my dad. Due to addiction and mental illness, my dad was robbing banks and committing crimes. It got to the point where the FBI and police were tapping my mom's phone, showing up at her house looking for him. In August of 2006 my mom told my dad, "All I can do is plan your funeral." By September 2006, my dad was dead. He got shot by the police when they finally caught up with him. So my mom was left with an 11 year old and a 13 year old, working only ten hours a week. She was "robbing Peter to pay Paul" – getting out loans and waiting for checks to come. However, we were always fortunate to be able to do stuff like travel, go to museums, eat out with all of our friends, etc.



These are just a few obstacles that I admire my mom for enduring and overcoming. I don't see how she did it, and neither does she. "What brought me through those very dark times is that at a young age I felt the presence of someone looking out for me, and that presence continues with me today," she says. She never ceases to amaze me with her kind spirit and out-of-this-world strength. Writing about her shows me how strong she really is, and I will forever be proud to call her my mom. I am who I am because of her, and I will be lucky if I can be half of the woman she is. She is my real life angel that was heaven sent.



The Woman Who Persevered By Reggie Reed

When we lived in Alabama, a hurricane hit our house. I didn't know about it at the time, but my mom, Rachel Reed, managed to move everything— including a huge fish tank— to Madison, WI while finding a new

job and continuing on like nothing ever happened. I remember being confused and asking when we were going to go back home, and they'd only say that Madison was home. And when her

children weren't doing well under the Madison school system, my mom decided to move us to Sun Prairie and settle all over again. Throughout all of these life challenges, she constantly put a smile on her face and stayed strong in front of her children.

Last year my mom hit her head and woke up with vertigo; this means that she started suffering chronic headaches and dizziness. It got so bad that she had to stop working and couldn't drive. She started spending more time in her room and was eating less but continued to smile through the pain. She would push herself to help around the house, start feeling really sick from working too hard, take a nap, and do it all over again. She continued to stay afloat despite these challenges for the sake of those around her.

My mom planned on going to college and becoming a nurse; she then had children and put those plans on hold. She immediately shifted gears to providing as much as possible for her kids. Despite this, she never stopped: she continually researched multiple topics and challenged her brain. She put in all of her focus and effort into her children but didn't let that get in the way of her education. *Note: Rachel Reed graduated from the Odyssey Project in 2006.*





Beatrice Johnson, a Woman of Courage

By Ruthie Allen

I was introduced to one of the bravest and most courageous women I know on March 13, 1965. Her name was Beatrice Johnson, my great-grandma. Beatrice Johnson was an adoptive mother of one child, my Grandma Mary Ruth. She also was a foster grandparent to numerous others when she worked at Cook County Hospital. I was taught the meaning of faith and pleading the blood during times of fear and adversity. I learned the valuable lesson of being a lady in deed and dress from her. Her greatest gift to me was unconditional love.

I'm not sure what year Momma moved to Chicago from Mississippi, where she had worked in the cotton fields. As the story goes, she moved to Chicago with a gentleman she was to marry. When that proposal fell through, she did not return to Mississippi, her comfort zone, her familiar place. Soon after, Momma began working in the great stockyards of Chicago, a very brave feat after working cotton fields; slaughtering cattle took guts in itself. I forgot to mention she had brought her adopted daughter, my Grandma Mary Ruth, along with her to Chicago. Grandma married Charles Brown, and from that union came three children: my mom (Laurell) and two brothers. My mother got pregnant when she was sixteen and married my first stepfather, James Allen, who proved to be an abusive man to my mom but not to my brothers and me.

I lived with Momma for the first seven years of my life, and life was good. It was during these years she worked as a foster grandparent at the Cook County Hospital, showing love to children who needed special attention from abusive homes, abandonment, or severe illnesses. Momma was also a very devoted member of Robert's Temple COGIC (Church of God in Christ), located in Chicago's South Side ghetto. *(The black and white illustration shows the church on the day of Emmett Till's funeral)* It's hard to believe such a pillar of faith and strength was surrounded by thieves, robbers, and rapists. Momma was held up numerous times going to Bible study or meetings on various evenings at that church. I remember we were walking to the bus after choir practice one evening when men approached us and tried taking Momma's purse. She refused over and over again while holding my hand and placing me behind her. She repeatedly pled the blood of Jesus, saying, "I rebuke you in Jesus's name" a few times. Eventually they ended up with the purse, but we escaped with our lives and without becoming a rape statistic; I felt as if she was the bravest women I knew. I remember her very modest way of dressing, and I wanted to be just like that when I grew up. Momma was one of the highest missionaries of the COGIC religion. She embodied holiness and empathy for others, traits I feel added to her courage.

Never having borne children of her own naturally, she took in a child that had been abandoned by her mentally ill mother. That eventually became the vessel to my meeting one of the most awesome women I've ever known. The bravest thing Momma taught me was to love unconditionally and be empathetic to others, two lessons that have led to my own courage.





My Role Model at Age 104

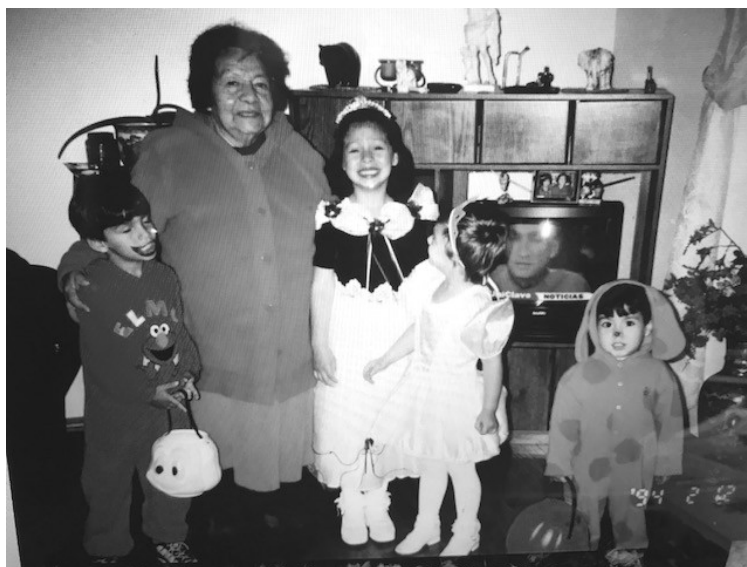
By Sayury Peralta Vivanco

Every weekend all the families would meet at Mama Elvirita's (Grandmother's) house. When I say all the family, I mean all my grandmother's children with their husbands, wives, and children. She never took off to have fun for herself. I always saw her there and ready for us. She loved to sing when she cooked, read a lot of books, and made things by hand (knitting, crochet, and sewing). Also, she had a schedule for all my cousins to take turns to spend the night at her home so we could interact with each other. Every weekend when we got together, we had a little bit of everything: dance, folklore, guitar, singing, eating, playing, and praying. She is a woman of courage because she raised her eight children without the help of a husband at home, she had the courage to find a way for all of her children to get an education, and she never drank alcohol. She was a role model for all of us.

It was a huge challenge, but she chose to raise all of her kids without any help. My grandpa liked to drink a lot, and she didn't want any of her kids to watch his behavior when he was drunk. After many opportunities, she tried to help him to change, but he always failed. She decided to leave him. She moved away with the kids and started fresh by herself.

She moved to Lima, the capital of Peru. It was a busy city. She started working as a professor at San Marcos University in the Education Department, where she was able to provide for her kids. My older uncles and aunts helped my grandmother to raise the youngest siblings and took turns based on her work schedule. She always said that she worked so hard to make them *hombres de bien* (men of good soul). Every single one of her eight children became professionals as adults, and all of them still keep her tradition to get the family together on the weekends, even when some of my uncles moved out of the country.

I can say we are a very unique family because we as cousins love each other and care for each other like brothers and sisters. Grandma always prepared food for everyone, including our pets (dogs). Grandma was amazing: she always reunited us every weekend. The females started helping Grandma by preparing the table, serving, passing the plates, and making sure they were not missing anyone. The males started catching up with things they did during the week, at work or at home. We kids were playing, singing, or helping in the kitchen, too, and watching the young cousins. I never understood how she did it. I remember when I spent the night at her home, she made the schedule where four cousins spent the weekend with her—two big ones and two little ones. She did it this way so the big cousins could help her to take care of the little ones and teach us how to do it. Always at her home, she had something for us to



do. She always had a schedule for us from when we woke up until the night.

She seated us at the table. Based on our ages, she had notebooks with homework to do with her for one hour. Then she made us read books and tell her about what we read. She fed us, made us play Monopoly, taught us how to cook the right way, and also had chores for the old cousins to do. She taught them how to wash their own clothes by hand. Back then, we didn't use a washer or dryer machine.

She taught us a lot of things that now I realize are very important and helpful for our daily living. When she came to the USA, finally I saw her again. She was 94 years old and still reading without wearing glasses. When she came to the USA, she made me read her the newspaper in English. I told her, "Grandma, the newspaper is in English. How will you understand??" She replied, "Just read and then translate for me." I laughed. My grandmother died at 104 years. She told me before she died, "It's funny that when you were little I used to take care of you, and now you are taking care of me." I'm so happy because my grandmother met my kids, her great-grand kids, and she was doing the same to them that she did to me when I was a child. She was teaching them how to read, sew, knit, crochet, etc. She made them pray and read the newspaper for her. She was an awesome lady, and I still remember everything like it was yesterday. I love her so much, and I miss her a lot.

She was a great person, so compassionate towards others. Her spirit and memories always will live on in me.

Love you, Grandma!



My Go-Getter Cousin
By Sch'Royce Brown

"Creatives Hustle Harder." Strolling through Pinterest, I came across this phrase, which describes a lot of us in so many ways. Reading this made me

want to push harder because I am a creative person, I have many hustles, and I always go hard. In fact, I turned this into an artistic thing by adding it to the back of my denim jacket as a daily reminder. This phrase also describes my cousin Dominique a.k.a. "Domo" Battle. I've always looked at her as a courageous woman because she's the most creative person that I know, she hustles every minute of the day, and she pushes so hard that nothing can get in her way.





Dominique is creative because she has a voice that will leave your jaw dropped. This makes her courageous because she uses her pains and struggles to express herself, and it helps release that demon that's bottled up inside. Most of the time when I'm visiting her, she's walking around the house singing and humming her little heart out. It's not the words that she's expressing but the emotions that make it personal. You can hear the soulfulness and how deep it's coming from the heart. She also displays her artistic creativity in a way that helps her keep a steady income and helps take care of her family. Being a hairstylist is a great talent to have because she loves to make people look and feel good. Creativity is very important because most of the

styles she creates require her to have an open mind and patience. A few of her most popular styles are sew-ins, dreadlocks, box braids, and simple French braids. Most of these styles are hair extensions, and that requires great detail.

Having a hustle mentality is the key to getting past the struggle, including daily challenges: being able to make ends meet, building clientele if you have a small business, and networking. My cousin is the definition of hustle because no matter what, she will do what it takes to get to the top. Some jobs she takes may be things that you aren't trying to turn into a career. For example, she works at the Gentleman's Club. She's being very courageous because showing your body to strangers and maybe even people you know can get uncomfortable. Speaking of her being a woman of all types of hustles, she also has a job at the gas station. She's a little quiet, so working in this environment she has to be courageous to talk and hold conversations with random people. No matter what, money is to be made so that other doors can be opened.

My cousin goes hard because she has no choice. She's homeless, and she has a two-year-old son named DJ who really looks up to her. While being on this journey, Domo runs across an old friend she knows from high school, and he is the person who lets her live with him. Being at this friend's house is very difficult because she has to live by his rules. This means she cannot get comfortable mentally and physically. It's like living on the edge because at any given time she can be kicked out. Not only is she uncomfortable, but in these hard times she has no other help. She's all she's got. Although her struggle is making her stronger, it also makes her stubborn. She kind of has a guard up because she feels as though she can do it all on her own, when in reality everyone needs a little bit of help. She's courageous because she's doing all that she can for her son and trying to make her situation better. Going hard will always be on the top of her list because being a good role model for her child is very important.

Dominique pushes herself no matter what. I can relate to her because we both are courageous and going hard for our children. With that being said, my jacket is the best description for both of us, whether Domo uses it as a daily reminder or not. She is what you would call a go-getter. She has creativity, she uses all her hustles to get by on a daily basis, and she will always go hard.



Super Woman – Mexican Edition
By Selena Muñoz

If you could have one super power, what would it be? You're probably having a million thoughts racing through your brain about what to answer, but for one muscular construction worker it wasn't having enough muscle but enough faith to still stay alive today. To not only have a tremendous amount of muscular strength but a countless amount of faith is to be a superwoman in disguise. This superwoman has such a great amount of faith that you inherit it, at your darkest moments in life. Little did I know that I had known Super Woman this whole time.

Super Woman experienced her first challenge during her adolescent years, when her older brother sexually molested her. Later in life she defeated him by forgiving him during his several cancerous amputations that eventually led to his death. Soon after, Super Woman fought her ultimate challenge against death, which struck Super Woman four times, causing four brain surgeries and several treatments of chemotherapy. Super Woman's fourth brain surgery was going to be the toughest because it was the most brain tissue she was going to lose and gave her a very slight chance to live. Super Woman decided to reach out to someone she used to reach to when she was hurt: her mother. Unfortunately, as soon as her mother heard Super Woman cry out for her love over the phone, her mother said to Super Woman that she does not have a daughter. Twenty four hours later, Super Woman woke up from her last surgery stitches and used her super power of faith to recover. Super Woman became victorious but heartbroken.

Super Woman still has one sibling alive and attempted to reconnect with her after the horrific phone call with their mother. Even though they don't see eye to eye on everything because Super Woman is blind now and her sister is



diagnosed with severe bipolar disorder, they still acknowledge each other, and Super Woman treasures that the most to this day. Around this time, Super Woman's brother-in-law was diagnosed with stage 3 lung cancer, and Super Woman used her super power of faith to help him win the battle against death. He was the first to inherit her super power of faith. It was then that Super Woman's brother-in-law wanted to help Super Woman reconnect with her long-time high school best friend. There was only one problem. Super Woman lost her best friend to her sister. Super Woman's best friend was my mother.

I met Super Woman when she held me in her arms the minute I was born. Because my mother and Super Woman were such long-time best friends, Super Woman became like a second mom to me growing up. My mother always looked at the glass half empty instead of half full like Super Woman did. I think whenever my mother looked at the glass completely empty, she would run to Super Woman for help. I don't ever remember my mother being happy except when she was with Super Woman. Not only did I appreciate Super Woman for being kind to me and my brothers but also for giving my mother words of wisdom to be kind to others.

After Super Woman's first brain surgery, we lost contact with her because my mother prohibited us from talking to her. She never told us why, but she just never wanted to catch us talking to her. Later in life, I found Super Woman through a Craigslist ad for an ironing board she was selling, and we reconnected. Not only did I find out my mother turned her back on Super Woman because of her brain surgery, but I also learned that my mother got Super Woman's own sister to turn her back against Super Woman. After Super Woman had told me all her battles in life, which most would consider tragedies, it was at that moment I realized Super Woman was Super Woman and not just an old friend of my mother. I also had realized that I, too, inherited some of her super power of faith. Now when my life feels lifeless or at ends, I count my blessings and use the power of faith.





Love over Money **By Tandalaya Taylor**

Waking up to smelling cheese sticking to the pot, hearing noodles boiling, and smelling crispy chicken being fried turned out not to be a dream but actually a meal being prepared by a great woman—a woman who can make something out of nothing into a six-course meal to eat; a woman who is creative at getting her family to try different meals to eat. She enjoys cooking because it makes the family happy. This woman who is amazing in so many ways is my mother, Tanya Money. She is an excellent mother even though she lost her mother at an early age, raised five kids as a single mom, and helped provide for me and my son when I was going through cancer.



Imagine losing your mother when you were 12 years old and not having a lady figure to mold you and teach you pivotal points that would be needed in life. There were other women in the family that would help raise her, but none could give the love of a mother. She learned about nurturing at an early age since she had to take the responsibility of raising her brothers. She got her brothers up for school, made sure they had breakfast, made sure they got to school, made sure she got herself to school, and then had to do it all over again. That's why she was destined to become a great mother.

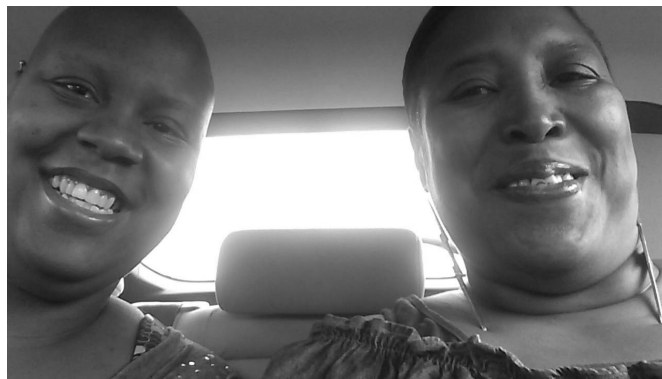
My mother is a great mother for several reasons. She raised five kids with no help, but she did it with grace and poise. She kept us involved in positive activities. She told us to pick an event that was important to us, and she would then make those events. I would tell her that I wanted her to attend my spelling bee competition. My brother would tell her he wanted her to attend his strings concerts. My sister wanted my mother to come to her plays, and my other brothers wanted my mom to attend their sports events. Five kids with different personalities meant a busy schedule, but she attended events that mattered to all the kids. She has always wanted the best for us.



As recently as a year ago, while I was fighting the biggest battle of my life, she still managed to provide for her family at a difficult time. I was in the hospital for two weeks during the diagnosis and first stages of cancer. As many times as she had been a provider, my mother went right back into action. For two years of my

treatment, she took care of my nine-year-old son. She made sure he ate, attended school, kept up with his activities, and had clean clothes and stability. She took time off to take care of my son and me.

What my mother did for her family (her brothers, her own children, and her grandchild) and what she sacrificed shows her excellence. My mother is dedicated, royal, and loyal, and she carried her family on her back to success. My mom broke the cycles of early pregnancy with her daughters, kept her sons out of gangs, and made sure all of her children graduated high school. She broke a lot of records despite being a single mom. My mom has made me a caring, kind, loving mother because of the way she loved me.



Only the Strong Survive **By Ta'Tiana Clacks**

"I am only 13 years old, and I can't raise her," my grandmother stated. "'Only the strong survive' echoed from the walls in the big living room space," my mother stated.

Raised by my great-grandparents, my mother, Ms. Sheila Robertson, was set to face many difficult situations. Growing up in Chicago in a home of aunties, uncles, and cousins, she did not feel left out.

My mother was born on May 24, 1970, and an empress was created. My mother grew up with old-fashioned values—bedtimes, dinner with family, saying "Yes, ma'am" and "No, ma'am," and marriage. Still, after all the greatness my great-grandparents displayed, my beautiful mother was looking for love at the age of 15. She met my father, Stanford Clacks, and the rest is history. By age 17, my mother was pregnant with me . . . She then graduated high school and became a licensed nurse. Knowing how disappointed my great-grandparents would be if she didn't get married, my father decided to marry my mother and buy a home to raise us. They moved us into a better environment so that we wouldn't face the same obstacles they had endured.

Life was rough, but we made it through moving and a cancer diagnosis. My mother was saving for our future when our home was foreclosed. My father became depressed, seeking refuge in the form of crime and liquor. This sorrow would haunt all our





family forever. (“Only the strong survive,” my mother states.)

My mother went to church and felt like giving up before this voice told her to stand strong. My mother had surgery and no more cancer after that. Thyroid was the issue. She has taken steps in loving herself more than searching for the love that, at age 13, her mother was not able to show her. She decided to get into therapy and eat healthy, and she is getting her credit in order to get another home.

I salute my mother and admire her strength. Thank you, Mom, for loving me and my three siblings.



Phenomenal Woman

By Tori Armour

“I’m a woman phenomenally. Phenomenal woman, that’s me” —Maya Angelou

My granny is the most amazing woman I know. She is a mother to five kids and grandmother to umpteen grands and great-grands. She leads our family with poise and strength, she is a phenomenal cook, and she is a woman of unshakable faith.

My granny is the matriarch of our family. I can talk to her about anything. She’s always there to listen and give guidance. Every time I talk to her, even if she tells me something I don’t want to hear, I leave the conversation feeling better than when we started. There are a lot of us, and all of our names start with T. We’re nuts, but she manages to keep us all in line, even if she gets our names confused. We are rarely called by our own name. When I was little, my grandma had a cat named Toshi. I was upstairs and heard Granny yelling, “Tori! Get off the table!” I came running down the stairs to find her yelling at the cat. I told her I wasn’t on the table, and we laughed. Grandma’s house is always filled with laughter and love, and it always smells like food.

You may come to grandma’s house hungry, but you’ll never leave that way. Grandma always has something to eat. She keeps greens in her downstairs freezer for easy access for her starving tribe. Somebody’s always hungry.





Grandma lit the fire for my cooking desire. She taught me how to make dressing, fry chicken, and make hot water bread. When I was a little girl, she taught me how to decorate cakes. She'd say, "Keep your hand light so you don't smash the leaves." Watching her, I learned how everyone gathered together to enjoy good people and good food. Food changes the mood. My grandma not only cooked for us but for her spiritual family as well.

My grandma has been a devout Jehovah's Witness my whole life. She prides herself in her faith and tries to pass it on to all of us. I remember going door to door with my grandma in all weather. When doors closed upon us, she didn't complain. Jehovah gets my grandma through everything. She doesn't worry because she knows that Jehovah will provide. Because of my granny, I got to know Jehovah. Though I'm not baptized, I still try to make it to the Kingdom Hall when I can.

I'm grateful for my grandma. I can't imagine my life without her. She taught me strength and understanding. This is her tribute from her Original Yellow Baby.



Be Brave and Never Stop Dancing **By Tyjeana Galloway**

It's the late 1950s in a middle-class black neighborhood. In a big house on a hill, a young girl dances in front of her mirror to the tinkling music of an opened jewelry box. For up to six hours a day, alone she would dance; she would dance for pleasure, and she would dance out of pain. No one knew that behind the doors of 5238 Maffett Street in Saint Louis, Missouri, she was enduring ongoing childhood sexual abuse and extreme domestic violence at the hands of her stepfather. She was the second oldest of five children. Tanya was eight years old when her life took a drastic turn after she witnessed her uncle kill her stepfather. Tanya remembers the night vividly. Imagine being eight years old and hiding your baby sister underneath the bunk beds in your room while the adults literally are fighting to the death in the next room.

After the tragedy and due to threats of violence against Tanya's family, they fled to Madison, Wisconsin, an all-



white community up north where they figured they could start over and no one in that dark past would find them. Little Tanya was full of anger and wasn't well behaved in school. Finally, she opened up to a white social worker, telling about things she'd lived through, and that decision backfired. She had broken the family code by telling an outsider family business. That landed her in Mendota Mental Hospital for the criminally insane. She remembers that no one in her family came to visit her. She was put in straight jackets a lot of the time, received electric shock therapy, and was given radiation treatments that resulted in burning her thyroid gland out so she has to be on medication for that the rest of her life.

Years later, Tanya married and had three children. She also became a baptized Jehovah's Witness. But she was still soul searching. After she got divorced in the early 1990s, she began her own odyssey to find herself. She was determined to change her future and succeed no matter what challenges she had to face as a single black mother living at the poverty level.

She started attending MATC in Madison and then began commuting to MATC in Milwaukee by taking the Badger Bus every day so she could earn her degree in Interpreting for Spanish and Sign Language. During that time, her teenagers at home were not on their best behavior; in fact, they were getting pretty wild. She didn't allow that to derail her, and she kept going with the goal in mind to graduate. Every night she had to do at least four hours of homework. She applied for numerous scholarships and finally won the WMWA scholarship from the Jeannette Rankin Foundation. In June 1997 she was flown down to Atlanta for three days to receive the award and the \$20,000 scholarship. When she was there, she remembers being scared and feeling lonely even with the success she'd achieved. She says that prayer got her through those days, and God was with her when she accepted her award. She gives him many thanks, knowing without him she wouldn't have made it. She taught us kids that through education and determination, we can write our futures. She wanted us to begin the dance to break the cycle of abuse.

I chose Tanya as my woman of courage because regardless of what she went through and the negative labels that were placed upon her, she still had a strong desire to succeed. I absorbed her ideas, and I believe that has inspired me and brought me to the Odyssey Program today! So I will leave you with this statement from the woman herself: "Women, be brave and never stop dancing!"





My Woman of Courage Victor Rojas-Mena

“God gives us only what we can handle.” That’s what the women said in my country, Mexico. This story is of one of them. She endured significant obstacles, from taking care of family members without complaint, to taking the high road with her in-laws, to following her passion for agriculture after leaving school.

As the only woman of her siblings, she always had the mother instinct to care for others. Before she finished elementary school, she already was in charge of her four nieces. The youngest was only six months old. Her sister-in-law just left them, and after she left, her brother became alcoholic.

At the age of 18 she got married. Eight months later she was six months pregnant and her husband was killed in a car accident. In a year, she was single, married, a widow, and a mom. Ten years later, she got married again. Because she was married before and already had a daughter, her new relatives never liked her. They always said bad things about her, but she was very confident and knew who she was. She never said bad things about her in-laws to her four children because she did not want them to feel hatred toward them.



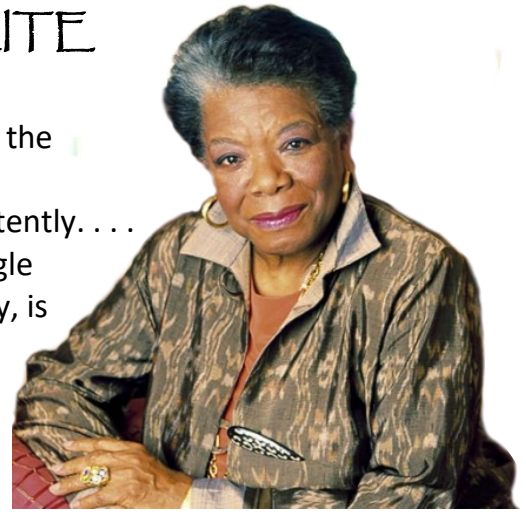
Many say that the enemy of success is failure, but for her the enemy of success is conformity and mediocrity. She only went up to sixth grade in school, but she found a way to teach herself. She was always trying new things to achieve her passion for agriculture, new seeds, or new methods of planting, and she was always encouraging more people to try new things. With new things come new problems to solve. One time the police came to her house asking for her new plants because they looked like weed, but it was only four acres of amaranth.

It’s always a pleasure to see how now as adults, her nieces call her for advice and respect her for what she did for them. When I have a problem with my children or an obstacle with my business, I always ask myself what she would do. When I do not find the answer, I can always call her because she always has time for me. I feel very lucky to call her Mom.

FAMOUS WOMEN WITH THE COURAGE TO WRITE



"Courage is the most important of all the virtues because without courage you can't practice any other virtue consistently. . . . I believe that the most important single thing, beyond discipline and creativity, is daring to dare." — Maya Angelou



"There is a stubbornness about me that never can bear to be frightened at the will of others. My courage always rises at every attempt to intimidate me." — Jane Austen



"I took my Power in my Hand / And went against the World." — Emily Dickinson

"It takes a lot of courage to show your dreams to someone else." — Erma Bombeck



"It takes courage...to endure the sharp pains of self-discovery rather than choose to take the dull pain of unconsciousness that would last the rest of our lives." — Marianne Williamson



"I remembered that the real world was wide, and that a varied field of hopes and fears, of sensations and excitements, awaited those who had the courage to go forth into its expanse, to seek real knowledge of life amidst its perils." — Charlotte Brontë





"When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid." — Audre Lorde

"It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends." — J.K. Rowling



"I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It's when you know you're licked before you begin, but you begin anyway and see it through no matter what." — Harper Lee

"Above all, be the heroine of your life, not the victim." — Nora Ephron



"Risk anything! Care no more for the opinion of others ... Do the hardest thing on earth for you. Act for yourself. Face the truth." — Katherine Mansfield

"I know what I want, I have a goal, an opinion, I have a religion and love. Let me be myself and then I am satisfied. I know that I'm a woman, a woman with inward strength and plenty of courage." — Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl*



"I told myself, Malala, you have already faced death. This is your second life. Don't be afraid — if you are afraid, you can't move forward." — Malala Yousafzai, *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*