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ODYSSEY ORACLE REFLECTIONS



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A Creative Life **By Brandi Whitlock**

The things I like to do creatively are making jewelry, painting, DIY Projects, and arts and crafts. I also want to start sewing. I really get excited when I have ideas. I write them down or draw them out when I want to do a project. I really want to get the materials right away.

I just feel like I'm in my own little world, like I'm on my time and there is no need to rush. I'm great at doing this project, and I'm creating something awesome for someone or myself. It's a masterpiece and everybody likes it and wants me to make them one. How this feeling relaxes me and puts me in a better place! I'm proud of the finished product.

I think my favorite project is making jewelry. I make bracelets and earrings the most. I look at jewelry in the store and then think to myself that I can do this! I just have to make time for me to do this. I get so excited to go to the craft store and get the supplies I need. Sometimes they don't turn out the way I wanted them to, but in someone else's eyes they may love it. I learned that your art doesn't have to look like the norm. When it's different, that's what makes it unique. Even though I don't make a lot of pieces, I enjoy what I do.



I got a lot of my creativity from my mom. My mother, Cheryl, could draw so well! She was so talented and didn't even know it. I don't know if she was told that she was not a good artist or she thought that she wasn't a good artist. My mom showed me a lot of creative things. My mom came from a creative family—her younger sister sews and makes dolls, and my grandfather was a chef and owned his own catering business. My grandfather, who is still driving at the age of 99, would give us all kinds of different food to try out. We lived in Oakland, Calif. My mom went to Art School and always liked to doodle, and she read a lot. So, I picked up a lot of creative things from my mom. My life is very creative. What I mean by that is I do things at the spur of the moment. My life is crazy in a fun way. I have weird ideas, and I do things at the last minute.

I also have a cooking show! Well, not a real one (giggles), but when I cook at home I talk to myself like I'm taping a cooking show. My husband thinks that I'm weird because of the way that I think. I love the way that I think. Why think the normal (boring) way? So, my mind has found something new to try out—sewing! Yes, my mind wanders to different projects and different things at any given moment. Can you imagine wanting something so bad that you can taste it? I want to sew and make my own clothes, and that will be my next creative thing. Who knows, maybe I will have my own clothing line one day.

My mom has taught me a lot about life and just loving what you enjoy. She passed away in January of this year. All the things that she taught me I will continue to pass on to my kids. I will continue to live a creative life in her memory.



Mexican Journey **By Brenda Juarez Cruz**

"Making a big life change is pretty scary. But know what's even scarier? Regret."--
Anonymous

When I was a kid growing up in Mexico, I used to believe that all the decorations for September 16th (Mexico's Independence) were for me because that's also my birthday. My mom and dad would tell me that it was for me. It became like a special thing for me because even though I knew they weren't for me, I still believed that they were. It would brighten my day seeing all the flags, fireworks, and decorations in the streets and hearing music everywhere. I would feel butterflies in my stomach just seeing all this crazy celebration and knowing that it's also my birthday. It would make me feel more alive and happy.

But that all changed once I got here to the U.S. I don't see my people, Mexican people, celebrate it as much as we did back in Mexico. It's really sad because now I don't feel the excitement of my birthday coming as much. Sometimes I even forget that it's time to also celebrate my independence and that it's not only my birthday.

It was a big change in my life. I came here when I was eight years old, and this journey is part of my lifetime story. All I can tell you is that coming to a totally different country, hearing a different language, and seeing the differences from our culture was really scary, emotional, shocking, and sad. Coming to a different state was a big change, a big step for me. I still have family in Mexico and friends that I haven't seen in years now, so of course I don't have the same connection with them that we used to have. We barely talk and we don't know anything about each other right now.

Also the language was a change. Whenever I have a chance to talk to my people in Mexico, they always ask me about some words I say. They say that I'm not speaking fluent Spanish and that what I'm speaking is Spanglish. The loss of connections and language made a big difference in my life. Knowing that I wasn't speaking my first language correctly, the one I used to speak when I was a baby, made me feel really bad and unconfident when it comes to speaking Spanish in front of other Spanish speakers. It was a change that I never even realized was happening.

Some of the differences between these cultures I noticed were in school, community, and technology. Back in Mexico in my school we had to wear uniforms no matter what, and the staff was stricter. If you didn't wear your uniform to school, they would punish you or take off points. The uniform "represented" the school and the



students, even though it had nothing to do with being a student. They cared more about appearances than the actual student. If you were late for school, they would not allow you to go in unless you had a “legal excuse.” That’s how strict they were, and they didn’t play. Also, if you didn’t turn in your homework on time, it affected your grade really badly. In school the little mistakes, like absences or low grades, were like asking them to kick you out. They didn’t give you chances, and they gave up on you easily or kicked you out if you were late on paying the tuition.

It makes me feel sick thinking and knowing that there’s not as much support there as we have here. The community is a lot different. Where I’m from, we get along well unless there is a conflict between the other person and you. Other than that, we’re like family. This is something I really like, and it makes me feel more confident and happy.

I’m glad and thankful that I got the opportunity to come here, live here, and be a part of this community because here it seems like we all have faith in each other and believe in dreams. I have so many opportunities here for school, and it just motivates me to keep on with my education. I love it, and I feel like the luckiest person because of all this help I get.



Perfect Imperfection
By Christopher Villalpando

I chose to write on the inner struggle that I deal with on a daily basis, the constant focus on my progress from day to day. In my eyes, our imperfections as humans are just the opposite: we’re perfect in our own way because there’s no real truth to define perfection. Moreover, our imperfection is perfect. To have the ability to recognize what works and what doesn’t is what’s so beautiful about us. Everything up to date is perfect because through trial and error, we’ve made perfection from the smallest toy to the biggest building. If you look around you, be open minded and ask yourself, how has this or that ever come into being? With that said, we are perfect in our own way.

I try to challenge myself in a vast majority of ways throughout my daily life. I have a purpose for this, and it’s to move closer to a bigger goal. This goal is wealth and being capable of putting my family in a position where they won’t have to worry about money anymore. In turn, I use this same concept in all parts of my life that I can change. In the gym I try to do better, pushing myself farther, longer, and heavier than the last time. Physically pushing myself beyond barriers is always rewarding and helps with my confidence as well.

Mentally is the absolute hardest for me and for humans in general. Everything starts with an idea. To actually put that idea into an action is one thing, but to continue with that idea is a whole other thing. It takes that and so much more sacrifice, discipline and dedication to keep going. A king once said, “If a man was able to conquer himself, he could conquer a city.” To overcome yourself, to sacrifice today’s wants for tomorrow’s needs, is a point of perfection in itself.



I push myself every day to be the best father, son, brother, and friend that I can possibly be. I lead by example so that my daughter can follow in my steps and not fall victim to the system that so many people in our society fall into. One must understand that mentally as a person, we must be prepared and also open-minded to change. Throughout our daily lives this is inevitable, and things as such will deviate us from what we are trying to accomplish—our perfection.



Weight of the World **By DeAngelo Hood**

There are so many aspects of my life that I feel could be better. I really thought that by the age of 26 I'd have it all together. I thought that I'd be finished with college, own a home, and be married with kids. If only life worked out the way we plan it, right? I haven't given up on my dreams and aspirations; it's just taking me a little while longer to reach them, and I'm okay with that. Like everyone else, I've had my setbacks in my life, both personal and ones I've had no control over, but I'm trying my hardest to push through.

When I was at the very young age of 13 or 14, my mother abandoned my three sisters and me. At that moment, I was forced into a parental figure role. Even though we lived with my grandmother and she kept a roof over our heads, she had her own stuff going on. With her divorce from my grandfather and her situation with her boyfriend, she couldn't be there emotionally for us the way we needed her to be. She provided all the necessities; however, some of the things that we wanted were neglected. I could never wrap my mind around the fact that she was getting government assistance for all four of us, yet everything she brought us was secondhand or from Goodwill. She would buy us shoes from Payless, but her boyfriend would have every new pair of Jordan's and two and three hundred dollars worth of weed every month. So I figured by any means necessary I had to provide for my three sisters and me. I started skipping school to shoplift for us so we wouldn't be looked at as poor. I felt horrible doing it, yet I felt it was something I had to do.

So after being let down and hurt by my own family, I developed serious trust and abandonment issues. I don't have a lot of friends because of this. I am quick to throw up a wall, and I'm always on defense. I've even noticed that my shyness and introvertedness comes through when I interview for jobs.

I won't deny I'm a work in progress, and each day I'm striving to be a better me. I'm growing and opening up a little more, and I'm loving it. I am no longer that little boy who felt like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. I no longer have those fears and reservations. I can say that I'm proud of the man I've become, and I can't wait to see what the future holds for me.



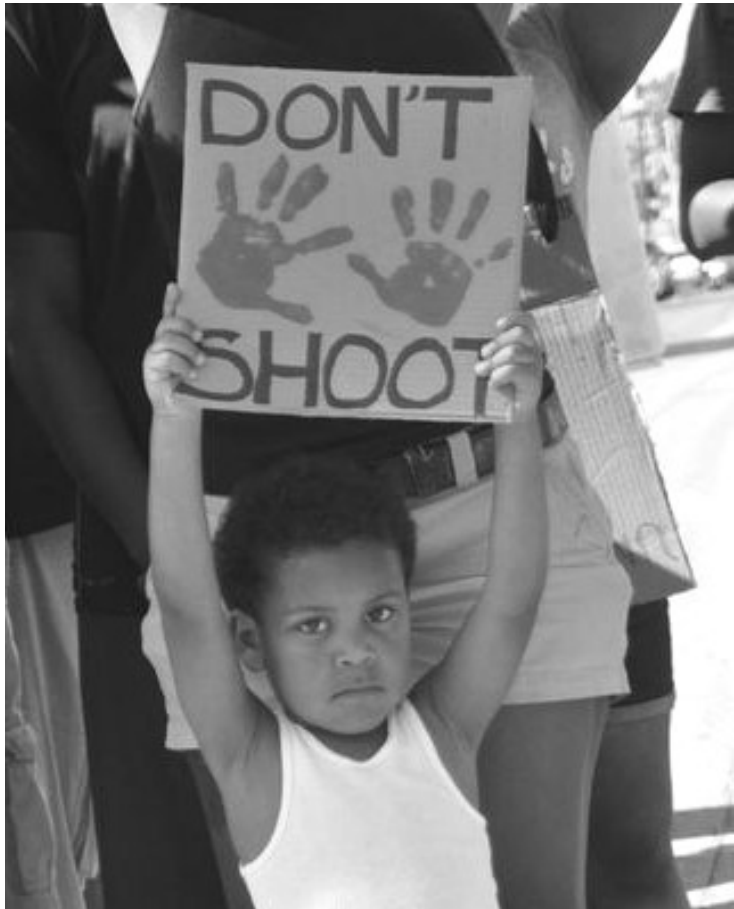


Reflections on Race **By Derek Dodd**

One of the biggest problems facing this community is race relations. There is no strong unity between other races, like the black community, white community, Asian community, Latino community, and the African community. There is a big separation among all races dating as far back as the slavery days. Unity plays a small part in the community.

Racial profiling is a big problem in the community as blacks and Latinos are prime targets. I myself have been a victim of racial profiling, and it still exists today. I've been profiled in the work force, given jobs based on me being a big guy. "Oh, he can be a big help to us and he can lift a lot," they say, not knowing anything about me. It is very stereotypical thinking that a big black man is a good worker. I've been racially profiled by the police when I'm just walking down the street. I'm stared at and asked if I need something or if I am lost. Why in no time at all do I need police help? In the past when I was driving a nice truck, I was followed by the police, having my plates checked out as they were following me. Just being a black man with height and body build makes me a target for police. To say "he's intimidating" is a bunch of bullshit.

I plan to reach out to the community by being active in the community programs, giving help to the ones in need, being a part of re-entry programs for men and women that have been in prison, helping with drug and alcohol issues and with county jail inmates. I myself also went through drug issues, incarceration, and the crooked system of the Department of Corrections here in Wisconsin, especially toward black men. Their goal is to make it hard for black men and Latino men and low class white men to get work or a place to live. Also they make it hard for people with mental illness and homelessness. There is not enough compassion for this need. I plan to be part of the movement and, with God's help, to reach as many people as my heart can. We all will stand before God one day.



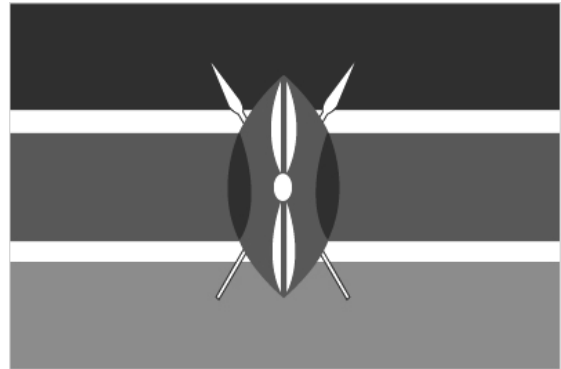


Difficult Journey **By Dorothy Katana**

The journey that my family and I took in 1998 from Kenya to America was very difficult. There were many things that transpired—from the paper work with the embassy to cultural differences to establishing my own self in the new world.

One of the difficulties that we had was the immigration process. At the beginning of the application process, my parents were very happy and were so eager that they sold our house and many of our possessions. Little did we know that there was going to be a terrorist attack on the American Embassy, one of the most tragic events my nation had faced since the revolution and one that would also determine if my family could still leave the country.

Another difficulty that I faced through my journey to America was the culture. The only thing that I knew about the US was from television. We used to watch *The Bold and the Beautiful* at night and assumed that everyone lived in the suburbs and had too much drama, always was polished and dressed lavishly, and hugged and kissed with your mouth open upon arrival in their homes. Mind you, I was eight years old. My, was I in for a shock! Upon our arrival at O'Hare airport, I was the most confused I have ever been. Everyone spoke funny and people were predominantly white.



Leaving Nicaragua **By Heydy Pichardo Reyes**

My transition from Nicaragua to the United States was difficult at first because of the language barrier, the cultural differences, and the fact I was leaving behind what I knew as home and life. I made the decision to come to the United States because I wanted an adventure in a place I had only seen on TV. Many people might say that my decision was crazy, but for me it was a change that I do not regret.

I came to Madison when I was 15 years old to live with my aunt. That was nice at first, but after a while I was not as welcome as I had been before. Even though I do not regret coming to this country, it was still difficult leaving my parents behind. Back home in Nicaragua, parents are the ones that protect you, shape you, and take care of you. When I came here, I realized that not all parents, but some parents, here take the time to raise their kids, educate them, and teach them morals.

After being in this country for a while, I started high school; or, I should say, I started to live in a whole new world. In Nicaragua, high school is just that—high school. It is the place where you go to learn. Teachers back home always said that home is the first school, and that is how it was until I moved here. School here is the place that shapes teens. It seemed like high school here is not just high school; teens try to find an identity. They try to figure out who they are and who they will be. Sometimes they have to worry about school, work, and life. Do not get me wrong—I loved high school. I met new people, and most of my teachers were great to me and went the extra mile to help me. Ms. Price, my English teacher, helped a lot. She allowed me to get my job when I did not know how to drive and did not have a car. Having a job in high school, which I would not have had to worry about back home, shows how high school is different here.

Nothing is as bad as it seems. This country helped me become independent and shaped me into the strong person I am today. I remember crying myself to sleep for a couple months because I missed my parents a lot. After those months, my survival instinct kicked in, and I understood that I had to be strong and move on if I wanted to make it. Many people think I am a cold person for not missing my parents so much, but I see it as survival. Soldiers fall asleep in fear of losing their lives, but they wake up the next day to fight a war.

This country is full of opportunities. I learned how to drive here, and now I have my own car, which I love. I have met great people along my journey that have helped me. Because of those good things, I do not regret being here.



Four Special Sons By Janina White

My four sons are special to me because they are my children. They have their individual reasons why they mean so much to me. They all have different personalities, and that's what makes them unique.

Johntay is the oldest, and he is eight years old. I like to think of him as my backbone. He helps me so much and is very strong. Johntay can handle more than the other kids. He also is a lot like me. I think it's because I had him so young and was finding myself. He is a boy version of me literally. He walks like me, talks like me, even dies for attention like me. Johntay is special for his big heart. Also he knows me better than any one else. He is goofy, social, artistic, and creative. Johntay loves to be in the spotlight, almost the exact opposite of Jaelin.

Jaelin is five and to me he is fragile. He is sensitive and shy. Sometimes I don't expect too much from Jaelin because I know he is so fragile. I think Jaelin knows how I feel, so he sometimes slacks off. Jaelin is special to me because he is cuddly. He makes my heart warm and makes me feel like Super Mom. Jaelin doesn't see a flaw in me. Jaelin lives to compliment me and make me feel special. He also is very smart, and it seems like learning comes naturally to Jaelin. Jaelin will be my baby forever.

Johntrell is two years old, and all I can say is that the terrible twos have kicked in. He is a little Tasmanian devil. He always messes with his older brothers. He also knows that he won't get in trouble for it. Johnntrell is special to me because he brings out my happiness. He keeps me laughing as well as on my toes. He is bossy, loud, funny, and cute. I think that's what saves Johnntrell. His little vocabulary tickles me. He always says, "Oh, my God!" if he can't figure something out, and I wonder where he got that from. It breaks my heart to see him getting older. I want my baby back! Johnntrell is hyper, talkative, demanding, and charming.



Last but not least is my Nova, and he is ten months old. Nova is so adorable. His eyes are so dreamy I'm sure he will get away with everything. Nova is special because of his beauty. His little face touches my heart. I don't think I could ever say no to him. I'm sure he will get away with everything. Also our bond is special because I stuck with breastfeeding. Feeding him is his comfort, security, and nourishment. No one could take that from us. Nova loves cuddling and playing. He is trying hard to keep up with his brothers. I am not sure of his personality, but I am excited to see the outcome.

All four of them symbolize change. They are so young and have their whole lives ahead of them. It's up to me to raise strong successful men. It's a tough job, but I love everyday of it. Whatever the outcome, I will be proud. I will always have a table that seats the four of them so I can cook for them and sit and watch my boys eat. My four boys mean the world to me, and I wouldn't trade them for the world.



What's Real by Jessi Hodges

Please bear with me: this is my first attempt to step outside of my structured box and share something I wrote freelance. Don't get me wrong, I write, but opening up the door to share my personal thoughts and feelings is hard. My opinions tend to be a bit controversial, and I'm not always up for debate. My god positioned me in a place where everyone and everything is challenged. My peers, the demographic I fall in, live on the constant hunt for confirmation and words are never enough. Without facts, you're full of it. And honestly it's just been easier to

re·al¹
/ˈrē(ə)l/

adjective

1. actually existing as a thing or occurring in fact; not imagined or supposed.
"Julius Caesar was a real person"
synonyms: actual, nonfictional, factual, real-life; [More](#)
2. (of a substance or thing) not imitation or artificial; genuine.
"the earring was presumably real gold"
synonyms: genuine, authentic, bona fide; [More](#)

follow format than to argue my real with the world.

I know, right—what is real? For me, all I know is what I've lived—an accumulation of real life consequence and reward. I was born one day and facing tests I wasn't prepared for the next. I

lived without lessons. All I had was a guess and check system, keeping what worked and letting go of all that went wrong, the entire time not knowing my real was only one of many.

Of course, most don't buy it. It's all about what they've been taught: more than one reality doesn't make sense and could never work out. They believe the rest of our experiences only exist on TV—an ugly ignorance creating serious insecurities in those that don't fit the stereotypical mold. Lucky for me, God gave me a strong will and a heart full of fight. I've learned to step outside my zone and respect the next man's stance. I believe if a tree falls in a forest and I'm not there to hear it, yes, it does make a sound. I mean, if I'm not in Africa watching the children starve, do they disappear? No, they're still there hungry and will die.

So what is real? Let's upset Webster and challenge the written definition. For me, each real is unique, crafted in one's personal journey, based on real life impact—a lot of what we feel. For example, a rape victim is going to approach sex differently than a prostitute's daughter raised in a brothel. Is one reality less real? I don't think so! Only ignorance could prevent me from the blessing of others' life lessons. I appreciate all realities. Combined, this is quite the world!

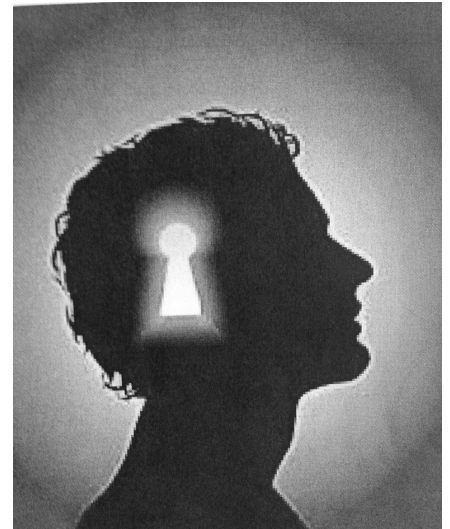


Psychology and Why **By Joseph Lentz**

Inspirational words from Gandhi: "Live life like you would die tomorrow, but learn like you would live forever." I love this quote and believe it can be very useful in psychology because of the high number of suicides in our younger generation. I for one was a part of those numbers. When I was younger I was involved in a lot of bad decisions, from being picked on to doing the picking on, and I have also been the prey of gangs and drugs. All that did was get me in a lot of trouble. As I started that lifestyle, things only got worse. I've spent plenty of time in jail for the cruel stuff I've done to other people and myself. I hurt a lot of people to make myself feel like I was the man, but I was not—I was some kid preying on the weak and being a follower, which made matters worse. I was always in and out of jail and doing a lot of drugs, to the point I almost took my own life because I felt like it wasn't going anywhere. I lost a lot of good people in my life, including my family, because of how I was treating people, and the drugs made it no better. Not only did I hurt the people who cared about me, I was also hurting myself. I felt like I should just end my life, so I took a lot of pills to

ease the pain. I had the tool to my brain. Before I could squeeze, I woke up in the hospital cuffed to the bed. I didn't know what was going on, but I knew that I was going to jail.

While doing my time, I did a lot of reading and soul searching and came across a book about Gandhi. As I was reading this book, I stumbled upon that inspirational quote, and it changed my whole perspective on life. What came to mind while reading this quote was the idea that instead of hurting people and myself, why not help people? That way I can help myself. I came to understand that I have been through a lot, and I'm pretty sure that there are a lot of people, not only kids but adults too, that I can talk to one-on-one and help with their situations. Many cases of suicide are caused by being bullied, but there is a cause and effect. See, the bully picks on the weak, but he or she wasn't always a bully. He or she was once picked on and harassed and that's the cause; now, the effect is that he or she preys on the weak, just as he or she was once picked on and harassed. Now the person being harassed and picked on feels stressed and depressed, and the effect of that makes that victim feel that their life is not worth living.



Because they feel that they have no one to talk to about how they're feeling or what's going on in their life, this is where psychology comes into play. I know for a fact that having a nice, long one-on-one with somebody can relieve a lot of stress and anger, especially when the person you are having the one-on-one with knows how you feel and can relate to your ways and your feelings. Psychology is a means of relief—it can help in ways you can't imagine. It's like a pill for stress, depression and also suicide, and its side effect is hope, comfort, stability and the knowledge you always have someone to talk to when times hit those rough patches.

My name is Joseph M. Lentz, and I believe psychology is a key factor in life. You always have that knowledge that you can talk to someone and they will not only listen—they will give great feedback about life and how you can change and go about situations differently. In conclusion, a mind is a terrible thing to waste, but your body is a temple that should not be misused or abused.



Becoming a Detective **By Kelly Hayes**

I have always known that I wanted to have a career in helping people. At first, I wanted to be a respiratory therapist and get a better understanding of the human body and anatomy. But on April 26, 2014, my plan changed. My son's father beat me up. He broke my nose, fractured my jaw, and tried to kill me. As he was beating me up and dragging me across the floor, he suddenly stopped. I caught my breath and gathered all the energy I had. I ran from house to house, screaming, "Help! Someone please help me, he's trying to kill me!" No one answered their door, but finally a lady who was walking to her car heard me. She came over and saw me with my black eye and bloody nose, torn shirt, and no socks or shoes. She took her cell out and called 911.

The next day after I gave the police my statement, a detective came to my house to talk to me some more. Her name was Detective Armstrong. She asked me some more questions about the incident and I

had to go into details. It was very uncomfortable. She asked about our relationship—how many years had we been together and how long had he been hitting me. There was one time I'll never forget—what the fight was about I don't remember, but what he did to me is unforgettable. He tried to drown me. First he started off in the tub, and I guess I was putting up too much of a fight because he was not able to get a hold of me. But then he pulled me by my hair and put my head in the toilet. My son had a bowel movement and did not flush the toilet. As my son's father was trying to put my head in, he noticed it and flushed it with my head in it. As horrible as this was, telling this story and all the other things my son's father had done to me wasn't that hard, maybe because I had never told anyone. At the end of our conversation Detective Armstrong set my mind at ease. She told me that my son's father was on the run but she was going to get him. Every day she would call me. Even though I was beat up, black and blue, and hurting physically and mentally, when Detective Armstrong would call me it would brighten up my day. I really felt like she cared about her job enough to want to get justice for me.

My son's father was on the run for five days. Every day he would call me and ask me why, why did I call the police? He would say, "You are taking me away from my son," and he would blame me like it was my fault. Then he would beg me to take back my statement, and he would say that he would never hit me again. "Yeah, right," I said. "I've heard it all before."

Detective Armstrong called me and told me that she caught him. I couldn't believe it. Even after that, she would still call me and ask me how I was doing.

I was in an abusive relationship for five years. The detective made me realize that I didn't have to go through that anymore, and that I was stronger than I realized. She made me open my eyes and realize my potential, but she also helped me to understand that I was going through Battered Woman Syndrome. I would like to help someone else like Detective Armstrong helped me. I watch CSI and Criminal Minds and imagine that's me.

I don't regret anything that I went through because if I didn't meet my son's father I wouldn't have my son Keenan. Keenan is my world, my reason for living, my moon and my sun and my stars. He doesn't



know how hard life is or how I get up every day, go to a job I hate, and struggle to pay bills and make ends meet, all for him. When he wakes up in the morning, his eyes are bright and white, full of life, ready to go to school. When I pick him up from school, he is eager to show me what he made just for me or to tell me about his day. Those are the moments that I look for every day. I can't buy him everything he wants, but I make sure that he has what he needs. If I didn't go through the five years of abuse, I wouldn't have the strength and courage to leave, and I wouldn't be in the Odyssey program. It will be a journey where I can reflect on my past and plan for my future.

At first I was mad at my son's father and I hated him—well, I still do. After all, he took five years of my life. But now I am a whole new person; I realized that he broke me down and I'm rebuilding myself. I can do whatever I set my mind on, and my mind is set on becoming a detective.



Away from Here By Lakoyé Buford

I look forward every night to when I can dream, my little place of happiness. Here I am free of fears and thrive in life. I'm far from the quietest person in the room, and I leak confidence. I am away from the mental prison of my thoughts, away from childhood memories of isolation, insecurities, the heartache from my children's father, the stress of being a single mother, and the feeling of being the black sheep of my family. I can be the woman I am destined to be—fearless, expressive, going for what she wants without hesitation and not taking no for an answer. Here I find my voice. I draw people in without trying to push them away. It's like everything I touch here turns to gold. With the world in my hands, I am a power house. Here I find my voice and become alive.

There I am on stage at The Grammy's giving a speech:

Sometimes I have to step back and think where I am because there was a time I stopped dreaming of change. Well, I'd first like to thank God; without him, none of this would even be possible. You continue to bless me even when I don't deserve it. I say this all the time, but I swear it never gets old.

To my two beautiful children, Chance and Fatimah: you know you're Mommy's world, and no one can ever come in between that. There's no love that can compare to the love I have for you guys. Believe that. I work so hard so that you won't ever want for anything or anyone, and I also instill the importance of hard work, dreaming, and faith in you so that you'll be able to stand on your own.

Mom, I love you and the strength I didn't realize you had. You were a single mom, but I can't recall any time you complained about it. I might have not gotten everything I wanted, but I always had what I needed. To my Aunt Jennifer, you are the true definition of a hustler—real talk. You showed me a lot through your actions. You would give up your last dollar for anyone in your family; now that's a big heart. Everything you got you earned and you deserve it. You go, girl! Last but not least, Bay, my grandma: even in this lifetime I'll never go through what you've been through, and I just hope I become at least half of the person you are. As a child I didn't appreciate you, but you showed me love I never knew. Without you I wouldn't be up here now. And at times when I felt like walking off and that motherhood wasn't for me, you told me I could do it. I always felt safe with you.

I just want to tell everyone out there don't give up on your dreams because you can start from nothing and end up with something just like this. Have a blessed night.

In my dreams I'm there, right in the center of everything; trying to change the world around me into a more positive atmosphere. I am at peace and feel full of life. It's not the same boring routine of my everyday reality:



Get up at six, make Fatimah a bottle, change her diaper, then Chance. Throw on some over worn clothes, brush my teeth, open the door for Bay, bump into my mom because she's everywhere at once, rush to make lunch in order not to miss the bus. Then I go to school and right after head to work, then wait for the cab since it's ten o'clock at night. I make it home, rush to take a bath, then struggle to put Fatimah to sleep since she thinks it's playtime all day and night, while my mom takes Chance in the room. I finally get her to sleep after about thirty minutes, sometimes even an hour. I turn on Golden Girls and wait to fall asleep, which is around 3 AM, so I get maybe around three hours of sleep on a good night without Fatimah waking up every time I put her down. My alarm goes off at six just to wake up and do it all over again.

It's the lives I inspire, the changes I make, the hearts I touch when I read one of my poems or bring life into a character in my dreams that's some kind of high for me. I am able to provide for my kids financially on my own and don't have to worry about missing work or school when I can't find a babysitter. They have access to a whole new world where they can explore and see places most only see on television. They get the best of both worlds. Also, I am able to provide for my family, who have always been in the working class. I am important and beautiful to them now.

In my dreams I soar, conquer the world against me, and leave behind a legacy.



My Journee
Latesha Jackson

Long nights and joy-filled days are what I look forward to since the birth of my daughter. The joy she brings to me overpowers my tiredness and sleepless nights. Before she came, everyone always tried to tell me how I would feel and what to expect, but nothing and no one's words are like the experience itself. No one can prepare you for motherhood.

Before I became pregnant I was in a very stressful situation. I had lost my job due to lack of transportation, and my boyfriend was in between jobs, waiting on approval. We were on the verge of losing our home. The stress only brought us closer. All we had was each other. He received a phone call shortly after for a truck driving position, which meant he wouldn't be at home often. A couple days after he was approved, he had to go take a drug test. On our way to the office we stopped to get a pregnancy test for me because I had not received my menstrual period. While we were waiting for them to call his name, I went to the bathroom to pee on the stick. I sat there nervously, waiting. Two seconds later I saw the two blue lines. I was in shock. I went back out to the waiting room where my boyfriend was and showed him the test. His face lit up with joy. I laid my head on his shoulder, and my eyes began to cry out tears of joy and fright. I began to think about the fact that he was going to be gone for weeks at a time. I didn't really know anyone in that small town. It was my first pregnancy and I didn't want to go through it alone.

So I came back to Wisconsin with my family and friends for support, but I did not think my plan

all the way through. I could not afford to live in two places, so I gave up my home in Iowa. Even though we could have caught up on the bills, I let my fear of being alone make me make a huge mistake. I was staying with friends and family. I thought it would be easy to find a new home and a job. But I was wrong. It was harder than I thought, especially since I was pregnant. I wanted to give up, but knowing I would soon be a mother got me through.

On my due date, July 14, 2014, I woke up with pains in my lower abdomen. They felt like menstrual cramps. The pain was bearable, so I held back from going to the hospital. I went in later that night just to be sent back home. They told me I was in labor, just not “active” labor. It was a relief and disappointment at the same time. I was anxious to meet my baby girl and terrified of the labor pains. After being sent home, I was awakened again the next morning, about 1 AM, to more abdominal pain. This time it was 20 times worse than menstrual cramps! I bent over, balled up and crying, trying to bear through the pain until I couldn’t take it anymore. I arrived at the hospital around 3 AM. The doctor said, “I can feel the baby’s head, push!” I panicked. I knew I wasn’t ready, so I refused. Another doctor came in to check my cervix and said, “She’s four centimeters, admit her.” I knew my body wasn’t ready. As they walked me to my room, I thought, this is it—I am about to meet my baby girl.

Seventeen hours of labor without medication went by, and before I knew it I felt my baby girl trying to make her grand entrance into the world. But my body still was not ready. My cervix was still in place. I was stuck just under ten centimeters. The pain became unbearable and I shouted, “Give me the drugs!” I relaxed, and two hours later it was time to meet my new beginning.

July 15, 2014, at 10:05 PM, I became a mother to a beautiful baby girl named Journee. From the moment the doctor laid her on me, I looked into my baby’s eyes and was in love. I knew at that moment my life changed and I had purpose. *I can’t be careless. I have someone to look after. No one is going to take care of my daughter the way I will. She is depending on me to raise and protect her. I cannot be selfish.* All of these thoughts were running through my head. I didn’t doubt that I could do this. I already knew I would do whatever it takes to keep my baby well and safe. Everything I do is for her and because of her. Her cry melts my heart. Her smile brightens my day. I wouldn’t trade her for anything in the world. There is no one in this world that can love me and push me harder than my baby girl—Journee, my beginning to a new journey, our lifelong journey together.





I Slipped through the Cracks

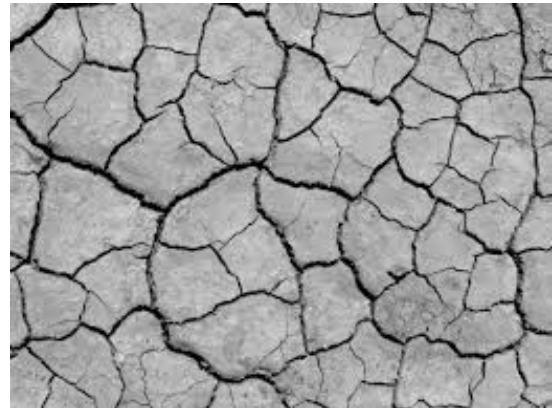
By Lenora Rodin

Slipped through the cracks means to escape notice or lack sufficient attention. It can also mean to get lost or be forgotten, especially within a system. And this is my short, very short, and to-the-point story.

I have always pictured myself as a little person surrounded by giants, meaning that everyone I encountered was better than me. That was because in my mind I did not exist: I had no actual being or importance as a person, and I was invisible to my family and to the world. I've never known love. I have always equated love with sex. The only difference was that when the sex was over so was the love, at least in my mind.

I was born on a hot summer day in July. I came into this world fighting and kicking, and I have been fighting and kicking ever since, fighting to protect myself and kicking to be seen and heard. After all, I had a story, a life, a voice. No matter how little or meaningless it may have been, it was mine. I must have been in the first grade when I came home with my tooth knocked back by a girl in my class named Odessa Rodgers (who is dead now, by the way, and, NO, I did not kill her). I will never forget her name. No one in my home even noticed my tooth—not my grandmother who I lived with, not my mother who showed up periodically, and, hell, not the teacher that I was in class with Monday through Friday. This was the beginning of me slipping through the crack, The Educational Crack.

I learned at an early age to stay out of the way and to be afraid, very afraid. I lived most of my younger years in fear—fear of being hungry, fear of being raped, fear of being beaten, even fear of being killed. All of these fears stemmed from the violence that I saw in my family. I should have been removed from that house, but, once again, I slipped through the crack, The Family Abuse Crack.



When I was growing up, we were not allowed to have problems or complaints, and there was no such thing as depression. DEPRESSION, WHAT! After all, we did not pay any bills, so what gave us the right to be depressed about anything? How Dare You! Forget the fact that your mother and all of your aunts and uncles were either drunk or high on some type of drug. Forget the fact that your mother just left you with her mother who showed you NO love in any kind of way. Forget the fact that you were abused as a child and when you came to live with your grandmother you lived in constant fear. I could go on, but I think that the message is clear. I slipped through the crack again, this time The Crack of Un-Diagnosed Mental Illness.

Yes, I am an example of a person who slipped through the cracks of life, but I have started on the path of correction so that some of the cracks that I slipped through can be closed and never opened again.



The Scariest Trip of My Life

By Margarita Cid Luna

My mother was running away from an abusive relationship, so she took my brother David, who was 16 years old at the time, my four-year-old baby brother, and me—I was 12 years old. We used to live in a village all the way south of Mexico City, with all dirt roads. There were about ten houses, and all were owned by my family members. The houses were made of bricks, and we did have electricity but no running water. We had a couple of dogs, cows, and donkeys. It was hard to leave our house and our family, especially my grandmother. I knew it was going to be the last time I saw her. As I was saying my goodbyes, I remembered all the sleepovers at her house, and how we used to lie in bed and talk about life and about my mother when she was little. My heart broke into a million pieces when I saw her crying. I hugged her and didn't want to let go. We took the bus from my village to Mexico City, and I cried the whole way there. I cried until I had no more tears.

From Mexico City we took a plane to Agua Prieta. It was the first time I had been in a plane, and it was scary but also exciting. When we got to Agua Prieta, it was a very hot summer night. My mother talked to two guys who were about 30 years old for a while, and then we took a taxi to a hotel. It was a small, old-looking building with small windows, and we stayed overnight. Then the next night there was a very strong thunderstorm. My mom woke us up a little after midnight and dressed us up in dark-colored clothes so it would be harder for the border patrol to see us in the dark. She said, "It's time." I was very scared and felt butterflies in my stomach as we walked out of the hotel. There were more people waiting with the guys, and we walked about two miles into the woods. I could hear frogs and crickets and some other animal whose sounds I had never heard before, but I was too scared to ask what they were.

As we were walking, I could see a helicopter in the sky. It was the border patrol, so the guys told us to lie on the ground, which was still wet from the earlier storm. We got up and walked a little more before we got to the highway and ran across. I didn't know it, but we were in the US at the time. Then a white van came and picked us up. There were at least 15 of us all piled up, and it was very hot. I was sitting right next to my mom as she was holding my baby brother. He looked scared. I looked at him and smiled, trying to make him feel better. We drove about one hour before we arrived at a house in



Douglas, Arizona. There were more people there from different places, like Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico. We waited there until they bought our plane tickets to Chicago. When we were on the plane, I sat with a stranger—she was a white lady with blonde hair and blue eyes. She was speaking English, a language that I had only heard on TV, so I closed my eyes and acted like I was asleep. When we got to Chicago and I finally saw my brother's face, I cried—but this time it was because I was happy.

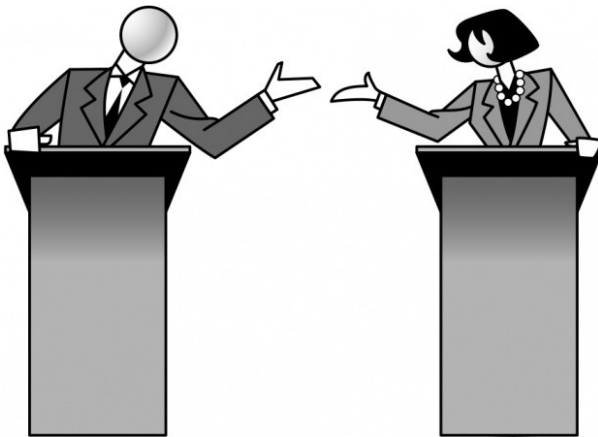


Educated Debates

By Matthew Kruger

Educated debates are always positive for the mind. When I think about this sentence, I feel like it has more meaning than what's on the surface. What if I told you that having a simple conversation with someone could open your mind to things you never thought possible? Having educated debates can do the same thing. Let's break down that first sentence. *Educated*: Going into a debate, I like to make sure that I am, in my own opinion, fully knowledgeable about the subject of debate. *Debate*: An argument, a controversy, and retorting statements are a few things that come to mind. *Positive for the mind*: I think that any kind of learning is always positive for the mind. An educated debate can be extremely helpful when trying, or not trying, to learn.

What is an educated debate? Well, first there has to be a subject that people have a difference of opinion about. A debate I always seem to be in is why the Packers are a better football team than another team. My knowledge of why the Packers are better is based on statistics. When my counterpart doesn't have reasons or, in my opinion, valid points as to why their team is better, the educated debate becomes an argument with no real meaning. If the other party has valid reasons or is knowledgeable about their opinion, then I like to listen. And when I listen, my mind is wide open to new ideas and knowledge.



How is an educated debate positive for the mind? It comes down to learning. In my opinion, listening to your adversary is a great way to learn. Listening to them is just the surface. Your brain is now learning the other party's studied knowledge. Your adversary has formed his or her own opinion, and to be able to acknowledge and accept that is one of the many things that is positive for the mind. I never used to accept anyone else's opinion. My brain was concrete in the sense that I knew what I knew and that was

it. I used to attend an alternative high school. Had I completed this program, my career options would've been endless. My counselors had a lot of pull with the trade community. I could've landed any trade I wanted and had my education paid for. But in my mind, I was only there to graduate high school. They tried to tell me to stick with it and gave me endless reasons as to why I should've, but my mind was concrete. I did obtain my HSED, but I was eventually kicked out of the program. Had I just been open minded, I could've grown into something more. I guess I should've listened.

Another way to learn is pretty obvious: study. Doing research on the topic helps you get a better understanding of the subject of debate and gives you reasons as to why your opinion is

the way it is. Who, what, when, where, and why are all essential questions to ask when researching any topic. If you can answer all of those questions before a debate, you're in good shape. Listening and learning, or learning while listening, are just a couple things that happen to your mind during a debate.

What else happens to the mind during a debate? At some point, emotions will come into play. You could get angry when someone says something you don't like. You could get happy when you get your point across. The trick is to control your emotions; don't let your emotions control you. Learning to control your emotions during a debate is positive for the mind. It leads to growth. Growth is extremely positive for the mind, if you allow it to happen. I've been in numerous arguments with my ex-girlfriend where my emotions took over. Things get said that shouldn't and things get said that should but not in the right manner. Not having control of my emotions is a big reason as to why we broke up. It's not healthy for either party to let emotions control the debate. I now acknowledge and accept that I was letting my emotions control me, and I'm ready to learn and grow. Looking back on that and many other closed-minded situations, I've learned that opening my mind is a natural high.

Finding out about The Odyssey Project was like hitting the jackpot. For years now, I've thought that I should get back to stimulating my mind. I tried once, some years back, but to no avail. Doing nothing but memorizing someone else's knowledge wasn't giving me the fix I needed. At Odyssey, I can challenge what I already know with what someone else already knows. Be it pupils or the people I study, the knowledge is there for the taking. An educated debate doesn't have to be an argument or even a debate. It can be as simple as a conversation or you can make it a wisdom war. Either way, learning something new is always positive for the mind.



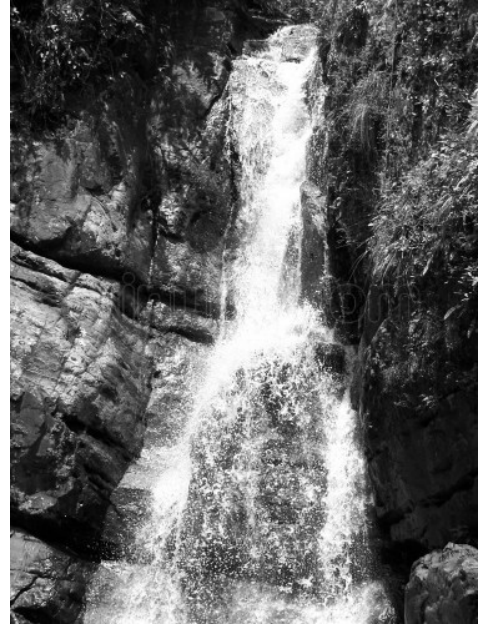
My Favorite Place!

By Melissa F. Dominguez

Hmmmm, my favorite place, I have to say, is a waterfall in Puerto Rico. When I was 17 years old, I was living with my Grandmother Fela (she's my mom's mom) in Cibao, Camuy, Puerto Rico. My grandfather had a stroke and passed away, so I flew to Puerto Rico for the funeral. While visiting for the funeral, I was worried about my grandmother being alone, so I decided to stay with her to make sure that she would be ok. I wanted to get away from Chicago because there was so much going on living in a city that has gangs—having to worry about what colors not to wear, where you can and cannot go because of the fear of getting jumped. I had to help raise my sister, having so many responsibilities that I had no time to be a teenager. It was nice being able to enjoy some time to myself.

I grew up in Puerto Rico so I already had friends there. I went to the same school I did when I was little so everyone knew who I was, and even the staff knew me because my grandmother was one of the lunch ladies (cooks) at the school for many years.

One day all my friends and I decided to go to a river in Vega Baja that has a waterfall. That Saturday, Dalila, Eliezel, Joel, Hector, Carlos, Abimael, a few other people, and I met up. It was so good seeing my friends again after so many years. We all acted like I had never left the island. We were all so close that it felt like my family was here. The trip to the river was so much fun. We laughed, listened and sang to the music, and told jokes—normal stuff teenagers do.



I thought it was going to be a breeze to get there but, nooooo, we had to climb a small mountain, walk through a small forest to get there on a really, really HOT day. UGH!!!! Let's just say that I still have scars on my legs from all the branches and wires. Finally, we got to the river and I was so excited because I had never done anything like that before without an adult around. I was a little disappointed at first because I didn't see the waterfall at this point. It was a little further down from where we were.

When we got there, it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I cannot describe into words the beauty that I had witnessed. The way the sun shone through the mountains, the water was the perfect temperature; the falls were not hard to stand under. The water moved smoothly through the stones. All the beauty combined just blew my mind. I had never seen so much beauty in one spot before. Even though I had been to many beaches, rivers and lakes before, this one was by far the prettiest of all!!!! We all had a blast enjoying this beautiful waterfall. We had a picnic with lots of food; we listened and danced to the music. The day was perfect!!!!

I got to go a few more times before I left Puerto Rico to come back to the States. I haven't been able to visit my Beautiful Island, but I hope that I get to visit soon. Who knows, maybe I can take my family there for a good time. Let's just hope I remember how to get there and we don't get lost Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Hopefully my family will enjoy the beauty as much as I did—and the water, too. I hope that by the time we get to go to Puerto Rico it's still there.



Caring
By Michelle Conley

The crazy thing about life is that I've always expected things to go wrong. Growing up as a child, imagine living in a nice home, where both parents work and life is great. You don't even know what a struggle feels like because both of your parents see to it that you have everything you need.

I lived in a blue two-story house with my mom, dad, sister and two brothers. Monday through Friday, Mom would walk us to school across a busy street while

sipping on a glass of hot coffee. We had a German shepherd puppy named Pup-Pup who was as smart as a human and very clever. The older we got, the dog began to walk us to school. He would cross the busy street when it was safe and watch us walk into school. When the bell rang at 3:00 pm, Pup-Pup was waiting patiently to take us home. Well, one day our house caught on fire while we were out doing family night. Friday family night out is where we chose a place to eat. No matter where it was, we ate together as a family. Truth is, the house burned down to the ground and we lost everything. At the time I was about eight years old and no one wanted to give us a place to stay. Ever since then, I vowed to give back what my parents gave me. I would work hard just like them, always give hugs and do unto others as they do unto me.



So we moved away, started from the bottom, and moved into a shelter in Madison, WI. The shelter didn't want my dad to stay because he was a man, and we refused to be split up. Mom and Dad started doing temporary jobs here and there, and it seemed like we were getting somewhere.

What I did to cope with this situation was always to remind myself that I shouldn't let the things I can't control bother me. I never told anyone because as long as my family and I were together, we fought these tribulations together. My parents were always reassuring, and I made sure I constantly reassured my younger siblings. Even though we were struggling, we still were able to smile. It was like, "Laughing in the midst of a storm!" But no matter what, I always noticed that Mom and Dad never gave up. So I started volunteering. When I was old enough to work, I did just that; but my parents only let me if I kept my grades up. So I started going with my sister-in-law, who is a nurse, to work when she would do homecare routes, and I jumped in to help out. That's when I knew being a C.N.A. was the job for me.

My peers weren't as mature as I, nor did they have a plan ... a.k.a goals. So I had my mind focused, wrote my plan down, and pursued it. Giving up was not an option! Well, my coworkers and patients loved me! They loved my ambition and how compassionate I was. Family members of patients would come in just to tell me how much they admired how respectful and patient I was with their loved ones. And the patients would tell me great stories and constantly tell me how much they appreciated me. As a C.N.A I used to take care of older people with dementia, and the family saw no need to visit them at all. The patients usually didn't remember them or their minds only remembered the past. The elderly I took care of were also aware that their family put them in a nursing home because they didn't have time for them or were waiting for them to die to receive their fortune. You would think a child would always care for their parents because their parents never gave up on them.



Caring comes easily for me. Even if not appreciated, it means a lot to me. So to see patients smile is rewarding enough for me. That motivated me to be a great nurse and reassured me that I was in the right field of work. I was right where I belonged!!



Loving the ‘Can’t Get Right’ Kids

By Mikiea Price

I love all kids, but my favorites are the “can’t get right” kids. Daily I see kids get misdiagnosed or have a rough point in life, unfortunately dealing with things that they shouldn’t even have to know how to process. And, of course, we see a major behavior change in school, such as violence, not doing homework, sleeping, or barely showing up. When I see behavior like this, I try to engage more with the student—show concern, encourage the kid, and hope that he will trust me enough to fill me in on what’s going on. Sometimes I can kind of see what it is already, just because I came from where this child is at.

If we have another staff who has the educational background but can’t relate to these situations, they, nine times out of ten, are going to lose this child in the whole messed-up system—the “no child left behind” system. Put a label on them . . . and what’s going to happen to those kids? They never go away, they get old, and now they are neighborhood drug dealers, thieves, murderers, etc. What happens when we get about 30 of them in the same community? Unfortunately, crime rates go up, and small cities and towns aren’t safe anymore.

What could have happened differently? We could have figured out what was going on with the child, set standards, goals, and consequences. Each child is different, and what works for one child doesn’t work for all. Even as a parent, you find yourself putting more energy and time into one child than the other. That is what makes us have so much experience and knowledge. When I work with kids, I always stay in the moment, with expectations I know they can handle. Since I know them, I don’t handle every child the same. I really believe I and others can save our future kids, but we cannot be afraid of change. Kids sense fear in us, and they know if they are loved and if we really care.

I was given an assignment to work with this kid who was labeled a “heavy hitter.” Those are the kids I love the most. But once I’d read his IEP, I was kind of second-guessing this assignment. He was known for attacking staff and teachers and was very hard with accepting authority, so they said. But I kept reminding myself that this was a second grader, a baby, so how hard could it be? I remember the first day I met him. I was looking for this monster. He was so small and cute. He was very conscious of who I was and that I would be working with him one-on-one. I noticed that he was a jokester, he was friendly, and he was very protective of his friends and belongings. This let me know that this kid was not so bad and that I needed to help him deal with himself.

The first week was really “all about him,” but I set standards and expectations which he seemed to clearly understand. What really stuck to me the most was the option of not participating in the class. But he knew with me that it was not even an option. There were no ifs, ands, and buts about that. When I got to know this kid, I realized he wasn’t a monster at all. All he needed was some love. That was the easy part for me! I worked for four months with this kid. I gave him hugs and I let him know daily that I appreciated him and that he was doing a wonderful job. I went out of my way to buy him nice things (such as socks and clothes) and also things to make him feel good about himself and fit in with his peers. I made sure that he smelled good so he could feel good. So many teachers would approach me and say, “Ms. Price, you’re doing an outstanding job! What are you doing? He is a totally different child.”

The school year was really rough, and he had an episode at least three times a day. I was shocked because I had never seen this kid even get smart with an adult. One day my kids were sick so I couldn’t

come to work. When I returned, they told me he had a fight on the playground, cursed the lunchroom teacher out, went to the safe room for the afternoon, and threw desks. I was so shocked and couldn't believe it. I asked myself what could have possibly gone wrong. When I greeted him, he was so happy to see me. I said, "How was your day yesterday?" He replied, "Terrible." I asked, "How so?" He said, "Everybody blames me for everything that I don't even do." I told him that he had to fix what happened the day before with an apology note or face to face. Then I told him that a note means much more to me because you put the time in to sit and write it. When he gave the notes to the teachers, their responses were, "Whatever." I saw that they had lost their purpose and that they were taking this kid's behavior to heart. Maybe they were burned out by this point. . . .



The teachers were done—they had no more energy for this kid. And the kid knew it. So they had a staff meeting about him and his progress, and they wanted to know my thoughts. I was really nervous to tell them because the way they responded to him affected his behavior, too. As they talked and talked, I said, "God help me explain this kid and don't let me come off as protecting him and offending them." I remember that they kept saying, "You know more, Ms. Price, because you work one on one with him." When I heard myself respond, I just gave it to them the way I saw it. I said, "Somewhere down the line we lost our purpose—to save and help this child. This kid is homeless and having a very difficult time accepting and handling this, which is to be expected for an eight year old. You all are so used to ignoring him that this is his way of getting attention. He knows that there is only so much you all can do because you guys have 20 other students. He is aware that he can act out and be able to play with the iPad all day. He doesn't have any goals, and he doesn't feel good about himself or his situation." Then a teacher responded, "That sounds like his mom's problem." I said, "It sounds like our problem. When we hit that time clock, we have a purpose. We need to leave yesterday exactly where it is—yesterday. I've noticed that when he comes to your class he spends 20 minutes at his desk. It's not because he's being defiant; it's because it feels good to him to have something that he can call his own. When he doesn't eat his snack and puts it on his desk, he wants to take it home because his meds don't allow him to eat. You set him off when you throw it away after he asks you not to. It is a time that, as teachers, we need to think whether he is being naughty, or if we are picking the wrong time to use our authority."

I asked them to step outside the box, put themselves in his shoes, and ask how they would like to be treated. "Do kids have feelings? What would you long for after a long day of work? How does love help your life daily? Imagine getting up everyday and not knowing where your next meal is going to come from, wondering where you're going to sleep when you leave work. All I've been doing is giving this kid a lot of hugs and love, things he needs—guidance, goals, and very clear expectations of how I expect him to behave in school—, and it made a difference. I give him praise, I recognize him, and I let him know that he is going to be fine." I also told the teachers, "This is our future. The older they get, the harder it gets. Right now he is still a baby—there's hope. This kid won't go away. He'll get older and harder, and we are helping him fail when we give up. It takes a village to raise a child, and if everybody would remember their purpose, everything will fall in line for the best. Every child is different. Call home, talk to parents, and make sure that you all are on the same page. That is my outlook on what I've seen."

It felt good to speak up for a child that needed to be spoken up for.



Feelings by the Water

By Myisha Ellis

I love to be close to the water so I tend to stand close to the edge—surrounded by the lake, land, and trees; the squirrels leaping from tree to tree, up and down chasing each other. I look at the waves and the fish that swim with them; the calm sky on bright, sunny, warm days. I imagine myself falling in and allowing the current to carry me where it would like to take me and the wet, crisp, cool feeling I have washing over my body.

I think about my past and my past relationships. I worry about the challenges I face ahead, and the best way to get to my solutions. Do I take my time and deal with each problem one by one, or do I run from them as if they won't affect me in the future? The feelings of anger, sadness, happiness, joy, fear, and being naïve are all bottled up inside me like a shaken soda, and when I open up I explode. The calming touch of a gentle hand of love and care, the anger of not knowing how to fix my worries, the passion I have built up inside me and the person I would love to give it to—what holds me back from loving myself as a whole? Is it my appearance and the way I carry myself? Is it my hair and the way I wear it? Or is this all in my head? My insecurities are eating away at me like termites on a fresh wooden house. I ask myself how I could be better and make my life golden. Can I be someone with a strong and firm outlook on life, pride in my origins, statuesque with my character but not conceited, the confident person I know I have inside me, able to release my doubts and express my feelings as I do on paper or a text message?

I look at the trees and wonder if I was a bird how I would soar over land and the water. Would I be able to distinguish between the water and sky if there was no land? Would it be safe if I landed and built a home or would it be better for me to live in the trees? Could I escape danger just by expanding my wings, and would I survive a secret attack? Would I be able to cry? Would I have the feelings and emotions that humans do? Would I be able to talk to them, or would I just freak them out? Could I be something more than what I am today—a joyless woman with trust issues, worries, and wonders? Am I just that—a broken woman wondering if my love is real and passionate enough to be with the one I love, a woman who has been beaten, trampled, lied to, shut down, belittled, and misused? Can someone help me find the answers, or is it that all my answers lie inside of me?

Then my phone rings and on the other end I hear a deep, soothing voice that I'm not used to hearing, a calm voice that has compassion and understanding, completely different from what I'm used to hearing. Before him, it was a voice that was yelling at me and was harsh to my ears and was cold to the nerves, asking me where am I and why I haven't called and why I didn't tell him where I was going, a controlling man that only wanted me to be a heartless doormat and a helpless maid. This voice I hear is of someone who really loves me and wants only the best for me and to see me prosper and grow—a tall, dark, handsome man that shows me courage and strength; a man that lives to bring joy and happiness to all his family and friends, a voice of reason and honesty. No anger or sadness fills my heart when I hear this voice. It feels like love is calling me and asking when am I going to be home, and how long am I going to be at the lake. Not long, and love tells me good because he has a lot of love and appreciation he would like to share with me. I say ok and I'm on my way to him. I call him my honey bunny because he's so sweet that bees wouldn't want to catch diabetes just sitting next to him.

As I start home, I see a couple walking, holding hands, and smiling at one another with love and tenderness. It brings a tear to my eye because I remember when that was me and how it felt to be deeply in love, how it feels to have that feeling again after being broken down to feeling like nothing. That pleasant voice makes me believe there's hope for me and my heart. I begin to wonder if that person will cherish me until the day I die, and if he would care if I left. Would he be willing to stay and fight for us or would he just consider me unlucky and miserable? Would he find me to be different and want to marry me? My emotions are feelings, but sometimes it's just not enough to conquer this water I lie in, hoping that they will stop the current from carrying me away from love and passion. I go to the lake to clear my mind and find answers for my flaws and issues, to find a solution to my problems. Just by seeing the lovers on the beginning of my journey home gives me hope, and the cars flying by makes me think that definitely this is going to be the journey I am going to love to take. Only time will tell.



A Backpack Full of Dreams **By Natalia Rodríguez Miramontes**

It's been ten years since I left my house in México, with my backpack full of dreams, to reach and look for new opportunities. Some memories I've forgotten, but what I will always have in mind is how important it was for my parents that I received an education. They used to talk about education all the time, trying to show us how necessary it is. Why all this insistence? I think I was young and ignorant, and I did not realize that they were correct. Their reasoning was based on their experiences, and with education we would achieve a much better quality of life. We would be ready for an uncertain future and knowledge would guarantee us a better future—professionally, intellectually, or economically.

Even though my parents were full time workers and had busy schedules, they gave us quality time and were always involved in our education.

Why, if all these reasons are definitely certain, did I not listen to any of their advice? We as young adults should not miss out on opportunities.

After high school I stopped my education. I thought that by working two jobs and making money I was on my way to achieve my American dream. But I was wrong, and I should not have settled for only making money. Did I forget the main reason why I came to the US? And what was I thinking when I stopped my education?



I felt I was not ready to continue, and I was scared to fail. My reasons have no justification. I was not able to continue because of my poor English, I was scared of looking like a fool, and the worst reason ever was my fear of commitment.

My best recommendation for any student is to never be afraid to face adversity and accept a challenge. We have to fight to achieve a goal, and no matter how long it will take to get it done, the reward will be enormous.



Memories of Cherokee, Iowa
By Nissa Uriostegui

As you drive into Cherokee, in the northwest corner of Iowa, you will find a small town full of friendly people and tons of personality. On the left hand side you'll find Spielman's, a restaurant, bar, and hotel. I can remember one year we went out for Christmas and stayed in the Spielman Hotel. It seemed so small, almost like the walls were closing in on you, and it had this funky smell to it. However, more than anything it had a story to tell of many travelers that had passed through over the years.

Across the street lived my Great Grandma Hazel. Her house was the best house in town. It was full of old family pictures and afghans, and it always smelled of freshly baked goodies. My Great Grandma's was that place where you could relax as you watched her crochet or bake. She was very old fashioned and wore either a dress or a skirt every day of her life, even when she worked in her garden. She was a very religious woman and attended church weekly with my Grandma.

I can remember the first time I was allowed to walk down to my Great Grandma's from my Grandma's house. I was nervous, but I felt so proud of myself. When I got there, she was pulling out fresh chocolate chip cookies. She had me sit at the kitchen table and served me three with cold milk. Then we went to the living room, where we watched *The Price is Right* before I laid down for a nap on her couch on her four-season porch. I can remember how comfy and cozy it felt; it just felt like home.

Down the block lived my Grandma Marie and Grandpa Dean. Whenever I walked into that house, it felt like a security blanket had been wrapped around my shoulders. The strong presence of Grandma Marie's independence and strength always surrounded her, which made all of her family feel safe. My grandma was a beautiful woman inside and out. She was a bigger woman and quite tall, and she had this laughter that could bring warmth to any room. She was a big believer in family and keeping us together.

I can remember one year when we went out for Christmas, when I was about eight or nine years old. The whole family was squeezed into



their simple one-bedroom home. As you walked in, you could hear the happy chatter of family and the aroma of my grandma's famous chili, which would have led you straight to the kitchen, where you would have found all the guys playing a card game at the dinner table. It was that Christmas I realized that it was my Grandma that was the stitch that kept our patches together in our family quilt. It was from that point on that I strived to be more and more like her.

If you drive further into town, you will find one of Iowa's mental hospitals, which is beautiful and scary at the same time. The buildings were beautifully constructed and stand mysteriously on acres of land. It looks like it could be a university or college up there instead of a hospital.

But even with all of its beauty, when you step through the front doors you are almost guaranteed to get goose bumps. You get this presence of something greater walking through the hallways. Everything still has that 60's era vibe, and it reminds you of an old horror movie.

If you head in the opposite direction, you will find yourself in the downtown area of Cherokee that is full of shops and diners that are as unique as the owners. My favorite place has to be Carry's Café, where you'll find all the local townspeople sitting on stools with the town's gossip while drinking coffee. The plates are piled high with more food than any one person could eat, my personal favorite being the "Hot Beef Sandwich."

I remember the first time I stepped foot into that café. I was with my Mom and Aunt Mary; I was taken back into time. From the floors to the tables, it looked like something from the 1950's.

People wonder why Cherokee, Iowa, is my favorite place to go. Why not Chicago, New York City, or San Diego? It's such a simple, boring town with nothing to do. It doesn't have the ocean, Broadway, or variety. My family, my roots, and my heart are in that town. It's where I was born and where my best memories were made. My grandparents and my great grandma have passed away and all my family has moved away from Cherokee, Iowa, but it's still home for me and always will be.



Then and Now
By Nitia Johnson

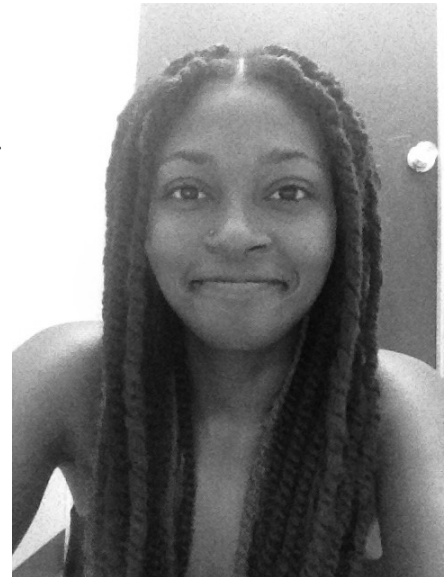
Hectic: this word could truly sum up the majority of my life. The person I used to be is completely different than who I am now and who I will become. I have had good times, so I won't make it seem like it all was bad, but slowly things got worse as each day went by. Along the way, I went through the woes of life; things that, at the time they occurred, I had only seen in movies or read about.

Naturally, at the beginning of high school, I still had my innocence. I was the oddball out of all my crew of comrades. Wild and vibrant, outgoing and beautiful, I was a people person and always full of energy. They even teased and mocked me, playfully, because of this and the fact that I was the smart, goofy virgin. This was not the norm for our southern roots, where girls get pregnant at 13, but for some reason I was the odd one. When they teased me, at the moment it was happening and in my head, it seemed funny so I usually laughed along. Usually after it had time to sink in, my heart and spirit didn't feel good. So I began writing, not a diary, just notes. When I'd go back to read the notes, I then realized how their teasing affected me. I felt corny and nerdy, and I was embarrassed, especially as the school

year went on and every one of my friends as well as other girls at school started getting boyfriends. I wondered why no one was asking me out or to school dances. I thought, am I not pretty? This made me sad and kind of shy, but I eventually found relief when I realized it was because everyone was having sex. It was only because I wasn't available for enjoyment like other girls, not because I was ugly or stank.

This realization got me through a couple years of peer pressure because I began to understand it was a sex thing. Everything revolved around sex. I wasn't ready, and I decided to let the other girls do that while I kept doing me. Everyone around me was always so eager for the weekend to come. You would think they all were running for first place in an event. My environment at home didn't give me much comfort either. We never had all utilities on at once, and we always had to sacrifice, either water with no heat for the month (my favorite), or to feel the warmth of having central heat but no way to wash off the day's events (my brother's favorite). Despite this, I remained in school.

Meanwhile, everyone was partying and kicking it. I, 15 dying to hit 16, was out applying for jobs. I was so nervous and anxious for someone to call me with good news that I sat by my phone all day, checking it constantly. I did this as if I was a military soldier's wife after learning her husband has become a casualty fighting overseas. About a week after my birthday, still excited about turning 16, my hard work and dedication during the summer had paid off. I was called into Wendy's, a local fast food restaurant, for my first interview, which would soon become my first job. Wendy's was great. It was my second home, my co-workers were like family, and it was a place for me to escape my troubles at home. I could use my job as excuse for not going out with my classmates and getting into trouble, which I did on several occasions.



Things were going well. I liked working and being my own person, and I even met a nice guy. He was cute and had this dreamy Jamaican accent. Throughout the rest of the summer, we developed a close friendship that went well on for half of my junior year in high school. He was a well-kept secret from my dad because of his age. I was more than ok being his friend, even though he was about six years older than me, but my mom and friends seemed to not mind. He was so cool and harmless that my mom let him stay over while she went out of town for the night. I thought it was so cool of her. I was so excited that I got out board games and movies for us to watch; this was my best friend.

Little did I know that by the end of the night my whole body and mind would go into shock and not have the ability to process what was happening in front of me through my weeping eyes. I, the sweetest person alive, was being pinned down, raped, and stripped of my innocence and trust. That whole day went haywire. I became a rape victim, him a rapist, and me left poor and lonely. For him, life probably went on as usual, but I was left in bad shape.

As you can expect, I didn't want to do anything. I resembled a snail; I pulled away from everyone. I was mad at everyone. I began to dread the fact that I still had 1.5 years left of high school; I began to hate school. I could no longer talk to or have anything to do with my friends. They cared about me and knew something was wrong. I hated them for asking. I would think *I can't tell you this* as I would pull the strings of my hoodie to cover my entire head and the majority of my face. I didn't want anybody to see me, and

this hurt me. I started with all A's; then I would wake up some mornings and not want to leave my room, and wonder why I had an F or two on my report card. It nearly killed me to see a bad grade on my report card. I eventually took notice that my parents never seemed to be interested in school, and I started to give up too. More and more I stayed in my room, stopped eating, and, even with my asthma, started smoking. I started going to school maybe twice a week and losing my real friends in the process.

I had myself a deep depression that came with feeling a sense of anxiety and paranoia almost all the time. I wasn't the same. I didn't react or respond to the issues or everyday scenarios in the same way. I had been obsessing for years about what I could have done differently that night, and it bothered me. So I began to seek and crave a better life. I would have moments where I would go out and think I feel better, only to have flashbacks, thoughts, and memories run me right back home. I was being engulfed in my feelings. Slowly I pulled out of this and got reconnected with an old classmate of mine. He hardly remembered me, but I remembered him. He was unique. He came around, we spent time together, and overall enjoyed each other. I not once thought about the past when I was with him. He made me forget everything that had ever happened to me that night. I was in love, and then I was pregnant.

We both moved to Madison, hoping to stay together and have a family—something neither of us had ever had. Through my journey with him, I have gone through domestic violence and then on to be pregnant and homeless in the heart of Wisconsin. I just so happened to have a mentor's number, whom I'd met when I got to Madison, and I turned to her for resources. I was 21, homeless, and pregnant, and I walked everywhere. She never judged me and was always on my side. She was there for me when I had my first child, Xayana Symone. She was there to help me get on the right track.

When Xayana got here, she made me feel like everything was going to be all right. We are best friends. She has changed my whole perspective on life. Back then I would allow people to get to me—something someone said or did could affect my life and mood. Now that I have my daughter, things don't seem as bad. She shines a bright light when she smiles and winks those big brown eyes, and it's impossible for me to frown.

All in all, I am a mixture of then and now. Deep within, I am still the same in some ways. My kind heart, which never changed, gives me faith and hope that parts of the person I was can be redeveloped. I miss the days when I felt carefree—you know, like I was weightless on the moon—and, yes, sometimes I wish I could go back. I will never forget or underappreciate the trials and struggles. In fact, I'm quite grateful, for they strengthened and prepared me. Ultimately, over time, they have led me to who I am now. Until recently, I felt lost—like I had no control over my own life. I'm in this for me and my daughter, Xayana. I can now say I am ready for the road of success and greatness that I can become in the future. I am on a new odyssey, and I'm taking control again.





Odysseys

By Patricia McKnight

It was autumn when I packed up my belongings and moved to Topeka, Kansas from Madison, Wisconsin. The weather was cool and crisp and the colors were vibrantly beautiful—always my favorite time of the year. All the leaves on the trees were in full fall change, with reds, oranges, golds, yellows, and even still some greens from the departing summer.

My son Tory was four years and I was 23. The plan was to move to Kansas to be married to a young man I had met in Madison while he was going to school. The relationship had not been going well. He had been unfaithful, more than once, and with the decision to forgive, I also made a firm decision to move away and start over again with him in his hometown of Topeka, Kansas.

We left on a Greyhound from Madison to Kansas on October 1, 1981. My son was very busy at four years old and very inquisitive. In spite of the long ride, he was very well behaved. We had to share a seat. It was only really uncomfortable at night when I had to lay him stretched out across the seat, while I sat with my knees pulled up to my chin as I sat on the floor. It was quite uncomfortable, and I can still vividly hear the wheels rolling under the bus. I felt every bump. By the time the morning came and we were close to Kansas, I had a miserable head cold because the driver rode with the air conditioner on all night.

When we got to the Topeka bus station, he was there to meet us. Although I was glad to leave Madison, I did not like Kansas. As time went on during the couple of months we were there, I realized that I had not really forgiven him. Besides that, I just could not trust him or get over the thoughts of his unfaithfulness to me. I did not want to be with him after all.

My oldest brother was living in Denver, Colorado at the time, and I made the decision after speaking with my brother to leave Topeka and move to Denver.

Topeka was a small country city, whereas Denver was a big city. I fell in love with Denver immediately and decided I wanted to stay. So I did. My son and I stayed with my brother and his girlfriend. A couple of months passed and I wanted to work so I could make my own way. My brother told me about a place that was hiring strip dancers. I was young and built nice, so I tried it. I got a job working a club called Sid King's Crazy Horse Bars. From that point, my life began to move very quickly. I was making good money, but I began to get involved in a way of life I had never known. I was dancing, and to get the kind of courage it takes to take your clothes off in front of strangers, I began to drink a lot. The more drinks I sold, the more money I made. By the time my shift was over, I was drunk. I had also started dating customers for money. Clearly, my life had changed.

My son was not getting the attention he needed, so my mother eventually came and brought him back to Madison. I was free to do whatever I wanted. Sometimes I felt guilty for having my son leave while I stayed. Drugs took away all those guilt feelings. Pretty soon I did not care. I had a full-blown, full-fledged heroin habit. I was turning tricks, drinking, and stealing. You name it, I was doing it.



In 1996 I was the victim of a hit and run car incident. I was in a coma for nine days, and I had lost my memory. After I had gone to rehab, I decided it was time to move back to Madison and be the mother I had intended to be. It was not easy at first, but I kept trying and trying.

One day while at a women's group I was attending I learned of the Odyssey Project. I applied but I was not accepted at first, so I applied again and finally I was accepted. With a lot of hope and hard work and by the grace of GOD, I will complete the program. I'm excited and feel truly blessed.



Determined to be Responsible
By Prodajaé Huntley

When one visualizes a wealthy individual, one can see that this person has financial stability and potentially has faced many obstacles along the way. Our government has molded many citizens and noncitizens into classes: a first class, who controls decisions; a middle class, where controlled decisions are limited; and lastly the lower class, who is mostly controlled, limited, and funded by the state. As a result of this, our middle class is getting smaller, and soon enough there will only be rich or poor. I believe this is because the middle class does not have as much opportunity of having options to make better decisions and to take things further. Where do I stand between the two? I still am trying to figure that out and shape a better future for myself. I believe that if one has the mental ability to make clear, precise, and responsible decisions for oneself, one can be whoever one dreams of being. It is much tougher to become wealthy in the 21st century, especially for African American men and some women, although poverty is continuing through generations of all races. I have been through many situations that make me believe my mind can take me further than money can.

In high school, I was determined to put in the extra time to focus on homework and consistently complete my homework on time. I was able to complete my goal and attend to the next task along my path to success, despite the fact that I did not have a stable environment at home. My parents' separation affected me deeply without my knowing it. I always chose to work more often than spend time with friends and family so that I could make sure to make ends meet. Rather than going out to procrastinate, or letting the urge of laziness overcome me, I developed the mental strength and power to say, "No." As a result, this taught me that I will not become a product of my environment—that I am in control of my life. I chose homework rather than going out.

I had my son at an early age, but I figured it was okay, being that I am responsible and graduated high school a year early. I had started taking classes, but I lost my time management skills, becoming tired and sleep deprived, and I ended up dropping out of school because of this. I found the courage to struggle on my own and make ends meet, and I have worked hard to not let stress interfere with work and everyday life. As I work to find a balance between these different demands, I try to apply the wise advice that my mom once gave me to my own life: make responsible decisions.





On Hardship
By Sahira Rocillo Ramírez

"Never to suffer would never to have been blessed." —Edgar Allan Poe

Sometimes I wonder what my life would be like if it was "easy." Easy is a very vague term, isn't it? Perhaps waking up to another sunrise is an easy thing to do for me, but I'll never know what someone else had to go through just to live for another day; as Morticia Addams said, "Normal is an illusion, what is normal for the spider is chaos for the fly."

After all, if I hadn't suffered along the path, if I had not lost some battles in life, would I have learned my lessons and grown in strength? Would I have ever learned to appreciate the value of things and be thankful for life's simple pleasures? What if I had never experienced the weight of people staring at my scars? I never judge the beauty of human beings by the way they look. I'm always intrigued and fascinated by their scars. When I think about my accident, I start to question if I would be as compassionate and understanding if I was not marked by my own scars. I wonder if a pretty face would make me an insensitive bitch.

On January 3, 1992, when I was three and a half years old, I suffered an accident. My parents were trying to negotiate the buying of a very old car—it would have been our first family car. The dealer went to look for my father at our house. My mother led him into our living-room. As they were chatting, one of my neighbors knocked on our door and asked my mom if she could take me to the store to buy candy. She agreed, and I went off with her.

When I returned, I never made it back inside my house. My neighbor just left me at the door, and instead of going in, I went inside our "new family car." I sat down, and while I was peeling off one of my candies, it slipped from my fingers. As I was picking it up, I saw a box of matches. I struck one out of curiosity, and I saw it consume slowly until its flame reached my fingertips. I threw it immediately after I felt the sting of the burn. The match fell on the back seat. The fabric was very old and very flammable, and the car caught fire immediately. I was trapped.

I was rescued by a man, or was it an angel? His name is Jose Conrado Mendoza; luckily for me, he happened to be present at the time of the fire. He was the only one, besides my mother, who tried to break into the car while the spectacle gathered more and more viewers. When he found me, I was coiled underneath the front passenger seat, sheltering myself from the heat underneath the car's dashboard. My attempts to open the doors failed due to the doors getting sealed by the melted rubber. He finally pulled me out of the car and laid me on the grass. He then went to stop my mother, who was in a frenzy mode and still tossing buckets of water on the car, trying to get me out. She couldn't recognize me and thought I was still somewhere inside.

I don't remember feeling any pain during the accident. I've read that intense burns tend to numb the skin. The pain came after. It was physical, and, as I grew older, it became emotional. I've had to endure so many surgeries that I've honestly lost count. I spent three months in the hospital. They told my parents that I had suffered second and third degree burns on my face and hands, and that there was a 90 percent probability that I had lost my ability to see. Thankfully, the only vision impairments I suffer today are just hereditary and have nothing to do with my accident.

Since then, I have suffered discrimination and stares—in school, on the bus, in my jobs (or to even get a job in the first place), as I walk down the street . . . everywhere. This is why I promised myself that I would, one day, complete a higher education. That way, no one would question my capabilities and look down upon me as if I were less of a person just because I look different.

Scars are just one part of my struggle, one that I'm still learning to make peace with. I wish people didn't have to first know me for who I am in order to love or accept me. Perhaps a pretty face would do the trick and I'd not have to struggle to convince people that I am worth it. How would it feel to just wander around without being pitied for my looks from the start? I bet I wouldn't be able to sympathize with people in similar situations as mine. I know what they go through firsthand; they do not have to explain. There is a mutual understanding, an embrace.

Every time I think of my future and start analyzing myself, again I start to wonder: What if I had never had to endure sugar-coated discrimination, pity, even shame, because of my origin? Would I have this longing to belong rightfully in this place, as well as where I come from, without feeling in limbo? I only really learned what it "means" to be Mexican once I came to live in the United States.

I mean, as far as I was concerned, I was only a human being and my nationality was not another obstacle that I had to deal with every day.

Where would I be now if I didn't have to struggle financially to pay for my education? Would I even know that I want it so badly? Oh, what if I hadn't struggled to communicate in another language and was able to speak both English and Spanish with no trouble? I wish I had never felt the fear of a police car driving behind me, even though I am doing everything right. I wish I could apply to any job without being second guessed by employers wondering about my legal status in this country. These struggles have made me able to understand what my people go through and be compelled to help.



See, oftentimes, those who were born in a better position might not be as lucky as they seem to be. They are not able to ever learn what only hardship can teach us. The simple fact that they were born with privileges that most of us have to work really hard to obtain means that they often lack qualities such as gratitude, compassion, and self-esteem. Perhaps they will never know who they truly are, what they truly want, and what they can rise from; and, to be honest, I think that not having those weapons in life is rather unfortunate—it is a permanent loss.

That is why I believe that we must work hard to achieve the things that we want to accomplish in life. Hardship makes us stronger, defeat makes us wiser, and scars make us more compassionate, beautiful, and unique. I would never change any of the situations I have had to go through, for I love

the woman I have become. I embrace my flaws because they make me humble. I feel as though I've learned to be friends with pain; I know it too well, and I am strong enough to stand on both of my feet while I'm full blast feeling it. Pain has shown me that I am very resilient and brave. When I do win a battle, I savor the taste of success because I owned it with my own sweat and I do not owe anything to anybody, but myself.

So I damn well deserve to complete my education. I need it, I want it, and I will get it. I count on people that love and care about me, and I thrive on their love. I even appreciate those who have come into my life just to rip me open and tear me apart, for I've learned to mend myself up and keep going. And if I keep my endurance and attitude through life, one day I will wake up with the satisfaction that I have arrived at myself. I will have accomplished my education, have the job that I always wanted, be a role model to my son, and make him proud. One day I will walk in this, or any, land with the confidence that I belong here, regardless of my color, race, or origin. I will belong in it by right, just for being human. Then I will be able to fully give into the blissful taste of victory, and I will know the freedom that so many poets wrote about! I will be finally unchained.



Unraveling the Truth about Hate **By Shaneika Sanders**

I believe the truth never stops unraveling. But I also believe lies are what we as a nation are built on. We who are not part of the government have been tricked and blinded. We are slaves to their lies because we believe them. We stereotype by race, gender, social class, looks, etc. A hate begins to form for each other, usually due to something we lack in our personal lives. Then we teach our children to hate for our reasons, then they teach their children, and the hate-cycle continues. In return, it affects the relationships we have. Self-hate takes us down a negative path to our self-destruction, and then we destroy all those in our way. To me, hate is only built in us to take our focus off the truth going on around us.

Mental Enslavement

I think about the black men I grew up around being abused by police because of the color of their skin—throwing them in jail at young ages, never affording them the opportunity to a proper education, labeling them as criminals and savages, and speaking negatively on their lives. The government keeps them in poverty by taking away jobs, affecting the black man's pride by taking from him what's needed to feed his family. Knowing this will make him angry, so they can lock him up, or, worse, kill him dead. It's a form of physical slavery because during slavery times they would take children away from their mothers and never allow them to know their fathers for the sake of taking the strength that a bond like that can create. Due to this mistreatment, they grew weaker. They became slaves to drugs and over-drinking, and then they became abusive to their wives and children. Children grew up with hate in their hearts for all mankind, and till this day the cycle continues. . . .

The Hate Cycle

I believe that hate is taught. We are born with nothing but love in our hearts because we were created from love. This cycle works like any other. If I raise my children to cook a certain dish in a

certain way, they will teach their kids and their kids will teach their kids and so on. If I hate myself in any way, I will teach that. If not to my kids, I will take out my pain and frustrations on someone who doesn't understand life and has no one to teach them differently. Now that's a person who has grown hate in their hearts.

Most times we hate because of something bad that happened to us that we never took the time to allow to heal. Most times it is because we either don't believe in God or because we have now covered it up in some type of drug consumption and assumed this is the way of the world. I believe that when you have grown to hate someone you don't even know, it's usually because you hate yourself. I remember a white boy named Nick I met in sixth grade. He was prejudiced. It made me laugh because he was so dusty and he stank, and I stayed fresh. Not that that matters, but I couldn't understand how he hated me more than he hated the fact that he stank. Now that I'm older, I understand that it was his hate for himself and those in his own home. Anyway, his father was a drunk and very abusive. One day I was riding my bike past his house and I heard his mom screaming, "Please don't hurt him!" The baby was crying and his dad was yelling at the top of his lungs. I'm not sure what he was talking about, but he was pissed and I heard a lot of doors slamming. My brother and I just sat on the side of his house, almost feeling remorseful because I knew personally the little prejudiced kid who lived there.

Two days later I saw him at the park chilling by himself, and his face was bogus. I sat next to him and gave him some of my candy because I was the candy lady—I've been hustling for a long time. But I asked him why he was so prejudiced against blacks. He said that it was because his dad told him we are to be hated and that's all he knew. Then I told him that we heard what happened outside his house the other day, and I asked him, "Does your dad hate you too?" He began to cry and said, "It feels like it." I said, "Let's go play basketball," and we've been cool ever since. See, I knew a thing or two about hate. I've never hated because of race, but I hate drug addicts because of what they've put my family and me through. Then one day I became one . . . and the cycle continues . . .

Relationships

We refuse to allow ourselves to see how powerful we all would be if we stopped being so blinded by hate. "Divide and conquer": that's what the government wants—it's what they live for. As long as we are all in bondage, they got something to do. But until we learn to love ourselves, we will continue to pump hateful energy into our universe. We will continue to fall victim of a game we don't even have to play. Because of this inner hate, we prevent certain races from getting jobs, we hate on people's hair and clothes and material assets, or, hell, we hate other people's peace. We hate when folks cut us off in traffic. Hate is making us miss out on the beauty of loving the unknown, which is each other. We are in relationships, saying we're in love and hating characteristics of the other because they remind us of who we hate—or even of what we hate about ourselves. We will throw others under the bus to save our own ass, but why? Self-love wouldn't allow you to throw anyone under the bus. We are a lost species, and I do believe hate is the biggest cause of death in every race. And it will not change until we first change ourselves individually . . .





Triple Surprise **By Tenishia Bland**

The day I found out I was having triplets was one of the most memorable days of my life. I went to the doctor because I was having signs of a miscarriage. The doctor ordered an ultrasound. My heart raced as I climbed onto the work table. I could not believe this was happening to me. I felt like I had a frog jump down my throat, and my stomach felt like butterflies were hatching by the second. I was not sure what to expect. The technician carefully went back and forth over my belly with the probe. The warm gel they used got all over the place as I looked around the small, cool room. The smell of latex filled the room. I looked at the technician. Her face had a blank look on it as she said, "I will be right back. I'm going to get the doctor in charge and will return shortly."

The door slowly crept open. All I could hear was their footsteps getting closer as they approached in their white jackets. They talked and pointed at the screen at the same time. After a short conversation, they both looked over at me. Both of their faces were pale and flushed. How could that be? What was wrong?

The doctor finally said, "It looks like there are three of them." My eyes opened to the size of saucers, and I replied, "What? Three of what?"

He replied, "Embryos. You're having triplets."

As I walked out of the room, I had all kinds of thoughts running through my head. How was I going to manage three more children? I already had four at home. Three of everything: changing three diapers at a time, three babies crying at once. Oh my, I thought. I sat in the first hard brown plastic chair that was available. Shortly after, a woman with brown curly hair sat quietly next to me. I looked over at her and noticed teardrops falling slowly, one by one. I asked her, "Are you OK?" She replied, "No, I just found out that I'm not able to have children." I was stunned by her answer. I replied, "I'm sorry to hear that." I thought to myself, and here I am, fruitful and not happy. It was like she was put there for a reason, like she was sent to give me a message of how blessed I really was.



My role as a mother was already dear to me. I didn't just have a little person but little people who looked up to me every day for guidance and love. I also had to face the opinion of others. The remarks I heard included, "Are you from the South? People don't have big families anymore. Are they natural?" My Uncle Charles had another point of view. He thanked me for replacing the loved ones we lost. He said, "We lost seven of you and now you have given us seven back." My uncle made me realize I was not only a blessing to my children but also a blessing to my family.

Life has knocked me down a few times. It has shown me things I never wanted to see. I have experienced sadness and failures. But one thing is for sure . . . I always get up.



Kitchen Gateway
By Veronica Tinajero

My favorite place is my kitchen. It brings back happy family memories from my childhood. My mother is an excellent cook. She always cooked for our large family and still does. She cooks in anticipation of visitors. My mother always has visitors because they know there will be lots of excellent food.

When we were little, every day she cooked different food. She made tortillas, lunch, and dinner daily. All the produce she used was from my dad's father's field, so it was really fresh. Also she used to have chickens, rabbits, pigs, turkeys and goats for our house use only.

Whenever and whatever my mom cooks, it reminds me of El Jardin (the garden), a plaza in my home town in Mexico similar to the Capitol Square. It is a place in front of the church where people gather and hang-out most days, but especially on Sundays. I can remember as a teenager walking with my friends smelling food like enchiladas, pozole, tostadas, and ponche. The anticipation of going to El Jardin made me excited and really happy.

Now that we all live here, we cannot visit El Jardin. So, my entire family, brothers, sisters, grandparents, babies, nieces and nephews all gather at the appointed house, each bringing one part of a special meal. Part of the joy is that everyone loves each other so much that we all talk at once. The noise is so loud you can hardly hear, but somehow every one hears what they need to. When we meet up, I feel really happy to see everybody talking. It gives us a chance to catch up and talk about anything new in our lives, programs our children are doing, and all of our important life events. Being with them makes me feel a part of something bigger. There have been sometimes when we do not get together as often and I start to feel isolated. But every time I see them, it reminds me how much I need them to feel connected.

Now when I go back to my hometown, it's totally different. A lot of my friends from back there don't live there anymore, and now for me it's all about taking care of my kids. But one thing is still the same and that is the food.

Actually, maybe my kitchen is not my favorite place; maybe my favorite place is my hometown. My kitchen is only a doorway to go there.

