

YEAR 18, ISSUE 7

DECEMBER 9, 2020

ODYSSEY ORACLE

WOMEN OF COURAGE



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Note: Three sisters (above) in the Class of 2021 wrote about three generations of their family: Yvonne Johnson on their great-grandmother, Tawania Alston on their grandmother, and Brianna Johnson on their mother.

A JOURNEY TO THE UNKNOWN

BY BETSY ALFARO



“Only those who risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go” (T.S. Eliot). Thirty-four years ago, my mother made the courageous decision to leave her country of El Salvador and travel to the unknown. She encountered many challenges along the way and chose to face those challenges head on. Her type of courage was leaving her home of El Salvador, adapting to a new lifestyle, and becoming a citizen of the United States. For those reason I chose my mother as a woman of courage.



My mother made the decision to pack up what she had and follow my father to the United States. She traveled alongside my two brothers through many countries just to provide a better future for them. It was a risky journey since she did not know what to expect along the way. She saw a little bit of everything on the way, from people dying because there was no food or water to people being raped, but she kept going on her journey. Going back was not an option due to the war that was going on back home. She risked her life in order to make sure my brothers were taken care of, which shows her courage.

After being in the United States for 34 years, my mother still has not fully adapted to being here. She has learned the language, understands the culture of life, but one thing she truly misses is spending the holiday seasons like a big party. In America the lifestyle is rushed, whereas in El Salvador she would take each day as it came and go with the flow. She remembers being able to wake up and smell the holiday season in the air, but here Christmas is just enjoyed for a few hours and everyone goes back to their daily life like nothing has happened. She misses celebrating life, celebrating one another like there is no tomorrow, and misses how everyone would celebrate with the little they had. After so many years here, she has been able to adapt to the lifestyle, but one thing is for sure: she desires to return to celebrate a holiday with fireworks and a genuine holiday spirit.

In 2014 my mother went out on a limb and made the decision to become a United States citizen. She filled out her application, sent her documents that were needed, and before we knew it she got a letter in the mail stating she had met all the requirements and was able to become a citizen. She studied for many hours and days to know things about the United States in order to be ready for when she had to take her citizenship test. That test is hard even for someone who was born here; I remember she would ask me questions and I had no idea what the answer was. Finally, in April of 2014 we traveled to Milwaukee where she became a citizen alongside other people who had passed their test. After her long journey to get here, she went out on a limb years later and accomplished something that many wish they could obtain: becoming a citizen.



I learned from Maria, my mother, to be courageous, to be strong, and to not look back. To me she is courageous because she took risks, is still adapting to the lifestyle, and went out on a limb to become a citizen. Even though my mother would rather be selling mangos in the streets of El Salvador, I am grateful my family took the risk to make it here to the United States; I am thankful they made their way in the unknown.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS: THE STORY OF MILDRED VANNETTA JOHNSON

BY TAWANIA ALSTON



"Having courage does not mean that we are unafraid. Having courage and showing courage mean we face our fears. We are able to say, 'I have fallen, but I will get up.'" (Maya Angelou) This quote immensely describes my grandmother's impeccable courage and perseverance during times of despair. She

survived pain and suffering that could have shattered her mentally and physically, she managed to escape poverty and violence for the sake of her children, and she still shows strength and courage when others need it.

Mildred Vannetta Johnson was born July 2nd, 1951 in Chicago, Illinois to her mother, Mrs. Mary Anna Chambers, whom she shared a birthday with. Her childhood was much different than most others since she had taken on a lot more responsibilities than she had to. Mary, my great-grandmother, was diagnosed with breast cancer when my grandmother was only a child. This gave my grandmother the task of helping around the house, taking care of her five younger siblings, and watching her mother fight the cancer that eventually took one of her breasts. As you can imagine, this took a toll on not only her and my



great-grandmother but on the men in my great-grandmother's life as well, ultimately leading up to my grandmother's innocence being taken. So, believe me when I say her childhood itself could have broken her... but it did not; she persevered.



Mildred and her mother Mary

As a child, she had her mother and siblings to live for; as an adult, she had her own children who gave her life, a reason to keep going. She gave birth to five boys and one girl in the projects of Chicago: Brian, Roger, Earnest, Anthony, David, and the twins Christine and Chris. Even in the worst circumstances, she made things work because she wanted her kids to have better. Three of her children unfortunately died at early ages. Anthony died from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), David died when a drunken driver hit him on the freeway head-on, and Brian died from cardiac arrest. How do you live on when you have to bury three out of seven of your children



Mildred and four of her children

and they were supposed to outlive you? After two of her children's deaths, she decided it was time to take her children and get them away to a better life away from violence, the roaches, and rats in the projects they stayed in. She decided to bring them somewhere they could flourish and become educated, so in 1991 Madison, WI, here they came. It was a scary move, coming somewhere she hardly knew anyone, with no money, no place to stay, just hope for a brighter future, but that's all the motivation she needed.

Since then, she has devoted her life to being the glue to our family. My grandmother has taken a big part in raising anyone's kids when needed since that has always been the life she lived. She

fostered some of her grandchildren, raised some more, and now is the guardian to my mentally disabled aunt. Did you ever meet someone who'd give you the shirt off their back even if they must go without? That's always been her character, and no one could ever take that from her!

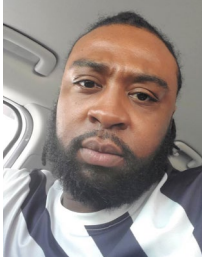
Throughout my grandmother's life, she's faced many barriers and unfortunate situations, but she survived it all. She never let what she experienced define or break her but only allowed it to strengthen her. If you saw her today, you couldn't even tell that she's been through any of what she has because she shines brighter and brighter every day. Her courage speaks volumes. I can only hope that I am half as brave, strong, and phenomenal as she is one day! One thing out of many that she has taught me is to never give up. Even when times become unbearable, I should hold my head up and walk through the storm because it doesn't last forever. My great-grandmother raised a wise daughter (my grandma), who in return raised an unbreakable daughter (my mother), who then blessed this world with three more remarkable women, who happen to be Odyssey Class of 2021 members Yvonne, Brianna, and me. I was blessed to be raised around these women!



*Odyssey 2021 classmates and sisters
Tawania, Brianna, and Yvonne*

EVERYDAY HEROINE

BY CALVIN BALENTINE



Have you ever seen gold? No, not the mineral that you buy from the jewelry store, no. I am talking human gold. My Grandma Dean was the first piece of gold to enter my life. She was pure, hard, and unchangeable. She was the prettiest thing to see. I say pretty thing referring to this beautiful woman because there is something about her that cannot be explained, just like gold; no matter what, she only gave off beauty and value. I cannot remember a period my Dean wasn't smiling. I know she had many purposes in life: I know she was here to serve; I know she was here to be a light in the dark; and I believe she had a dark past that she saw her way through by being her own light. These three things I watched and observed for 30 years of my life.

My Dean was born with the birth name Ardenia Hughes on January 26th, 1922, in Mississippi. She was the granddaughter of a slave; her father was born a slave but was freed as a child. Her grandfather was the son of a slave master. Upon being freed, her grandfather moved to another county and purchased some land. Being in the south and owning more land than some whites, her family had to consistently fight for their land. This led to a lot of the family fleeing north as fugitives to avoid prosecution for fighting/killing a white man. This family history embedded in Dean the belief that nothing comes before family. Witnessing the evils that took place as her father and uncles fought to hold on to what was theirs, she developed a zero-tolerance mindset for anyone/thing to be mistreated. Although being taught to avoid white people because of the violence they insisted on inflicting upon black people, she just couldn't: her love extended to all people. Her younger sister says her only fault was that she loved to a fault. Dean was kind but knew no fear, only love. This led to her being the strongest, fiercest, yet kindest person I've had the pleasure of knowing. Through all the dark in her past she managed to let her light shine.



After marrying my grandfather Eddie Balentine, they eventually left the south as my grandfather joined the Army as a way out of the south and the racism that lived there. After returning from Germany, they went north. They were some of the first Balentines to settle in the Chicago area, but many would follow suit. Every Balentine or Hughes that moved north went to stay with Dean until they found employment and a place to live. Known throughout my family as Aunt Deanna, as she is affectionately referred to (by everyone), my Dean would never tell family (anyone) no. My whole life, she taught me nothing comes before family; “you make a way,” she would say. It was this mindset that made our home the staple of the Balentine clan, as we call ourselves. She took in her sister’s oldest son and her other sister’s only daughter, only having one child of her own (my mother). Her baby sister had nine children, seven of whom could not wait to leave the south and at the first chance ran north to stay with Aunt Deanna. All anyone needed for an access pass to everything my Dean had to offer was to ask, or simply for her to know you were in need. My Dean was truly here to serve others, not herself.



My family being poor, I never understood how we could not have anything and yet my Dean be willing to give away what we had to “someone who needed it more.” I remember as a child there was a time when we had more than 20 people living in our three-bedroom home—family, friends, and strangers alike. One story that stands out to me is when I was eight years old, my Dean took me to pick up my report card. While there, she overheard my friend’s mother crying while explaining to our teacher that Charles was struggling in school because of problems at home. The problem was they no longer had a home: they had been staying in shelters, which was very unstable and unsafe. My grandmother, never meeting this lady and not knowing her from Adam, as she would say, invited her to come live in our already overcrowded home. They stayed with us for six months until she found somewhere to live. This is one of many stories I never understood. We stayed in the worst neighborhood in Chicago, and yet she continuously invited strangers into our home.

In all, there is no other like my Dean: totally fearless, totally selfless, and made from 100% love. Her love flows through the bloodline of the Balentine clan. For 95 years she lent her service to others, deserving and non-deserving, known and strangers alike, heck, human and animal. She instilled that selflessness in our family and made sure we knew our history “not so it can tarnish us but so we can realize we are here to shine even in the dark.” There is none more courageous than my Dean. I pray I am blessed to influence the clan as she did.

LONE WOLF

BY SARINA BENFORD



I was in about seventh grade when my mother told me she was adopted. I was in shock and disbelief because I felt lied to and betrayed by her for not telling me until I was a teenager. I grow older and realize how she must have felt that way her whole life. My mom does not know how strong she is! She overcame so many obstacles, and I am so proud of her to be who she is today because of that. Overcoming being adopted, facing single motherhood, and defeating alcoholism takes such courage! She has helped form me in her own way to become the strong woman I am.

My mom was adopted at a very young age into a very religious household. By the time she was 13 or so she, was moved alone to an Adventist Academy in Tennessee and relocated throughout three states until she graduated high school. Living alone at such a young age takes so much courage to do! As an adult, my mom was found by her biological brothers and started to form a connection with them. She has even had a chance to meet her biological mother.



When my mother met my father when she was 20, they worked at the airport together and instantly fell in love. She became pregnant with me shortly after. She was about six months pregnant when he was sentenced for a drug felony, causing my mom to become a single mother during her first years as a parent. She had very little help in raising me other than my Nana and Aunt. I cannot imagine how hard going through that must have been. Being a mother myself has shown me what courage and strength that must take when facing single parenthood.

My mother did eventually marry a man when I was about four or five, but by the time I was a teenager she went through a rocky divorce. It was a point in her life when she did not know how to be happy and that depression turned into alcoholism. She struggled a lot with drinking and was arrested a few times for DUIs and put on house arrest. She then chose to find rehab and fix herself in ways she could not by herself. She has been on a clean and sober path for years now and is so brave to make that change.

My mom loves wolves: pictures, statues, coasters, towels, you name it! They are all over her house. She in many ways reminds me of a wolf who at times must be the lone wolf but will always find her pack. Even as a child, my mom was her own lone wolf, moved from her pack into her own. I will always see her for the strong mother she has been for me and how courageous she has been to fix herself and find her way through depression. I see how she chose to be happy and left a marriage that kept her feeling trapped. I love that we have come so far in our bond and friendship. I see her as my woman of courage for all she has gone through and could not think of a person more suited for me to do my paper on!

MY SISTER IS MY FAIRY

BY SOUAD BIDAR



I am number two in a family of four children. I have a sister who is two years older than me. It is often said that the younger has an easier life, and I confirm it. I think being the youngest made my life a bit

easier because my older sister had already kicked all the doors closed for me. Looking closely at the relationship that has always linked me to my sister, I realize that she has really influenced my personality. Negatively or positively, it marked my life; my sister will remain a source of inspiration for me. While my parents were strict with her as a teenager, they were cooler with me. I have the impression that when it's their first child, parents are always a little stressed, while they are bound to be more relaxed with the second.

My older sister's name is Safaa, and she still serves as a Girl Scout. I would say she is aptly named because "Safaa" means "clarity." She is the good example of our little family. She is always there to take care of all of us. She took this role very seriously when she was younger. I especially remember the after-school snacks she made for us, toast and our cocoa bowls, before helping us with our homework. We were together in the same primary school. Even at the playground, she was always keeping an eye on me for fear that I would be bullied.



Older sister one day, older sister forever: a real role that weighed heavily on her sometimes, but which taught her a lot and very often forged her character. Much later, now that almost everyone has become an adult, she takes several responsibilities in our family. Since she was little, Safaa has had a very strong sense of duty. In fact, even if there is a little difference in age, it is always to her that my parents entrusted the house when they went out. And when my parents have health problems or whatever happens, she will volunteer to take care of them. In the meantime, when it comes to taking them to their medical appointments, taking care of their papers, and all the little day-to-day worries, she's the one who sticks to it.

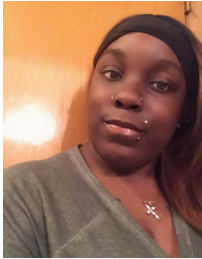
Once my sister graduated from high school, she left Morocco to Paris, France. She was admitted to the University of La Sorbonne for real estate judicial experience study because she wants to be a sworn financial expert before the court. It was super hard, but she managed to get her Bachelor's. In the same year of her graduation, I came to France to study decoration and interior design. I should have taken an entrance exam before I registered. Unfortunately, I failed. It was the first time that I experienced such a failure at school. No way! I could not announce this failure to my parents, especially to my father. He made the trip with me from Marrakesh to Paris, leaving his work behind him, just to support me. I don't know what happened to me, to dare to lie to my father. I always tried to avoid seeing the gaze of disappointment in his eyes!! My father had returned to Morocco, proud of me and happy about my false success. I stayed with my sister in Paris. Once again, Safaa must correct my mistakes; for two months, we were looking for a university registration, unsuccessfully!! It was so late to find a cheap place in a public university. My adorable Safaa supported me like I never can imagine. My sister had taken out a fairly large bank loan in her name, compared to her personal means, to be able to enroll me in a French university.



My sister is the most amazing sister in the world because when I arrived in Paris for the first time, I came with a little dream to study for three years to become an interior designer. But thanks to this remarkable woman, thanks to her support, thanks to her encouragement and dedication, thanks to her determination to always offer the best of herself to her loved ones, I had to study seven years to become an architect. This wonderful sister makes people around her wonderful like her. For most of us, fairies do not exist and it is pure imagination. But for some people, the fairies are present. The proof: one of those fairies is my sister. Very young, Safaa carries within her the desire to make her family evolve and to take care of her parents, sister, and brothers. My brothers and I are really grateful to her because she is always here for our welfare. She always helps us to find the balance. My sister is the best sister I could have ever hoped to have. May God protect and bless my Safaa.

BEING BLIND DIDN'T STOP HER

BY ANJELICA BROWN



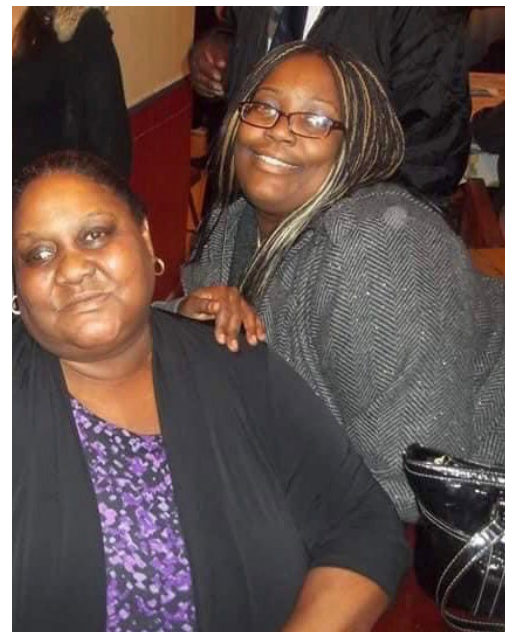
My grandmother Demetria Brown was born September 23, 1955 in Leland, Mississippi. She was raised by her grandparents. Her grandmother was what you called back then a homemaker, and her grandfather was a bricklayer. My grandmother had some barriers in life. She lost her eyesight at the age of 17, and she lived in what used to be called the projects in Stateway Gardens in Chicago, Illinois. She raised me from birth because her daughter, my mom, was a young mother and wasn't ready to be a mom, and also raised my brother, who born in 1994. She lost her husband in 1998 and was with a man who was not just abusive toward her but also an alcoholic.

Demetria was married to her husband at the age of 21 in Mississippi, and together they had three kids: one son and two daughters. My grandmother had her first child, my uncle, at the age of 16 years old. My grandmother was a homemaker, and my grandfather was a furniture worker. Demetria lost her eyesight at the age of 17 due to an illness; she became blind in one eye and had low vision in the other eye. Being blind didn't stop my grandmother at all.

My grandparents and their kids moved to Chicago, Illinois in 1978. They lived in what used to be called the projects, in a low-income high-rise building in Stateway Gardens. My grandmother witnessed a lot of terrible things in Stateway Gardens, from murders and rapes to gang banging. My mom, being their youngest, had me at the age of 16 years old in 1992; the only thing was that she wasn't ready to be a mother. Instead of me being placed in state custody and in foster care, my grandmother gained custody of me at birth and raised me till the age of 18 years old. I'm now 28 years old, and my grandmother still helps me when I need help or just helps me out with the kindness of her heart. My grandmother, being legally blind and living in low-income housing, took care of me in the projects till we moved into a four-bedroom house in 1998 on the Eastside of Chicago, Illinois.

My grandfather passed away in July of 1998 from a brain aneurysm. Demetria met a man in 2000; they got along pretty well until he would start drinking alcohol. Once he would get drunk, he would yell and get crazy in the house toward my grandmother. I remember him as a nice man who loved me and I loved him until he got drunk and caused chaos. His drinking problem got so out of control, causing my grandmother, my aunt, my brother, cousin and me to move in 2002 from Chicago to Wisconsin.

As you can see, Demetria had some barriers in life, but that didn't stop her at all. Not once did she feel like giving up. Demetria went from living in low-income housing to moving and now living in a beautiful three-bedroom house. She raised not just me but also my brother to adulthood, and she continues to still help the both of us out. She met and dated a nice, caring, man in 2005 who I looked at as my grandfather and loved so much, but he passed away in 2015 from lung cancer. Watching my grandmother as I was growing up until now, I know I will not give up in life even if life gets hard. I have a three-year-old son and can't imagine not being a part of his life. When life gets hard, it is not a dead-end. Keep pushing, and you will succeed.



SHE DIDN'T ALLOW ANYTHING LESS

BY TISHA BUTLER



"Come here, Baby, and look at this on TV. People are paying to have the lips you are born with!" These were the words my grandmother Margie told me because I was insecure about how full my lips were as I was growing up. It was a special on TV about lip fillers. My grandmother helped to raise me and my siblings, pushed me to do well, and taught me to cook. My grandmother is the most courageous woman I ever met.

When I was eight years old, my mother ran into hard times. She was not mentally and financially fit to take care of four kids under the age of 13 years old. She still tried the best way she knew how. Word got back to my grandmother about the situation her oldest child was in. The same day my grandmother found out about our living situation, she came and got all my mother's kids to live with her. She told us to leave everything because she would buy us new everything.



Living with my grandmother was not an easy task. My grandmother had a very high expectation for me that I thought was a little extreme. I was required to always get a grade of B or better. I felt it was extreme because everyone else was able to bring a C and never got in trouble.



My grandmother cooked for a living. It was a very profitable business for her. Every time my grandmother catered events, she made me help with prepping the food. I really disliked doing that. While I was prepping the food, she was also teaching me how to cook.

I am so blessed to have such a brave and kind-hearted woman in my life. If my grandmother had not come to get my siblings and me, no telling where we would have ended up. I never understood why my grandmother pushed me harder than everyone else until I got older and decided to ask her. She told me that everyone is different. She knew what everyone was capable of and she was not going to allow anything less. Cooking was something I was so against growing up. As I got older, cooking became one of my favorite hobbies. My family gave me the nickname of Lil Margie. Kudos to my grandmother!

WALK BY FAITH AND NOT BY SIGHT

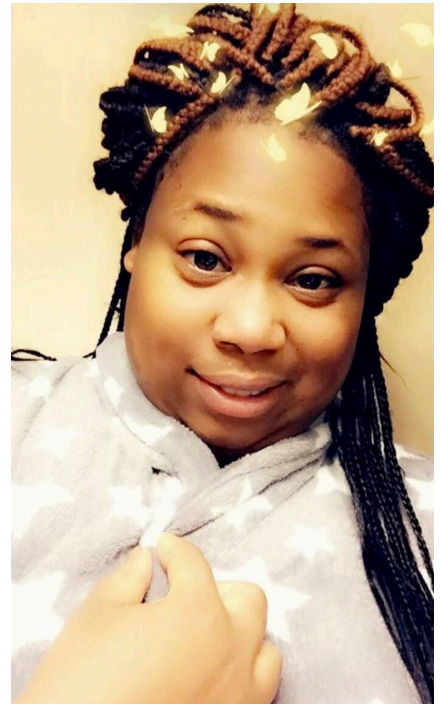
BY CASHAE DAVIS



To me, a woman of courage is a woman who goes through sudden obstacles in life and does whatever it takes to overcome them. I've witnessed this woman: my sister Jerika. She is strong, kind-hearted, loving, and brave. She is a woman who has courage. My sister Jerika is a great single mother of five kids who has been through so many life-changing obstacles for herself and her kids, keeps her faith, and remains strong.

Jerika has been evicted and homeless and has lost housing due to things happening to her children by neighbors; she just wanted to give up. She put herself in dangerous situations to protect her kids and herself. She used to be called "retarded" and "bipolar" by so many people in her life, still to this day, because she was such a personal and depressed person. She would always isolate herself. Others thought this of her when deep down inside she was hurt and struggling. She used to have to sleep in cars, hotels, and run-down places because of her past history with landlords. She made a way for her children, whether she has had to steal from stores for food or find anywhere she could to sleep. She was so brave to me.

My sister didn't like to ask anyone for anything because she always thought having five kids behind her was a burden to others. She would call me and tell me, "I'm just going to give up and end it" because she just couldn't do it alone anymore. My sister definitely is a definition of walking faith. She would always tell me, "Sis, you know I'm a child of God, and God's got me."



I feel she has so much strength, and she holds it very well. As time went by, she became more open. She didn't care what people said about her. She stood tall through all she had gone through, and it paid off.



She now has a beautiful duplex, and her children are doing great. She is financially stable, and she is putting all this in the past like nothing happened.

I told my sister how proud I was because she was so courageous and didn't give up on her kids and herself. We women have to remain strong. We may run into trials and tribulations, but we will overcome them. Walk with your head high and don't mind what others have to say. In the end, God has your back. Never give up and keep moving forward because the best is yet to come, and don't forget to stay humble.

ALL LOVE

BY PARIS FOSTER



My sister Melissa Latrice Foster is the most memorable and courageous person I know. From the day I first met her, I knew she was meant to be in my life. She has the heart of liquid gold and would do anything for anyone. The troubling part about Melissa is that throughout her life she wondered who she was. "What is my purpose?" she asks. Melissa is fearless and brave because she has made it through everything she has been through, and she never lost hope or faith, no matter what was thrown her way.



First, Melissa is a person who was left alone wondering who she could talk to. Who was going to help her see more clearly? One day she found a soul, the soul of a person who she could call Father. He adopted her. Oh, how she loved him dearly, a kind-hearted man who would do anything to break cycles. Melissa was so grateful to find a person to call her own. She did not feel alone anymore.

Then, the love and care that Melissa felt soon started to disintegrate. Why is that, you ask? She started to feel empty inside. No matter what she did or accomplished, it never was good enough. She was constantly reminded of the lonely soul she had by the one she cherished the most.



Suddenly, Melissa was out on her own but still trying to make it through high school. She never tried to engage in extracurriculars because of the doubt in herself. So she just worked and went to school. That was until one day she got up and realized who mattered the most in her life: herself. She graduated high school, went to college to earn a profession, and started a family of her own.

To conclude, Melissa Foster went after what she needed to make her whole. Holding her head up through all that's been thrown her way, good, bad, and ugly, my sister has never given up. I love my sister and brother-in-law. My sister has shown my nephews and now my niece and myself what family really means. Maybe that's where I learned to be so strong because she would not have made it to be the spectacular woman I know her to be today if she hadn't been strong. She has achieved many personal goals and is working towards being the best mom she can be to her children. If you ask me, there is no more emptiness or loneliness happening for Melissa, only great things from here. Family is what she values the most. My sister taught me what it means to have and be a family. I am Paris Foster, and this is my story about the most courageous person I know.

MINTZIE DAVIS, WOMBMAN OF COURAGE INHERITED FROM THE GODS!

BY SARAH GALINSKI



When you walk into a room, the entire room lights up. Upon your taking your seat at the table, the entire table shifts so that you are always placed at the head...all focus on you! You are one POWERFUL WOMBman! Such a commanding presence, you are a wife of 45+ years and a mother of six (eldest and first-born son deceased). Being positive and uplifting is your way of life; you radiate kindness and peace. I am forever grateful to have the Gods bestow on me a mother such as you. My shero, Mintzie Davis, aka Mom, is virtuous, family-oriented, and my role model.

Courage is defined as the ability to conquer fear or despair: Bravery, Valor. Your entire being is the epitome of virtue. Mintzie Davis, you are a virtuous woman! I have never heard you raise your voice, cuss, or speak negatively; you have not spoken ill about your husband or your duties as a mother and a wife. Furthermore, even till this day you still do not complain but appreciate what you have and who you have in your life. I have the dopest, coolest, most down-to-earth MaMa in the world! Virtue is what you embody...it's, quite frankly, who you are. When your name is spoken on any platform, in any room, everyone knows Mintzie Davis has arrived. Virtue is defined as having a particular moral excellence: manly strength or courage: valor, a commendable quality: merit. Ma, I am just saying 'you a supa bad ass!' Yes, you are, Ma'am.



Our home was always kept in immaculate condition, a hot, hearty meal DAILY. You are tenacious for your family. Your core values are family first, having a loving, positive mindset, honoring your husband and marriage, loving the Bible, and robustly believing in God Almighty. You are unapologetically you! You are an actual real-life Angel walking this earth amongst us. Sometimes I find myself like a deer caught in

headlights: I just stop and stare at your amazing being; I know you can feel me gazing at you from afar. I remember you taking us to the library DAILY. You said, "Reading is the best and safest journey you will have in life. Take an adventure home with you every day. Why not? You will not return home the same." I love that idea! Now as a mother and wife myself, I travel often with my four-piece spicy.

To say the least, Ma, you have shaped me into a marvelous human being...Dad, too, but for the most part YOU took on this idol of a role as wife, mother, homemaker, teacher, lawyer, doctor, seamstress, chef, and everything I would have wished upon a star for. All jokes aside, you remember the duck feathers. Well, it goes a little like this. I had a horrible day and shared with you what all occurred, and you told me, "Sarah Mandela, that is NOT YOU! You smile and hold your head up, not letting anything penetrate who you know you are. Now, put your duck feathers on and let those words, actions, and situations roll on off of you right now." I smiled the biggest, brightest smile that day.

To be grateful for the potency you have given me is an understatement. I am forever yours truly. Thank you, MaMa, for being authentically YOU! Not having a blueprint or ideal guide on how to be a mother or a wife but giving grace and mercy to yourself is as beautiful as beauty gets. As a matter of fact, you are LOVE! Okay, listen to this: you are unconditional love, right? The word love (an action) is defined as unselfish, loyal, and benevolent concern for others: to feel a passion, devotion, or tenderness for. Once upon a time Sara Ann, my grandma that I'm named after, gave birth to you, Mintzie, my Wombman of Courage.



WARRIOR IN DISGUISE

BY ERIKA GONZALEZ



What is a woman of courage? My own definition is a woman who holds her head up high and never gives up, no matter what life throws at her. When I got asked to write about a woman of courage in my life, I was stuck, not because I cannot think of a courageous woman in my life but because I have so many women in my life who daily show me how courageous they are. I have decided to talk about the special woman who started it all: my grandmother. My grandmother Atala birthed and raised eight kids, owned multiple businesses, and battled lung cancer. During her last days she was at peace and called all twelve kids to say her goodbyes. She let them know she had everything already paid and ready for her passing so her children did not have to worry while mourning her death.



Atala Lara, born in Mexico City, birthed and raised eight kids, six still living; one passed away at age 36 due to birth defects, and one was kidnapped at the age of three. Not only is birthing eight kids hard enough, but for the one with birth defects, they unfortunately back at that time did not have the technology to know what was wrong or how to help. Doctors diagnosed that her son would not live long. All she could do was make sure he was comfortable and happy. Atala did not let the doctor's news destroy her. Instead, it made her stronger because she knew her son needed her to be strong for him. He ended up living 36 years before a strong seizure left him in a coma he never woke up from. Four of her children decided to follow the American dream. Fifteen years passed before she was able to apply for a visiting visa and was reunited with her children.

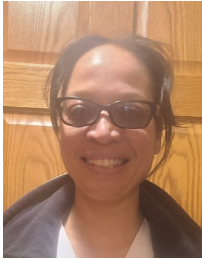
Not only was she an amazing mother but she was also an excellent business woman who managed to build up multiple businesses that later she had her children manage. Her businesses include shoe shops, bakeries, and owning multiple housing buildings that she rented out. Atala was a very hard-working woman. Atala's goal was to leave all her children with a business and land. With her hard work she was able to leave all eight of her children one of her businesses and land. She showed courage by showing that you can be a mother and business woman at the same time; you don't have to choose between the two.

At the age of 60 Atala was diagnosed with lung cancer, and it was taking over her body very quickly. Doctors were not sure how long the cancer had been there, but they knew it was very aggressive. After hearing the diagnosis, Atala arranged her funeral and wrote a very detailed will; she stayed calm and even would hide medical information from her children. She arranged a trip to visit her children in the United States and told them she was just doing her yearly visit. Her children knew she had cancer but did not know how aggressive the cancer was. On her last day of her vacation in Wisconsin, she said her goodbyes to her children and told them she would not be visiting next year due to her illness. A month later, Atala was found dead in her bed after having dinner. Atala did not let her illness stop her from being strong.

My grandma Atala had a huge impact in my life because she taught all of us how to be a strong courageous woman no matter what life throws at us and to not let anyone make us feel like we have to only be mothers in life. Thanks to her, now there are generations of multiple strong women who tell her story. If Atala was alive right now, I know she would still be the strong woman she always was and would encourage women to follow their dreams even if they are mothers.

A LONG WAY FROM DEVASTATION

BY VALERIA GORDON



This story is about my dearest mother-in-law, Barbara Jane. She was born in Sycamore, Illinois. Barb was the youngest of four children. She moved frequently throughout her childhood to lots of other small towns in Northern Illinois. Her mom and dad finally settled down in an Illinois town called Dekalb.



Her mother passed away from cancer when she was only seven years of age. Then her father passed away from a suicide, and unfortunately she walked in on him hanging from the ceiling. She really didn't know what to think of this at the time, but I'm sure it devastated her. Barb had a lot going on in her life. She would mention how her older sister was being prostituted out and how there wasn't enough food in the house. Barb never had new clothes or any clean clothes. Barb had to panhandle in order to get food in her stomach. Her father favored the oldest sister, so that sister would always get more food or more of anything.

It was then Barb moved to Madison to live with her auntie and uncle. She moved into the Old Greenbush neighborhood, and she graduated from West High in Madison in 1952. There she met her new mother and became a Catholic woman. She also met her husband. They married at St. Joseph's church in Madison. They stayed married for 35 years. Barb and her husband had three children, and they moved into their new home on the far west side of Madison. She loved her new house, doing yard work, and tending to her flowers. Barb also loved to travel. Her favorite place to go was Hawaii. Barb also was an excellent cook and was proud of her culinary skills. She also had a passion for dogs. She grew up with cocker spaniels, which her parents raised. Barb also had dogs of her own: four Shih Tzu.

Barb stayed at the nursing home where I work. Her kids loved her. Her son would visit every day, sometimes twice a day. She was a very sweet woman. I loved her strong ability to stay alive. She was always uplifting. She exercised and did lots of reading in order to keep her mind sharp due to the illness she was suffering from.



Barb impacted my life because I went through a lot of the things she went through as well. At times growing up we didn't have enough food in the house, and I would have to go steal in order to eat. We had strange men around all the time, in and out of the house. My mom was always putting her men before me and taking all the money we got and spending it on drugs and drinking. So, I couldn't take it anymore and moved out to start a new life myself, leaving all the negative behind and starting over with the positive. In the same sense, she and I have come a long way from having a devastating childhood. For her to come out strong and willful, that's what makes Barbara Jane a woman of courage.

BREAKING FREE

BY LABRESHA GREEN



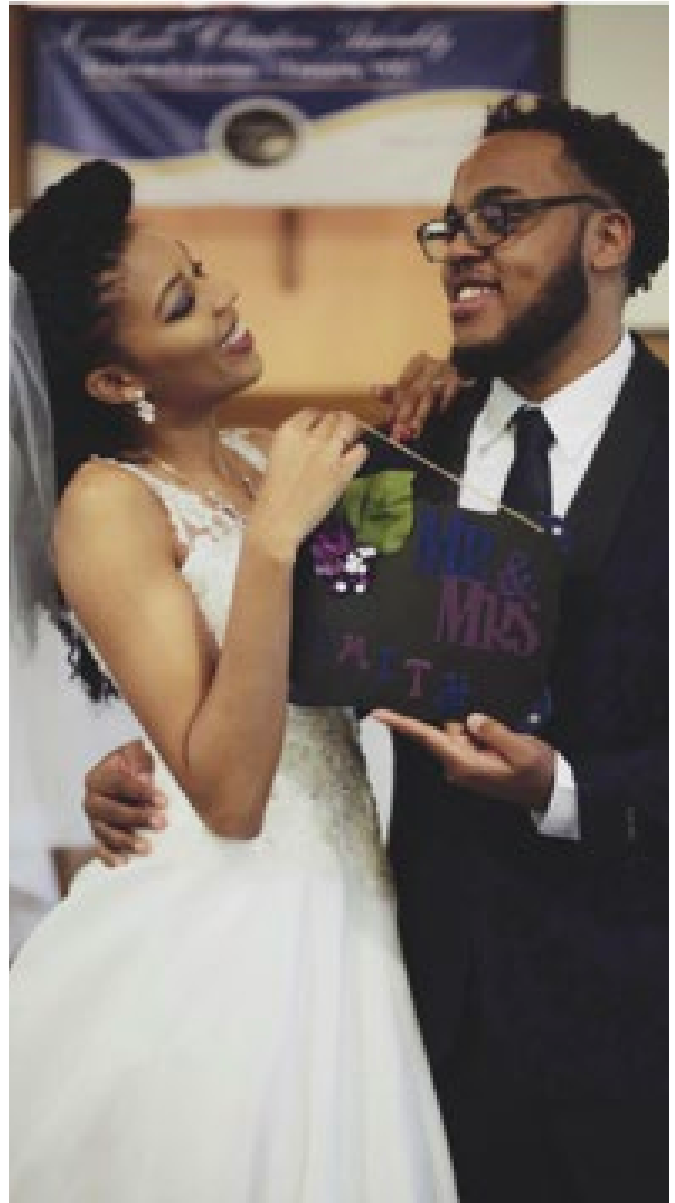
Courage is the ability to do something that frightens one, strength in the face of pain or grief. My sister is a courageous woman. Danielle Curry had lived a sheltered, unstable life, but now Danielle Smith is living her life. Growing up had not been so hard until she had to live with me, her older sister. Eventually, Danielle would step away from her comfort zone and get married and move away to Chicago. Danielle had the courage to move back to Madison and raise her family despite anyone's suggestions or opinions.

I remember my sister as a baby eating paint chips off the wall and digging into her wet diaper until the diaper cotton was all over her crib. Paint back in the 90s had to be toxic, so she has been strong since a baby for sure. Laugh out loud. I am not sure where my mom was or why we were alone all the time. I do know that this became a trend until we were old enough to be on our own. We were bound to wherever we lived and rarely got to do anything because "something could happen to us."

Danielle had eventually watched my brother and me leave home, one by one. My brother moved with his dad before he was 17. I had made the executive decision at 18 that I was moving to Madison with my ex-husband and his mother, leaving Danielle behind. By the time Danielle was 16, she was forced to separate from her mother and move with her dad and his wife. It would be a short period of time before Danielle would be forced again to move with me because it did not work out with her dad. Living with me was extremely hard for my sister. My role as a guardian rather than a sister kicked in. My sister explains me as a drill sergeant or something. I honestly did the best I could at 19 and 20 years old.



The first time I saw Danielle stand up for herself is when I told her we would be moving to Sun Prairie so that she would have her own room. She said, "I don't want to move; I've been moving all my life. Can't we just stay so that I can finish out my high school career at Verona High School?" Eventually she moved in with her boyfriend (David) and his family and continued her last year at Verona. While staying with David's family, her love for God had grown profusely. She would go to church every Sunday and joined the choir. Danielle graduated from high school. After I tried to force it upon her to go to college, she never went. She married David and moved to Chicago with him for a new beginning and to support him through college. Danielle had a lot of struggles and trials in Chicago, and with the news of a new baby the couple



decided to come back home.

From an early age Danielle had to be on her own, while following the ideas and instructions of my mom. Danielle had relied on my mom for most of her life and had to figure it out on her own. Being sheltered from the world and family never stopped Danielle from having her own life. My sister was able to stop the dependence on my mother and depend on her husband and Jesus. She is now married with her own children and is still learning. If courage was a person, my sister is it. Danielle is a woman of courage!

THE COURAGEOUS SCORPIO!

BY KWAN HOGAN



My mother, Jovita Hogan, is a woman of beauty, strength, and love! Her courage runs deeper than anyone I know. How, you ask? She does not know the words “I give up.” Raising two kids on your own can’t be easy, and she spent every minute of it with that same “never give up” attitude. Jovita Hogan, even when dealing with a hardheaded son, is extremely brave and faith driven. She knows what it’s like to lose someone you love so much, turn around, and keep their spirit alive through everything that she does.

I believe that never giving up spirit that she has started when she was little. Jovita was the only girl out of the six kids my grandmother had. As you can imagine, the dynamic in the house was stacked up against her a bit. Much later in the years, after having my older sister, she decided that she wanted to leave Detroit so that we could attend better schools. Most people in this situation, with one child and one on the way, trying to get out of a place that they do not see fit for their kids, would find it enough to break down. She was on her own, and not once did it cross her mind to throw in the towel. Instead, she made it happen for herself; she didn’t give up. Jovita ended up moving to Madison before I was born. She had gotten a job at a finance company, and after not being able to find a sitter for a newborn (me), she went out, got certified, and ran her own in-home daycare for two years. She found herself an apartment. Even though we could often hear the neighbors fighting, at the end of the day, my mom had done it. She sought out a better environment to raise us in, and she didn’t stop until she found it.



Many years had gone by; we moved probably two times by now. I was in high school when Jovita started telling me and my sister about her passions and dreams. She told us about the dreams that God gave her to start painting and making coats. This was new to her; she had always been an artist, but selling her art was a challenge for her at first. She showed her bravery by taking a stand. She ended up quitting her job to focus more on her art. Mind you, this was a job that she had been at since before I was born; it’s scary to think of leaving a steady job to start making art. But she was driven by God’s message. Not long after beginning her work, Jovita started her own business. Jovita’s Treasures is her website where she sells all types of art and different styles of coats. This was not an easy thing to accomplish. It was years of tears, years of wondering if she had made the right decision. And to this day she is still going strong.



Family is an important part of life. When we lose even a fraction of that, we can feel like a stray, wandering the streets without the slightest knowledge of how to be happy again. Jovita Hogan has been through this and has found the courage and the fighting ability to keep her head up and continue to press forward. Before I was born, my grandmother, Shirley, passed away. Jovita was pregnant with me during the time that her mother was in the hospital. I hate not getting to know my grandmother before she passed, but I can tell she lives on through my mom and even my older sister. Every piece of advice, every bit of worry, every ounce of love, I feel my grandmother through Jovita's teachings. Just recently I lost my uncle (my mom's brother). It was the first funeral I had been to and I couldn't hold back the tears because I felt like I had just lost a part of me. I hated that death was the only thing that brought me out of Madison to see my uncle, and it wasn't on good terms. I looked over at my mother in tears, and still a quiet confidence and purpose emanated from her, as if she was devoting the rest of her life to making sure she lives for the ones close to her that she has lost and that are still here to this day.

"This isn't the end." I decided to use this saying throughout my life. This short saying has taught me to never give up. I found this to be true in my classes, saving money, and caring for others. I want to be just like The Courageous Scorpio and continue forward, living and fighting for the ones I love.

UNDER THE SAME ROOF: A GRANDMOTHER'S FAIRY TALE

BY HENRY IRISSON



This is the story of my grandmother, Aurora. She was a short but strong woman who gave away her own money to help the poor. Truly speaking, now that I'm going to write about her, I'm realizing that I do not know anything about her life before the age of 30 that I can remember. My grandmother lived to the age of 87; the last time I saw her was in 2001. There hasn't been a single day, a single hour, a single minute, or a single second that I do not think of her. I always think of her, of her nurturing, her cooking skills, and her wisdom.

My grandmother was the oldest of six sisters. Each sister loved the others dearly as they grew up without a father figure in the house. Their mother passed away suddenly. Soon, all the sisters had to go with some of their aunts, but Grandma, being around 15 or 16 years of age at the time and the oldest sister, took care of the youngest one, Thelma, who was about four years old at the time their mom passed away. A couple of years later another sister, my aunt Alfonsa, joined the pack and lived under the same roof. My grandma showed a great resilience at a young age, having to go against some of their aunts' wishes to let the little one, Thelma, go live with one of them. Grandma Yoya, as everyone called her, did not allow that, as all the sisters knew that the aunt who wanted to take care of the little one was not a good fit to raise a toddler. To be honest, most of the people the rest of the sisters went to live with were mean to them; so mean to them, that another one of the six sisters moved in with her, the



one who is actually my real grandmother, Emilia. Don't be confused by this; I will explain. Yoya nurtured her three young sisters with a lot of love. Actually, one of them, Tia Foncha (Alfonsa), stayed with my grandma until she passed away in her late thirties.

My grandma Yoya loved to cook, and my favorite dish was orange marinated chicken. So, so good: my taste buds loved this dish. She used three kinds of chiles (chile pasilla, chile morita, and chile ancho), plus a few squeezed oranges, garlic, cloves, bay leaf, pepper, and salt. She made a thick sauce with these items, then marinated the chicken overnight. You could smell this from a mile away. I remember that coming back from school, I knew she made orange-style chicken, as we call it in Spanish.



Ma, as I called her, possessed a great level of wisdom. She acquired this wisdom without reading many books but from life experiences and hardships at a young age. Whenever I needed advice from her, she would always be there for me. One day, I decided to take oranges from our backyard garden (we had a huge backyard with a lot of fruit trees on it). I asked her, "Grandma, can I put a table outside the house and sell them?" I remember her vividly agreeing to it. I did it: I collected

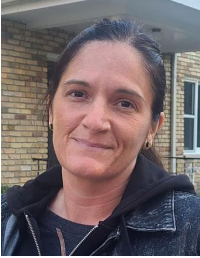


about 80 oranges and sold everything by dawn. I told her, "I made 20 pesos, I'm rich!" She said, "no, no, son, from those 20 pesos you owe me 13." I said, "what, I owe you 13?" "Yes!" she replied. I said "why?" She said, "because the oranges were mine, and the scale and container you put them on are mine, the table you put them on is mine, and the plastic bags you used to put the oranges in for your clients were mine, too." I remember giving her the 13 pesos and keeping the rest. Then and only then, I was taught a lesson of how a business works. Today I remember that, and I know that whatever business I embark on, I already know how it works. Grandma used those 13 pesos to buy me shoes; honestly, keep in mind that what I kept, seven pesos, was still a lot for a little boy.

Although Yoya was not my real grandmother, she raised me with the same love as anybody would raise their own children. She was, however, my real grandmother's sister, so I was still in the family. She was the best grandmother a little kid could hope for. I will always be proud of her.

I AM MY MOTHER'S DAUGHTER

BY JESSICA JACOBS



"You are your mother's daughter." That is what she always said to me. I told her I would never be like her; I would never go down the same path as she did. The truth is I did. You see, my mother and I have similar stories and shared experiences, and that is why I said what I said. She taught me how to break free from trauma and addiction and learn how to forgive; how people can find the determination to change their life circumstances and escape the ghosts of the past; and what it looks like when a broken woman decides to fight for her life.

My mother never had it easy. Through childhood and her adult life, she suffered many styles of abuse. The trauma of it all followed her throughout life for many years. She chose abusive men, and she chose alcohol and drugs to mask the pain she felt. I too have suffered the same things as she. So, when she made the decision to change her life, she knew that it would be a long road ahead to healing from all that occurred. I watched and observed her for many years as she worked through it all; in doing so, she was able to learn how to forgive. She told me she found freedom in doing this. No longer did she feel the need to mask and numb herself anymore with substances. In watching her I learned the value of forgiveness. She taught me that forgiving others is for yourself. When you forgive and find peace with the past, whether it is for yourself or others that have caused you harm, you are able to let go and finally live. It is a lot of work, but it is feasible. Forgiveness is an act done through courage. She forgave her mother, and I forgave mine. We both found some peace in doing this.



The lifestyle that comes with using drugs tears apart every aspect of what you love and care about. My mother's lifestyle landed her in prison as a seven-time felon in three different states. She lost everything. Honestly, it is a miracle she is even alive today. This is also a statement I make about myself. I walked in my mother's shoes. When she got out of prison all she had was the clothes on her back and a lot of determination. Throughout many years I watched this woman rebuild herself from the ground up. She never gave up on what she said she was going to do. In



1996 she was released from prison. She told everyone that she was going to go to college and eventually work in a men's maximum-security prison as a counselor. After fighting for seven years and writing three governors, she got her record expunged. By 2016 my mother earned a master's degree in clinical social work with an associate's degree in substance abuse and went on to work at Kettle Moraine

Correctional Institution, a medium security prison for men, as a drug and alcohol counselor. She has been on both sides of the fence now. Today, my mother works as a psychotherapist after being certified in dual diagnosis at Fond du Lac Hospital. She is the epitome of breaking stereotypes and stigmas that ex-cons and addicts carry with them their whole lives.

Through all the pain that abuse and addiction brings, through all the incarcerations and the institutionalization, she still had hope for herself and never gave up. She fought hard to save her own life. Today she helps others do the same. No matter what obstacles were thrown at her, she continued, driven and determined. She stood by me as I tried to destroy myself. She would reach out repeatedly trying to help me pull myself out of the same hole she had lived in. In watching her evolution, I was able to muster up hope for myself. If she could do it, so could I. She inspired me to fight for my own life, and for this I am grateful.



My mother is my hero. From trauma to forgiveness, from broken to healed, from addiction to recovery, she has never given up. She fought to be where she is today; now she helps others fight for themselves too. She has an unforgettable story and a fighter's spirit. She has taught me the value of self. I am so much like her because I AM my mother's daughter, and I say this proudly. She is a true woman of courage, and there is no one like her in this world.

WALKING WITH COURAGE: THE JOURNEY OF CHRISTINE JOHNSON-FURLOW

BY BRIANNA JOHNSON



“Knowing when to walk away is wisdom. Being able to is courage. Walking away with your head held high is dignity.” My mother was a woman of courage because she overcame violence, poverty, and life after having adult children. She lived around a lot of violence and death in her community as

a child. She moved out of town at an early age only to face more struggles with poverty and housing. Through the years she finally found stability in her life and started to face new obstacles when her kids became adults, which ultimately molded her to be the woman I know today.



Christine Johnson-Furlow was born October 5, 1975, and grew up on the southside of Chicago, Illinois. In the projects she was subject to lots of gun violence and death. My mom told me a story about when she was 14 or 15 years old. One day

a group of people came to her door looking for someone armed and ready. I guess they realized they had the wrong house and went next door and killed her neighbor. She was traumatized. Not only did she have a one-year-old son but she was pregnant at the time and feared for their lives. She then decided to leave Chicago. During her time in Chicago, she lost lots of friends and relatives to gun violence and nothing was left for her there. My mom, grandma, and uncles packed their things and headed to Madison, WI.

At first, living in Wisconsin wasn't easy. They were homeless and had to live in the shelter. When they did find housing, it was a one-bedroom apartment they all had to cram into. She wanted to go back to school but she was pregnant, so they put her in an alternative school. She eventually dropped out. Through the years she would fill a host of different jobs, finally landing a permanent job within the school system. At this time, she now has four kids—Theron Jr, Yvonne, Brianna, and Tawania—and is living on her own. As a single parent,





my mom faced many financial barriers; one thing I will tell you is that my mom made a way! Whether it was a broke down meal she created or bargained down clothes for school, we had it. She made sure we were always straight and clean cut, no matter what. We weren't rich but we never felt poor either.

As the years went by, all of her children grew up and had kids of their own. My mom was finally kid free and could do as she pleased. Or so she thought. We have kids, so now she is embraced with grandchildren every other weekend. It's bittersweet. But she loves her grandchildren and helps out whenever she can. She ended up marrying the love of her life two years ago. Everything was going great until she lost her job of 15 years due to the coronavirus. With age there are health issues, and by losing her job and having no minor children, resources were limited. Through it all she still strived to do her best and kept moving forward.

Back then I didn't appreciate or understand until I had kids of my own. Everything she went through and sacrificed for her kids made her my "Shero." When I was growing up my mother and I didn't get along. I was embarrassed by her at times because she was light skinned and I was fairly dark. I was bullied for it a lot. Instead of my mother getting angry at me for my lack of understanding, she instilled beauty and self-assurance in me. She taught me how to love the skin I'm in and to keep pushing through every storm. The knowledge she learned in her life guided me in mine. Even though she is a grandmother now and wife, it's still Mom to the rescue. Anytime my brother, sisters, and I need anything, she helps the best way she can and is there, still encouraging us and putting faith in our life while hers is still uneasy. She shows the ultimate strength, courage, and wisdom every day of her life and mine. I am forever grateful.



THE MOTIVATIONAL LIFE OF MARY

BY YVONNE JOHNSON



"The moment anyone tries to demean or degrade you in any way, you have to know how great you are. Nobody would bother to beat you down if you were not a threat" (Cicely Tyson). This quote describes my great-grandma's strong power and free will that no matter

how many times life knocks you down you get back up. Mary is my woman of courage because of the challenges she faced. Mary was able to raise her daughter with a disability, fight abuse and cancer, and support her kids while never showing pain or weakness.



Mary Anna Covington was born July 2, 1932. Mary was a different woman than most. She was raised on the poor side of Chicago. She was the second eldest of four children. Mary's mother was Indian and her father was Puerto Rican descent. Mary was the mystery child because she did not share the same father as her siblings. Mary's father was murdered by his lover because of her discovery. Young Mary lacked education because she had to help raise her siblings. Mary was raised by her mother and African American stepfather. They had very little money but managed to get by. Mary also became a young mother of her own at the age of 18. Mary married Henry Chambers Sr., my great-grandfather. Henry was enlisted in the United States Air Force. Henry fathered three children with Mary. Their third

child almost died at birth but was brought back to life mentally disabled. Henry and Mary separated but never divorced, and Mary chose to keep his last name. Young Mary reminds me of myself being second born and having our fathers murdered when we were so very young. Both of us became teen moms, cared for children with special needs, and helped our mothers with our siblings as well. Back then having kids young and not completing school was common. This gave me the courage to beat the odds and finish school. Both Mary and I suffered abuse. And in our black communities we swept it under the rug and life went on. Great-grandma Mary, how I wondered about our culture and





family history. On her 80th birthday I began to ask her about her past. I was always curious, snooping through her closet, wondering why there were bags of different colored hair rolled into balls, why her bras were a pound or two heavier. As Mary began to tell me, I realized how strong she was. Mary said she suffered from physical abuse throughout her years. By her late twenties and early thirties, Mary continued to suffer and discovered she had breast cancer. By the age of 34 she got one breast removed.

Mary mothered a total of seven kids: Henry Jr, Mildred, Gloria, Leon, Cheryl, Deborah, and Linda. Mary worked as a cashier and at the Post Office to support her children. By the time she was in her late seventies and early eighties, she discovered she had developed dementia. She moved to Madison, WI to be close to her oldest daughter, Mildred Johnson, and to get the help and support

she needed raising her disabled daughter. On June 6th, 2015, Mary Anna Chambers died in her home surrounded by her loved ones as she requested.

Mary was a big influence in my life. I'm furthering my education as I continue to raise my twins with special needs and my younger kids. It can be a tough rollercoaster, but as life knocks you down you learn to get back up. "I think when you begin to think of yourself as having achieved something left for you to work towards, I want to believe that there is a mountain so high that I will spend my entire life striving to reach the top of it" (Cicely Tyson). My great-grandma beautiful Mary, although we all called her "Muda," was strong and powerful. As her beautiful hair would grow out, she would dye it different colors so she could cut it and donate it to children with cancer. Even though she was the outcast of her family, she still managed to live life to the best of her knowledge. Along with the abuse came cancer, and she won! She is my phenomenal woman, and she lived a long life and left a big generation. Living on the strength and courage that she had even though death was approaching, it didn't stop her. On Memorial Day she danced with joy; that was her last day present. Before departing in death, she had the motivation and power to live, love, laugh, and cry. This is the life of Mary Anna Chambers.



LA REINA DE AMERICANO

BY FEATHER LLOYD



The love and acceptance that emanates from this woman is so rare. I can truly tell her anything, and she is my best friend. I am speaking of my grandma, but Granny is what we call her. Her name is Victoria Gloria Saudia. Regardless of trials, she

remains the humblest, most accepting person I know. Her strong sense of self, her perseverance, and her strength through her trials and losses have always been inspiring to me. She is full of pride but not prideful. She is authentic, loving, and genuine. I know how people always talk up their grandma, but my granny is truly a woman of courage!



Granny was born in Corpus Christi, Texas. She is an American woman and takes pride in her Mexican/native heritage. She will quickly correct you if you call her a Mexican because she calls herself a Chicana or Tex-mex. Then she will tell you that the borders were put here long after our ancestors were on this land. There are five proud generations. Her father was in the Navy, and her mother was a housewife. She loved her father and mother, but my great-grandmother was rather strict and very much stuck in the old ways. I remember once Granny telling me a story about how my great-grandmother would measure her two daughters' waists. Granny would have to wear a girdle because her waist was not tiny enough. This was just the tip of the iceberg, and she was anxious to get out of her family home. As soon as she turned 18 in 1963, she married my grandfather. This was against my great-grandmother's wishes, of course. She did not like him or anyone for that matter. They started a family right away, and the next year she gave birth to my mother. By the time she was 19, they moved up to Michigan to be closer to my grandfather's family. Moving away from your family wasn't common, but she was independent and was devoted to her own family now. She lived a simple life in Manistee, Michigan, but shortly after that she lost her baby brother. He was only 18, and it happened in a fire. Then her only sister had just gotten her first car, took it for a spin, and got into a deadly accident. She was only 21 and left behind her husband and kids. My grandmother now, away from all her family, had only two brothers left. Within the next 15 years she had five more children and was a devoted housewife and great mom.

In 1980 she divorced her husband, packed up her kids, and left for Wisconsin. She was familiar with Wisconsin because her brother had attended the UW-Madison. She had no job skills, no real family around, and could barely speak English, but she persevered. She taught herself how to read and write by interacting with her children and making friends at work. After knowing nothing but how to be a housewife for over 15 years, she managed to find housing, work, and a way to provide a great life for the kids. She raised my mother and her younger siblings alone on the west side of Madison. Her other



brother later passed away at 47, I believe from heart disease. She now only had one brother. Despite all this, she raised her children and remained single until they were grown. I think about if I could have handled her life, and I am not sure if I could have.

One night I got a call that changed our lives. I was frantic to find out that Granny had fainted, hitting her head on a counter on the way down. They rushed her to the emergency room, and my family called me because I was the closest to her at the time. Her brain just kept bleeding, and they couldn't figure out why, so they had an emergency surgery to remove a piece of her skull. She still lives with this hole in her head to this day. My Uncle Ray, her last brother, passed away of a stroke a few years back. He hung on for a year but ultimately couldn't recover. Then two years ago a freak accident happened to her second youngest son, my Uncle Ricky, who was a good man and so much like my grandma. He was in his car, got stuck in a snowbank, and the

car imploded. Watching my granny lose her son was hard. She struggled with the guilt of living longer than her child. Because of this, her heart was giving out, literally. She had a severe case of broken heart syndrome, and she was hospitalized. I was not prepared to let her go, so I sat there overnight with her. I watched her heart try and fade out many times. I was there every moment pushing that damn nurse button, making sure that wasn't happening. There was no way I was going to lose that woman, not after just losing my uncle; I was selfish and could not let her go. She is here today still thriving and full of life. She is not a meek woman by any means. You disrespect her and she will let you have it. Still, somehow, she does it in such a dignified way, never disrespectful even if deserved. She will not hesitate to tell you about yourself. I admire her dearly.

Her acceptance and unconditional love have gotten me through some hard times. Watching her still be such a woman of grace even after all the heartache is a source of strength for me. No matter how dark or how bad, she can overcome it. She is a queen. I have watched so many beautiful souls get tainted with resentment but not her. With every reason to be dark, she is still the brightest, warmest light I have ever been around. I appreciate her so much. We share recipes and go to pow wows and occasionally the casino. I have yet to meet a person like her. Her character and courage give me the strength to be better than the day before. She is truly a woman of courage.



THE SPIRIT OF SPIT AND VINEGAR

BY FARREN McDONALD



We went out driving one time, my granny and me, in her little red Fiat Punto. The fields and walls were a quilt of stories that lay in a deranged patchwork between the cold sea and the bony hills. Winnie knew every one of those stories by heart, and she'd stitched in a few herself over the years. That pile of stones

there was once a great house, reduced to ruin by a decadent British lord, and three I.R.A. men were hanged from that oak tree during the War of Independence, and that rock was where she swore that she saw a wizened old fairy woman combing her hair. When she talked about her own life, I just stared dumbly. I didn't yet have the wisdom or gumption to offer up much of anything at all. I didn't understand that the past isn't as far back as it seems to a child. She'd lived a hard life, yet she shaped the chaos of deprivation into years of plenty: she ran a business, raised a family, and inspired me to be a writer.



Winifred Farren was born in either 1929 or 1930; no one's quite sure. In those days you had to pay to register a birth, so people would have the child and worry about the particulars later. All the usual set-pieces of poverty were set up for her arrival: no shoes, a hole in your belly, and a family scattered to the four winds. By the time she was a teenager, she was off to Glasgow



looking for work. When she eventually returned to Ireland, it was to buy a pub. The seller gave her ten years to pay it off, but she did it in two. Back then pubs had to be separated by a certain mileage, so she also purchased the surrounding licenses so that nobody else could operate in the vicinity. Then she drove down to Cork and got hold of a Fisherman's license, a special permit that was grandfathered in and allowed your bar to operate 23 hours a day. It was a time of high morals and the pub was sunk low in a valley of squinting windows, but with her deft strategy she'd set herself up as the only game in town.

The family came next, three girls and a boy. She was determined that they wouldn't live in the same ignorance and poverty that she had suffered. They wanted for nothing, and all but one attended college. Two would go on into careers in education and help the next generation learn.



In 2016 I won a small competition and had my writing published for the first time. It was a story she'd told me—a "true story." A man came into the bar one day, harried and worn-out looking. He was in the horrors of drink and claimed that the entire grim march to the premises he'd been followed by a crow which had walked on the road next to

him and berated him mercilessly for the squalor of his existence. There were many such stories. Magical or realistic, there was no clear distinction. Stories were filled with leprechauns, fairies, drunks, filth, madness, ghosts, and jokers; they spanned continents, wars, love, and mystery. It was real folklore, from the last of the real folk.

Courage is far too mannered a word for this brass. She is the very spirit of spit and vinegar. I was named after her, Farren. That makes us kindred spirits. If ever I've written a clever word it was her blood that made it possible. If ever I've found humor in the lowest of circumstance, it was her spirit that powered it. She's living history to me, a connection to a world that will be lost forever, a pin that holds it all together.



UNCONDITIONAL LOVE OF A MOTHER

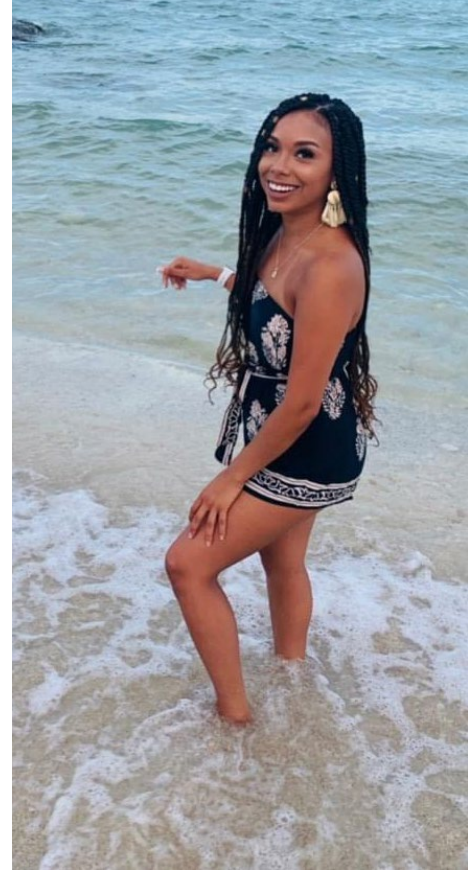
BY MICHELLE MCKOY



My daughter Symantha has one of the most beautiful smiles in the world. When Symantha walks into a room, all eyes are on her because of her perfect hair and make-up. That is what they see on the outside, but Symantha's real beauty is her inner strength and her huge heart. Senior year was going to be the best year of her life. She escaped an abusive relationship, made new friends, and was looking forward to going to college. That was her plan, but all that changed when Symantha found out she was pregnant. At the time, she thought her life was over. She was terrified of being a mother and more terrified of how her ex-boyfriend would react. The fear only lasted a week. She cried, then wiped her tears and told me she was going to graduate high school, have her baby, give him up for adoption, and go to college. Symantha wanted a better life for her son and herself. This was too much for a 16-year-old to deal with, right? There was no way she could do this in a short amount of time. I did not think this



would be possible. Symantha is a woman of courage because she was pregnant at a young age, finished high school, and went through an adoption during her senior year. Symantha is my hero for overcoming these obstacles in a short amount of time at a young age.



Being pregnant and going to high school senior year was hard. The bigger Symantha's belly got, the more whispers she heard when she walked down the hall. Every time we went out in public, people pointed at her and said harsh words under their breath. I remember she would look at me when this would happen, and I would give her a look or nod of encouragement to ignore them. Symantha put on a brave face every day, worked hard to get good grades, and even got into UW-Milwaukee. The day we got the acceptance letter, we both held each other and cried. This gave her strength to face people on hard days. See, she had a plan, and no one was going to ruin it.

When Symantha chose adoption, my whole family turned on us. No one thought she should give the baby up. It was not just our family that was unhappy with her decision. Symantha's ex-boyfriend found out what she wanted to do, and things got ugly. He was not going to allow his son to be adopted. I knew his pain and understood his anger, but I had no idea how violently he and his family would react towards her. They broke into our home and destroyed Symantha's room. Symantha had to be escorted daily by the school police officer to her car because his family threatened to hurt her. I could not leave her by herself because anytime I did, they would do something bad to her like send girls to my home to fight her. Every night was hard because her days were filled with pain and drama from her baby's father, his family, and our family. Symantha leaned on me for strength, but what she did not know is I had none. I pretended to be strong for her so she could get through the next day. I had no idea how we were going to get through this, but I never let her know that. Despite everything that happened, Symantha was still going through with the adoption.



By the grace of God, we found a wonderful couple to adopt my grandson. I will call them the Johnsons. My best friend heard Mrs. Johnson's story of how she had a miscarriage and was not able to have children. When my friend found out Symantha wanted to give up her baby for adoption, she recommended the Johnsons. The night I called them, I did not know that Mrs. Johnson's dad had died, and she was packing to leave for his funeral. I told them about Symantha and did not sugar coat anything. I wanted them to know this was not going to be an easy adoption. They said they needed to pray on it and would get back to me. Thank God the next day they called and said they would be honored to adopt my grandson. The Johnsons had three weeks to complete the adoption process that takes many couples six months to do. The goal was for them to take the baby home when he was born, so they had to hustle!

On October 16, 2013, my grandson was born surrounded by love. Symantha's close friends, brother, sisters, stepmom, father, and the adoptive parents were all there. We were all happy but scared because we knew our time with him was short. On the last night Symantha did not sleep. She was holding, kissing, and cuddling with him. Then morning came and we cried while taking turns holding him. Right before the Johnsons showed up, we wiped our tears and forced smiles on our face. When they walked through the door, they were excited but just as scared as we were. We all made small talk as we walked down the hospital hallway towards our cars. All I could think of was taking Gavyn's car seat and running out the door. My legs were heavy. I wanted to cry and scream and tell Symantha not to do this. I could see she felt the same way. From a distance we appeared as four happy people leaving the hospital with a baby. Up close we were all scared. We knew once we got to the door all of us would go our separate ways. As soon as we got in the car, we cried. We have never experienced heart break like this. That was one of the hardest things Symantha and I had to go through. The adoption took eight painful months with a jury trial. We won the trial by one juror.

Gavyn is a handsome seven-year-old boy who speaks two languages, travels around the world pre COVID-19, and loves salmon. Once a year we get a letter from the Johnsons and pictures. We can tell he is loved and happy with his family. Every letter gives us peace and comfort knowing that we made the right choice. Symantha went to college, moved to Dallas, Texas, and has a wonderful boyfriend who loves and treats her like a queen. For the first time, her smile is not fake. Adoption is not easy or for everyone, but we have no regrets. What I learned from Symantha is nothing is impossible: all you need is faith and hard work, and you can overcome anything.



MY AFRICAN QUEEN

BY STEPHANEY OBI



“Never pray to just fit in or to be plain and simple. Embrace being different, for what makes you different makes you stand out, and what makes you stand out makes you unique.” These are the words of my grandma, a woman of courage. Grandma Africa taught me this sacred proverb at a young age when I was struggling to

adapt to the Nigerian customs. At the time, I felt that the only way out was for me to come back to America, the place I knew as home. I have lived by it and embraced it until this present day. Not everybody has the chance to meet their grandmother, much less be raised by her. What I am most appreciative of in my life is the fact that I got to be raised by such an amazing person. Grandma Africa is a woman of courage because throughout her life she was able to move and adapt to any culture or situation; she kept her word and took care of my grandfather when he couldn't take care of himself; and she also took on a lot of responsibilities by raising her nieces, nephews and me. Therefore, she is a woman of courage because she believes in the power of actions and not just words; she is a woman by example.



My grandmother was born in Anambra State Nigeria (West Africa). She emigrated to America seven years after the war in Nigeria (1977). She arrived with her family: my grandfather, two boys, and her daughter. They rooted in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to begin their new life in a new country. Upon her arrival, she equipped herself with an education to secure her future and that of her family. She became a registered nurse while my grandfather pursued his dreams in education, obtaining his degree in Science and teaching as a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. As Grandma Africa's children grew older, she opened a group home for the elderly. She bought and owned her own transportation company and purchased numerous rental properties in the City of Milwaukee. She also brought over her siblings from Africa so that they could start their lives in America as well. After all these accomplishments, Grandma Africa was able to reside in one of the wealthiest suburbs of Milwaukee called River Hills. She secured enough money to send her three children to college. My father became an immigration lawyer, my uncle became an engineer, and my aunt became a doctor. I was also given that same privilege of getting to be trained by the same woman that raised my dad. I received the same exact training, the same sweet love and guidance by the same woman.

One of my grandmother's most courageous moments, in my eyes, would be when my grandfather's health began to decline. He became totally dependent on my grandmother to assist him during this time in his life. He suffered a stroke, which limited his activities from normal daily living. Grandma Africa paused her life for him; she became his personal nurse. She was his legs, hands, and eyes, and so was I. She taught me how to take care of my grandfather; she also taught me how to take of the house, the family, and myself. My grandmother was not only a courageous woman for taking care of Grandfather but also for keeping her marital vows through sickness and health and until death do us part. Most people

would not have, but she did. I still remember vividly how she took care of him, repositioning him at night without complaining or speaking under her breath. I will never forget the way she lifted him from his wheelchair to the bed and from the bed to the couch, not minding that she was the same age as he was, aging as fast as he was as well. She did that and more to the end of his time. My grandmother always made life look easy, even at the peak of tough times.

My grandmother poured so much wisdom into me. She taught me to believe that in life anything is obtainable and that the sky is not the limit but a starting point to greater things. She made me the woman I am today with her love, discipline, and exemplary life. She taught me to never settle for what life gives you but to strive for the life you want by remaining focused and humble, by completing everything you start with perseverance and excellence, and by never being afraid of facing adversities. Instead, no matter what, she had a positive attitude and approach towards everything while believing in GOD. She was not only my grandmother but a mother to me as well, from the time I stepped foot in Africa at the age of nine. It was my grandma that taught me everything, from how to say hi in a different language to how to brush my teeth the native way, and how to make the native soups, stews, main meals, and entrees. She would always have me in the kitchen with her writing down the recipes and ingredients as she cooked different meals each night. Then any day she was too busy to cook, she would ask me to make a dish that she had taught me before and ask me to cook that dish accordingly, following all the steps from my cookbook. Good or not, she would always show gratitude. Now I'm the best cook in our family when it comes to our native foods.



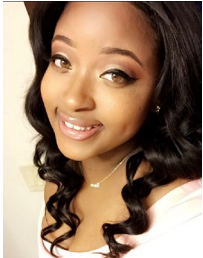
I can't believe she singlehandedly taught me about our culture—the dos and don'ts, like never eat with your left hand, always with your right, and never hand anything to someone with your left hand because it's disrespectful. The greatest of all she taught me was how to behave as a lady according to our tradition and culture. It made me better in every aspect of life. It made me a good wife, an excellent mom, and a good person to everyone. I am still unique and always working to achieve excellence in everything I do, all because of my grandma. She cared for everyone and was a mother to all she made contact with. She not only cared for her kids and grandkids but also for her nieces and nephews who came to live with her at a young age when their mother travelled abroad in search of greener pastures. She cared for four little kids under the age of eight, not including myself. She would wake up, make breakfast, bathe the kids, take them to school, church, music rehearsals, or sport games on time. never treating them differently or as if they were not her own. She

cared for them for years until they were able to join their mom. Presently they all have lives of their own prospering in different dreams and careers. She was indeed a mother to many.

You are not only a virtuous woman for keeping your word to my grandfather until the very end. Many would have walked away but you did not; you honored marriage and valued love. You are not just a strong woman for carrying the weight of others on your shoulder, but you are also a mentor and a woman of substance and of emulation because you paved a way for others to follow. You are not only my grandmother because you birthed my father but to me you are a Woman of Courage because of all the amazing characteristics you possess and for your helping heart of gold. I hail you, Mama, I hail you, Caroline Obi, I hail you, My African Queen. Your Granddaughter, Nkechi.

THE STORY OF JOHNNIE MAE CONKLIN: AN ANGEL AMONG US

BY ASIA PEARSON



Most people will tell you that they have never seen an angel, but I have. In fact, she is an earth angel, and she is also my grandmother Johnnie Mae Conklin. Growing up, I did not have many role models, but my grandmother was superwoman in my eyes. She is a woman of courage, strength, and resilience. Most importantly, she never let her troubles become her.

On July 11th, 1945 Johnnie Mae Conklin was born in Cleveland, Mississippi, to her parents, Rosie and Ennis Stewart. When she became of age she would pick and chop cotton with her family in exchange for a small pay out. While she was in school, she got word from her sister, who had moved to Chicago and married, that it was a great place to be. Unfortunately, by this time her parents had passed. Rosie died from a stroke on Johnnie's birthday, and Ennis died from a stroke shortly after. My grandmother packed her things and headed to the windy city by herself. Although she had lost her parents, and her siblings had left home to create lives of their own, she still found the courage to want a fresh start and life of her own as well.





When she arrived in Chicago, she stayed with her sister and brother-in-law. She began working at Rush Hospital as an administrative assistant. During this time, she was introduced to my grandfather Roosevelt Conklin. The two began to date, eventually got married, and had four children together. After having four beautiful children over the course of ten years, my grandmother decided she wanted a divorce, as her marriage was no longer a source of happiness. She tried to look past the infidelities, but they had become a routine in her marriage. She used to always say to me, "I can do bad all by myself." My grandfather went on to re-marry, while my grandmother continued to improve her life alone and has remained single up to this day. Married people often say strength is staying married even when your marriage is at its lowest. I believe my grandmother is the strongest woman I know because she had the strength to leave when my grandad was not holding up his end of the bargain in marriage.

Johnnie continued to work hard and was able to relocate from a rough neighborhood on the south side of Chicago to a nice condo on the north side of Chicago. She never allowed her environment to dictate her success. She is a woman of resilience. She spends her summers planting

beautiful flowers in her garden. She loves reading and politics. She is the reason I decided to vote after feeling discouraged about this year's election. She reminded me of a time when she was not legally able to vote and how I would not have been able to vote either if I had been born during her time.

Over the years my grandmother has been the rock of our family, mentally and financially. She chose not to be a product of her environment. Johnnie is a woman of courage because she always overcame her fears. She endured many obstacles on her odyssey that may have slowed her down but never stopped her. Just like my grandmother, we are all angels in our own right, but we can only fly by embracing one another.



BEING RAISED BY A BLACK WOMAN, WHAT A SIGHT

BY BURNETT REED



Take a pause, take a think, might want to sit down and have a glass of water to drink. From her kids to others, she vowed to be a good mother. All boys, one girl; all she knows is spreading positivity around the world. Sleet or snow, no matter the weather, Aunt Toni always kept family together. She is my woman of courage because she spreads positivity, keeps family together, and fights for success as an African American woman.



So long ago, I felt the hardships about not having love, sympathy, or other feelings because it wasn't taught to me in a respectful manner. It started about ten years ago when I found myself in a dark place. My lovely aunt probably was my biggest supporter. She is such a beautiful woman, with a spirit as big as a house. Her thoughts couldn't be purer, her love more genuine. Her arms wrapped around me with care and positivity. Loving words, loving conversation, just loving spirit: if her positivity wasn't around, I wouldn't be where I am today.

This woman brings me so much joy because I've never met anyone in her era to say, "Hey, somebody gotta keep family together." She has her own two kids (my cousins), plus pretty much every other kid (sixteen) she took care of. From early on, you'd never hear her swear, get frustrated, or disrespect anyone. Outside of things going on at my home, I always wanted to be like this mastermind. I wanted to have lots of kids, give lots of love, and spread my greatness throughout the world.

She has been through so much throughout her life from being the eldest, to being a godmother, to having great jobs. These things didn't just come quietly. Being an African American mom, she got thrown curve balls. She held so many titles at one point, it was hard to keep up. We were at a point in life where being an African American woman still had its ups and downs. She had to literally fight for the jobs she had. Upon all that fighting (verbally but respectfully), she still remained humble and happy to my knowledge. There was still a rainbow at the end of the tunnel because she went home to her children still with joy.



Being courageous to me means being reliable, being able to trust, being able to nurture, being responsible, and being consistent. This courageous woman has done everything above. From time to time, I'd want to run away to her house because you feel the love and care she has to offer within everything she does. From entering that door on 39th and Center to the little door on Palmer, Aunt Toni has always been the lady of the ship. She has led me to my first job, how to handle stress, how to respect people and their boundaries, how to be loving, and how to react when my mind is cloudy. She's given me the sense of security in life. How can a Black woman be so intelligent? How can she keep up the work she does and not be fragile? She grew up learned and passed on her methods of training.

ROOM TO LEARN

BY DELISHA SMITH



She was a child living between two different households: one side that turned their nose up “bougie,” and the other side being straight “ghetto” from the projects. She managed to pull both levels of class together successfully and became both book smart and street smart. I admire her independence, persuasiveness, and strength. Therefore, she is my woman of courage.

She was and still is a very spoiled child but had to hear what she should’ve would’ve could’ve done behind every handout. Also, she was judged about her failed relationships that left her a single parent. That motivated her to work harder so she would not have to hear anyone’s opinions. Nobody is perfect; besides, it all starts at home, so who were they to talk? She even went to the measures of moving miles away from Chicago, IL to Madison, WI to live in a homeless shelter with her seven-year-old and one-year-old daughters just to get away from all the nonsense.



She is a very educated women who continues to educate, so it did not take her any time to find employment; the rest followed suit. She had re-invented herself, but of course it’s life, so a few stones were continually thrown along the way. She had become accomplished and decided to try for love again. Then came her third child. It was a boy. So, she found love with her only son and decided to move back home. At that time, her oldest two children were living on their own.



She is a very tidy and organized person. She files every important document. She would say you never know when things are going to go left. You should always have proof when others decide to be deceitful. She knows what, when, and how to say things to get her point across effectively.

Just like she did, I grew up in between homes; I saw her struggle but face the world with no worries daily, no matter the weather. She was amazing. She had to put a lot of her own interests on hold to be a single parent of three, just as I must do but with four. She is the first person I call when I get into sticky situations. She knows how to use her words and her tone, putting others at ease. We are all hardheaded at times, but how else will we learn? Some people do not learn and continue to fail at life. My mother impacted my life tremendously because I am not one of those people: I willingly live to learn. She has instilled so many good qualities in me that I have nothing but room to learn.

UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

BY KRYSTAL SMITH



Unconditional love is the kind of love I have for my mom. During my hardest times in my life, I feel like I've always been able to count on my mom. Even as a child, I remember she'd always make sure I was well taken care of. My mom has taught me how to be strong, independent, and loving.

When my mother and I moved to Madison, Wisconsin, I was about four years old. It's weird how I still have a memory of that period in my life. We stayed in a hotel for the first couple of months. Even in that situation, I don't remember ever seeing a time when my mom gave up. Maybe she had times of weaknesses too and hid them. My mom has always been one of the strongest people that I know. She had me the day after her 18th birthday, so we grew up together. She made me feel more confident in handling tough situations in life. When my grandmother passed away from cancer in 2012, it made a huge difference in our family. My grandma was the glue that held the family together and was the reason we would get together. When she passed away, it was an eye-opener



for my mom and me to be more loving and remember we are all family at the end of the day. We can lean on each other and don't have to hide our weaknesses and struggles. When I watched my mother lose her mother, that was the first time I saw her really down. It affected her more in a positive way later because even in the grieving she became more patient and understanding. She didn't want that feeling of regret that if something happened to one of us, we wouldn't be able to repair our relationship. My mother found the strength to bring the love and caring that my grandma brought and to help keep the family together, getting us all together even during COVID-19.



Life wasn't easy for her. She and her mother had a tough relationship and she felt left out, not getting enough love and attention. She had to figure herself out in a different way than her sisters did. From that background, she learned to be a better mom because she didn't ask for help, she didn't look back, and she wanted to prove people wrong. My mom works as a CNA. She got the training herself without encouragement from others.

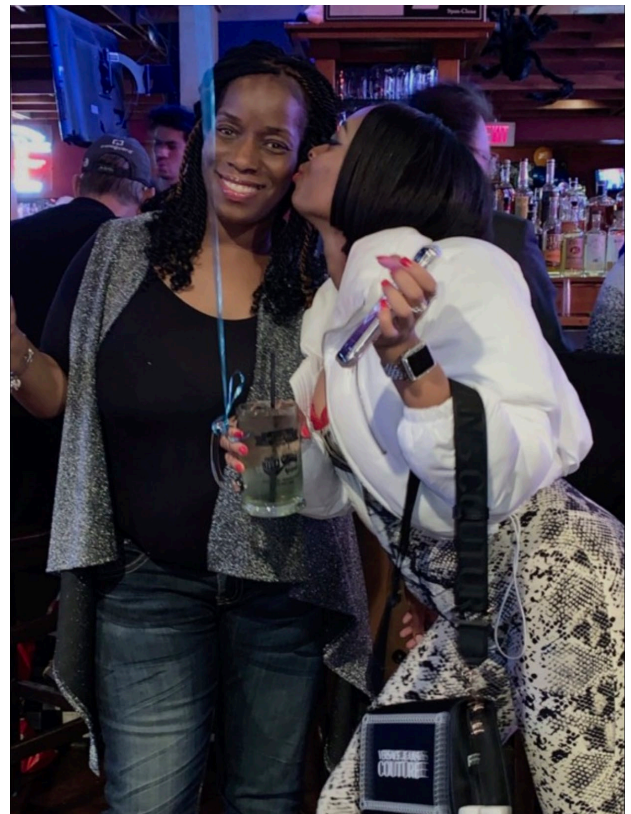


She did it on her own. Before getting into health care, she had her own day care. Being a single mom was one reason she went into child care because she didn't want to leave me with others, and it was an independent move she made for herself. The kids always loved her, and she loved them. She got them toys, took them on activities, and played a second mom role in their lives that made a big difference. One of her childcare kids became her goddaughter. I am her only child, and I am a lot to handle. When I fall, she picks me up. She would take the shirt off her back if I didn't have a shirt.

I believe you have to get to know your parent as a person, not just as your parent. Things haven't always been easy between me and my mom, but at 22 years old I've gotten to know her as a person and understand her on a different level and gain a lot of respect for her. What I respect most about my mom is that she is very giving towards her friends and family members. When my aunt wasn't working, she paid her bills without asking for anything in return. She helped my cousin get a car. She does genuine things without asking anything in return. My mom shows her loving nature by doing acts of kindness for me. Since I moved into my own place, I

thought she might abandon me, but she makes sure I am stocked up on paper towels, tissues, and soap for washing dishes. She lets me know she's there for me. My mom is good with words of encouragement and love, always there to be a listening ear. She reminds me that I am strong and from a strong background. She reminds me of how we didn't used to have anything. She tells me I'm intelligent, smart, and strong-minded, and she makes me feel loved by using nicknames like Angel Face or Sweetheart.

If you met my mother, the first thing you would notice is that she has good energy, she is a positive person, and she makes jokes all day long. You will be comfortable with her laid-back personality. I am similar to her with our personalities, which is why we get along so well now that I am grown up. We bumped heads a lot when I was growing up, but I can say it made our relationship stronger now. Whatever happens between us, the love will be genuine. My mom has always been there, the one I could always count on. No matter the ups and downs, she is the person in my corner. I have unconditional love for my mother.



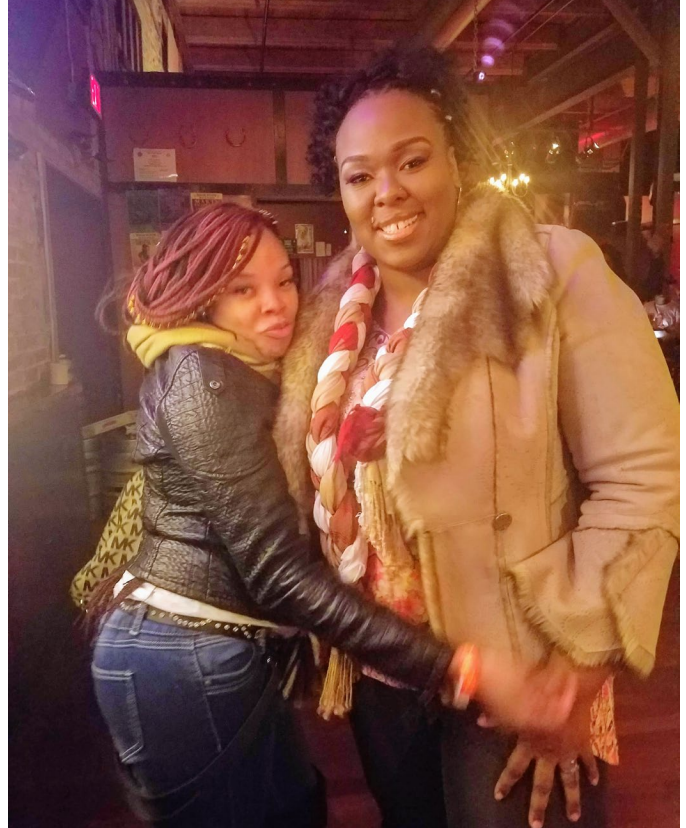
SHE'S A BAD MAMMA JAMMA!

BY THEDORA SMITH



YEAH, YOU HEARD ME! I've known her for more than 10 years now. She is and will always be my ray of sunshine, a sigh of relief and a shoulder to cry on when I am having problems, and my jester that makes me laugh until my

stomach hurts. She's my best friend. My woman of courage is a cold-blooded sistah, and I love her. She is a true Queen that takes care of her family and her business but mostly she takes care of God's people. Javone Deming cares for and wishes to solve the issue of young black girls as a black female inner city psychologist. I could have chosen to write about anybody because in my world it is easy to find a black woman that resembles courage to me. I see black women every day fighting and taking courage to make it each day. As black women it is embedded within our DNA. We learn to endure all and be all: perform duties of both momma and daddy, be a personal chef, become a teacher and physician, counselor and disciplinary, and most importantly make sure you are the family's savior and protector. This is not including covert racism, white male patriarchal misogyny, and poverty, barriers we face while raising children in this unjust world. Black women have created our superhuman strength from the weights called life. Lifting them would make any curvy, soft-framed woman appear to look like a masculine, muscle-bound super woman. I tip my hat if I had one to all black women. The things that set Javone apart from all of those blacktastic attributes that so many wonder black women possess is she refuses to acculturate and is an intrepid explorer and a devoted teacher.



Man . . . I wish y'all can meet her, sit with her, and talk to her because she has plenty to say. From observing, I have learned that when people meet her, they either hate her or love her. She stands about five foot five inches with much charisma and carries her confidence as if she's standing on the shoulders of Goliath. Those who encounter her for the first time could misread her confidence as cockiness and miss out on what a down chick she can be. I love her wiliness to not acculturate to her environment when we are in public places. She is her little ole' vibrant, loud, ghetto-talking self. Her colloquial talents shine through when she speaks, never changing and never leaning towards assimilating to speak standard English. It comes so naturally that sometimes even I wonder if she ever feels the pressure to code switch. She speaks with the authority that could make the majority in the room uncomfortable but the minority saying "preach...church." By sharing spaces with her, I've deduced that speaking standard English to appear intelligent is a front. As an African born in America, I don't have to pretend to be myself in a room because intelligent is what I AM!

In addition to being herself, she is an intrepid explorer. A large portion of the time, she is criticized and ostracized for not compromising but remains hopeful and brave to go out and put in work. She has managed to obtain contracts with the city to work with her target market. Her willingness to persist and achieve her dream and goals of helping the black community as a psychologist and open a safe house for young black girls are all brilliant ideas. Watching from the sideline how the “gatekeepers” treat my friend breaks my heart. One day, I asked what keeps her going to help people without holding grudges. She looked me in the eye as she reflected on her spiritual beliefs and knowing her purpose. I have witnessed doors of opportunity closed in her face, betrayal from her own people, denial of access, and jealousy from peers all happening to stop her vision. But her enthusiasm to persist is amazing. She knows how to navigate the system to get the resources that is needed to move forward. I’m so proud of my best friend and can’t wait until she starts on her journey with her safe house.

The biggest reason why I choose Javone to be my woman of courage is because she is a devoted teacher. She gives life lessons every day to me and others through conversation, ranging from spirituality and who we are as a people. We have extensive conversations about community social issues and how it all relates to who and what we are as a collective, as well as what we need to do to heal. Being around her has caused me to pay attention to details and have a sense of consciousness, not only paying attention to what is in front of me but questioning why and what the intention was. Within conversation she tests me to see if I was paying attention. She asks, “What I’d tell you?” I always fail to answer the question correctly. She does not ask the question as an authoritarian but as a way to remind me she told me that something was going to happen.

I look over my life and remember when our paths crossed over 10 years ago. Her refusal to acculturate, her bravery to become an intrepid explorer, and her role as a devoted teacher all pushed me to write about her. When asked could I live without her, of course I can, but I would rather think of the fact that because she is in it and touched my life, my course has changed forever. She’s a Bad Mamma Jamma, SHUT YO’ MOUTH!



A COURAGEOUS DEED

BY DANA STOKES



It was my first day reporting to this class called Learning Strategies. I wasn't that happy about it because I'm like "man, this is an ESE class." I really

didn't think I belonged in any ESE class. But here I was. I walked into class and showed the teacher who was standing at the door my schedule. I even remember the outfit I wore on that very first day. It was a plaid shirt, red jeans, and a pair of plaid penny loafers—hey, don't judge me, they were popular back in the days. The teacher greeted me and, without even knowing who I was, she complimented me. This meant a lot. It made me immediately feel welcomed and comfortable in a place I felt I didn't belong. Despite how I initially felt about that class, it turned out to be one of the most impactful experiences of my life. My woman of courage is my Learning Strategies teacher from high school because of her caring nature, positive mentoring, and supportiveness.

From that very first day I met my Learning Strategies teacher, I could tell she was genuinely caring. She would always ask me if there was something that I needed to work on other than what she had planned that day. She

also expressed that she was here to help me and wanted me to be successful. She lived by that each and every day I entered her class. Let me tell you a little secret: I think I was her favorite. I believe it was something about me that she saw that I hadn't seen in myself. With all my good days and bad days, she always showed me that she had my best interest at heart. She even went to the degree of taking me into her home when I was in foster care. This was such a courageous thing to do. To bring someone in your home without knowing their past and their struggles but being caring enough to provide them a better path and future: this is what courage is to me.



Throughout my time living with Tish, she showed true responsibility. There was never a time we went without our needs being met. She worked hard and she played harder. She showed me that having a good time came after the hard, independent work was done first. It made me look at life much differently than how I viewed it before. To see a young black single mother be successful and want the same success of other women is inspirational. My Learning Strategies teacher went from teacher, mentor, to sister.

Time has passed, and I am older now with kids of my own. Still today I can count on the support of my now-sister. I am never alone because I have her. She takes pride in my accomplishments, big or small. She listens, advises, but always supports. Our bond is irreplaceable. Being that Tish still lives in Florida where I grew up, my kids and I take trips to Florida for vacation! Tish also visits Wisconsin. One time when there were snowstorms, she didn't like it, though. It takes some getting used to. Tish is like an aunt to the boys. She calls and talks to them to see how they're doing, and she sends them birthday gifts. We shop together and go get our nails done. This is all over the phone, by the way, LOL. We can talk about anything for hours.

12 years ago, I walked into a class where I felt I didn't belong. But now I'm thankful of that very first day because I met a courageous woman who took me under her wings and guided me to a bright future. My Learning Strategies teacher is my woman of courage.



SHE SAID WHAT SHE SAID!

BY FALESHUH WALKER



With Dean's butter pecan ice cream, classic Lays, and RC Cola because Pepsi always burned our throats, I had long talks with a terrifyingly admirable woman: my late Aunt Nadine. Lying alongside her watching our seventh episode of Snapped and halfway through our pint of ice cream, she would decide to drop a gem. Only I

knew how to buy the right combination of snacks. I knew how to get the mood right. I always loved the way she spoke her mind so confidently and strong. I lived to mimic her. The way she could face her Demons sober was so admirable to me. I knew she was a force to be reckoned with. I had never seen that in our family before. Her brutal honesty and the confidence behind it took a type of courage not many people possess. I had been used to eggshell walking and sugar coating. Not in my aunt's house, honey! She was one of the most outspoken people I knew.



We shared many insecurities, the most prevalent one being our above-average height. She would tell me playground stories that instilled confidence in me that she herself had developed. In her mind, teasing someone for something they had no control over was foolish. She'd always giggle about how she took the humor out of their jokes with logic. My aunt would say, "They sit up there and tease me about being tall like I picked my body on the way out!"



If you've ever met a person that says what she feels, when she feels it, that person might have been my aunt. What better way to find out what you want to know than to ask, right? Well, you could always depend on one of my aunt's bold questions to reveal something you may not have been so proud of—in front of everyone!

People that were not yet ready to face things they needed to improve about themselves were very uncomfortable in my aunt's presence. I know because I used to be one of those people. Her honesty, and outspokenness made me feel like I was always in the hot seat, which in turn made me constantly check myself. I figured if I behave in a way that I am not compromising my integrity or dignity, that hot seat might begin to cool down. It did. Since she willingly gave me truth, I learned to give it to myself.

I truly appreciate all I have learned from her. My aunt's courage to be herself unapologetically continues to inspire me to do the same. Even though she departed, she left me the greatest gift of all: courage.

SEA MONSTER

BY SUNNI WALKER



Courage is the quality of mind or spirit that enables a person to face difficulty, danger, pain, etc., without fear; bravery. When I think of a woman with courage, I think of my Granny Simone. She was a real Bad Ass! She was a fighter literally, a wonderful grandmother even though she wasn't the best mom and struggled with a drug addiction.

My grandmother Simone was born a twin. She and her sister were premature. My great-grandmother put them in a dresser drawer and sat them in front of the oven to keep them warm. Unfortunately, the other twin did not make it. As my grandmother grew older, she developed the name Sea Monster. My aunt would always tell us stories of how she would have to help my grandmother fight the whole school. There would be a crowd of children, and my grandmother would be fighting them all by herself (laughing but serious). A young mom hit my aunt, and



my mom was fighting him in front of the house. My grandmother came out with her robe wide open and started shooting at the boy. Another time when I was younger, a girl in high school slapped me, and my granny beat her up. She was about 50 years old, LOL. She was punching and holding her glasses at the same time. The next day in school everyone was coming up to me saying my granny was O-G.

My mom worked two jobs, so my granny stayed at home and kept my cousins and myself. Every morning she would ask us what we wanted for breakfast. If my cousin Joi wanted potatoes, Kyle wanted pancakes, and I wanted grits, she would make three different meals. Our uniforms were pressed and hung on the back of our chairs. When we got home from school, we had a snack and she helped us with our homework.

Every day, dinner was ready at 6 PM. We didn't eat any processed foods: she made everything from scratch.

When my grandfather passed away, my grandmother started doing drugs. She would lash out and fight my mom and aunts, sell their clothes, and basically stopped providing for them. My mom said one day they came home and my grandmother was bagging up their fur coats and jewelry. My great-grandfather asked my mom to do something, and she said in a minute because she was feeding me. My grandmother got mad because she wouldn't do it right away, so she turned all her rings around and slapped my mom in the face.

September of 2009 the drugs caught up with her. My grandmother passed away. I had gone to her house multiple times, and she didn't come to the door. I told my mom and she had me go to her house again; still no answer. Within ten minutes of me checking on her, her neighbor walked down to our house and told us that he thought she passed away. He could smell the body in the hallway. I will always value my granny. She taught me how to be a mother, to be kind, forgiving, not to take s***, and, most importantly, that anyone is capable of change. My grandmother died alone, and the thought of that breaks my heart. How does a woman with so much family die alone?



JOURNEY TO A LIFE IN ALASKA

BY DIANE WALTON



The heroine in my life is my courageous and spunky Aunt Mingnon. My aunt has always stood out as different and non-traditional in various ways: in her style of dress, in her social and dating life, and in her work life and chosen career. Throughout her life she did things differently, following her own path, which landed her in the bitter cold and untamed Alaska.

Looking through the family album, I see that my aunt stood out in her style of dress. In the sixties she wore her hair in a short or low-cut afro. Her style of dress was slacks with a color coordinated matching shirt and vest or jacket, comfortable flat or low-heeled shoes, and simple unstated jewelry. This was to the dismay of her mother, who would have preferred her to dress in a more traditional way like her sisters and the young ladies of that era.

Not only did my aunt present herself in a nontraditional way, but the men she dated were nontraditional in a way as well. My grandmother had several strict rules about dating. One was that if any young lady, especially her daughters, came home late, that meant she had sex. Another was the young men dating her daughters had to be of a certain type and mannerism. My aunt dated several men of which my grandmother didn't

approve. And although no sex was involved, coming home late had consequences. So, she left home when she was sixteen. Mingnon dated and later married Conner, an older black man twenty years her senior. Connor passed later the following year of cancer. After that, my aunt began to date Charles, a young light-skinned man with long silky light brown hair, which he wore in a ponytail. Charles looked and could pass for white. My grandmother and others voiced their opinion, which my aunt refused to address.





In typical Mingnon fashion, her public life was also non-conventional. In 1978, my aunt heard Marathon Oil Company was looking to hire young male and female minorities to work on the Alaskan pipeline so they could qualify for government funds. She found out they were looking to hire people 30 years old and younger. So when asked, my aunt, who was 40 years old at the time, told them she was 30. My spunky, no nonsense, non-traditional aunt was hired as the first black female to work on the Alaskan pipeline. She worked on

the pipeline for six years doing odd jobs, painting things, waxing floors, and fixing pipes. She was also assigned to hammer units together, take pipes out that were loose, and other duties just like the men did. After six years, Marathon Oil had met their obligation of hired minorities. She and others were then laid off. After that, she worked different odd jobs including construction jobs, retail work, office management, etc. In the office management jobs she learned business and account skills, which came in handy later in her working career.

While living in Alaska, my aunt met a white man named Daryl, whom she married in 1983. They started a driver's education business, with him as the instructor. My aunt, who is very active and too hyper to sit still for very long, decided she would open her own construction business. In 1989, she opened "Asphalt Contracting" with money saved from her working on the pipeline and credit cards. "Asphalt Contracting" bids on contract jobs for the state, which includes jobs like painting lines in the streets to putting a fresh paint on or in the public-school buildings. After almost 40 years, she and both of their businesses are still going strong.

At 84 years old, my courageous, no-nonsense, non-traditional, very active Aunt Mingnon remains happy, healthy, and unfazed by the negative biases of others and life. She always has smiles, helping hands, and encouraging words for everyone she talks with. She is my inspiration, my heroine.



WEARING HER SCARS WELL

BY KEYANNA WILSON



It was the beginning of spring in Prentiss, Mississippi, March 7, 1953, the born day of Betty Oatis. Many parents would look at this day to be a beautiful day and a new journey to begin. But for the Oatis family, this wasn't so much of a good experience. As Ms. Oatis introduced Betty, welcoming her to the family, rumors spiraled shortly after Betty's arriving into the world. Rumors were that Betty didn't look like the child of Ms. Oatis's formal boyfriend, Mr. Daniels, which caused a bit of friction between the two. At two months old Betty was given away to her in-laws. This is only the beginning of her troubles through a life of trials as she fought for strength and success.

Going into her first set of trials, she was raised in Detroit by the Daniels family along with an older "sister." Betty grew up with the belief that Mr. and Mrs. Daniels were her actual parents. Living in a two-parent household and receiving the love from parents to a child, Betty had a great life with her "mother, father, and sister." Betty still had no knowledge that her mother and father were her aunt and uncle. At the age of 14 Betty heard from her "cousin" that her parents were not her real parents. Betty then became curious and asked her mother if her "cousin" was her brother. Her mother responded, "Do you want him to be your brother?" Betty replied, "NO!" Her mother said, "Then he's not." Betty has always been in denial of the truth; never has she thought it was real until getting on her own and finding out the family secret was the truth. She remains humble and held no resentment to anyone.

By 1972 Betty's strength became tested when she conceived her first child. Her "aunt," who at the time lived in Chicago, wanted to meet Betty's new bundle of joy. Betty thought visiting for her "cousin's" prom would be the perfect time. Still in denial, Betty left Detroit and accepted her cousin's invitation to visit Chicago, where her "aunt" convinced her to stay. Wearing a scar on her heart, humbled, holding onto her strength, she thought nothing of anyone. Betty stayed right there where her "aunt and cousins" lived and made it a home. In January of 1975 Betty became married. She conceived her second child in September, which gave her more reasoning to stay in Chicago. She realized a little bit into the marriage the relationship wasn't for her. She dealt with a great deal of trauma from her husband. She came up with a plan of saving her money and leaving. That's just what she did, still as sweet and as kind as she could be. I love to think of her as a superwoman. No matter what, she has always made a way to push through.





Using her strength and putting her survival skills into play, Betty now had two children with no help. She turned to her sister at the time to get back on her feet. Things didn't last very long living with her sister. She then went to stay with a co-worker. At that time, she was working two jobs, one as a beautician and the other as a bartender. After two years of living with a co-worker, Betty started to date. She met her last four children's father. Moving in with him and sharing a home seemed to be going so well for a long time, until things started to look upside down. Her lover was addicted to drugs and very dangerous to herself and her kids. Betty again found herself planning her getaway but this time with six children. Having a lot of courage, Betty kept pushing. The success began with staying in a shelter for one year and still working two jobs with six children. Betty remains a superwoman overcoming different obstacles in her life. She was able to save

money from both jobs, helping her to purchase her first home. By 1996 Betty landed a job working for the city as a Chicago bus driver, raising six children as a single mother. Betty went into retirement in 2018, and now she is at home working on hobbies she loves. She now owns a community garden, and she also loves hand-making jewelry.

Every so often when I think I'm dealing with something bad, Betty's stories have always brought me through my struggles. She has told me stories of dealing with worse, which has showed me how to be strong. She has installed in me survival skills and how, no matter what, to always be yourself. My grandma is my definition of a superwoman. She taught me to not be powerless but powerful.



MY STRONG AND POWERFUL INSPIRATION

BY SHIQUITA WOODS



The woman I chose is Henrietta Gables, my great-grandmother. She was born August 25, 1915, and raised in Tuskegee, Alabama. Her mother left her and her siblings behind at a young age, which forced her to be an adult at a very young age as well. Later in life my great-grandma moved to Chicago, Illinois, where she ended up having six children: five girls and one boy. One of the girls is my grandmother, of course. My great-grandma was a woman of courage because she owned her own businesses, introduced me to Christianity, which had a big impact on my life, and raised me strictly, something that I later realized as an adult was for a reason.

My great-grandma owned her own home on 61st and Normal, as well as three or four other homes in the Chicagoland area. She also owned and ran a grocery store in that same area. She was very dedicated to working and taking care of her family in the process. After working so long, my great-grandma decided to foster a few of her grandchildren, me being one of them. Before that I was being raised by her eldest daughter, my favorite great aunt, who passed away from an illness. So, when that happened, I had no choice but to go with my great-grandma, but I didn't mind. That was where I would go on the weekends anyway so that we could go to church along with my other cousin that stayed there before me.

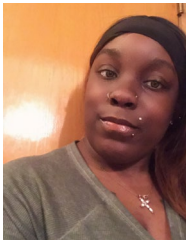
As a child I liked church because of the special holidays and to see friends. Eventually as I got older from consistently going to church with my great-grandma every Sunday, hearing the pastor's "WORD," going to Sunday school, Bible study, joining the choir, participating in skits, and visiting other churches for concerts, it became an enjoyable thing for me. Not only that, I also understood more of the concept of even going. Later in my life when I had my child, I would begin to take my child to church as well. I didn't do it as often as I went, but when I could. I wanted her to have some insight on what it is about for herself at least.

I learned a lot from my great-grandmother, even though as a child I thought she was strict and kind of mean at times. I later learned it was really just for my own good, and I'm thankful until today for my upbringing. Without her, I might have failed, but I'm here trying to make the best of it for my child and myself every day. My great-grandma taught me to cook, clean, and be a lady so that would help when I got older, and I can pass it to generations ahead.

She's truly appreciated even though she is no longer with us!!! I'll leave you guys with one of her quotes: "Raise up a child in the way he/she should go so that when they're older they will not depart from it!"



MOMENTS OF COURAGE



I showed courage in my life three years ago when my son's father, who used to physically abuse me, tried to run me over in a car as I held my nine-month-old son. He was mad at me for asking him to bring my son's blanket and other items back from his house after he had my son for the weekend. That Monday, I called D.A.I.S. [Domestic Abuse Intervention Services], went to court, showed proof that he used to hit me, such as pictures and witnesses, and asked the judge for a restraining order. I was granted one. I fought for my son in a nasty custody battle at the courthouse. I used to be afraid to run away from him and tell people what used to happen to me, but when he tried to kill not only me but our son, that was an eye opener. I knew I had to stand up and do something to protect not only my son but protect myself too. Three years later, I'm now living free not in worry, and I feel protected. **(Anjelica Brown)**



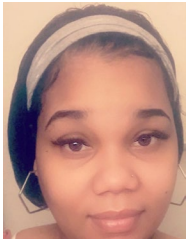
When I was younger, I wasn't that tough. One day when my family and I had my cousins over for the summer, my older cousin was always messing with me. He was only a couple years older than me. We got along for the most part, but one day we were playing in my backyard in a tree that I could easily climb into. He started throwing stuff at me. I had never really stood up for myself before. I told him, "Stop throwing s**t at me before I get down from here." Obviously, I didn't actually want to get down. But he called my bluff. He threw a stick at me and I jumped down, and then it was just on and popping. I couldn't even get my feet on the ground before he was on top of me trying to hit me in the face. I surprised myself by blocking and dodging the majority of the time. I got him off me, and I got in a good shot to the jaw. I stormed off.



I felt angry for having to fight in the first place. But at the same time, I was happy that I didn't stand down. I was happy that I had finally stood my ground. This was my first encounter with being courageous. Even though I didn't necessarily win the fight, I felt more confident. **(Kwan Hogan)**



My mother dropped me off to live with my ex-husband an hour after he was released from jail. I had never been on my own and was ready to be with my love. Sounds like a real love story, right? I assure you, it was not. He was 19 and lived with his mom. I was 18 and was running away from my mom. In the beginning it was sweet, but within two weeks his mom was hounding us to pay rent when she didn't even pay rent, laugh out loud. It was no problem for me. I got a job within a week at Walgreens and was paying \$50 a month. Again, his mom asked me for more money. Mathematically it just didn't add up. I was the only one paying out of all the five of us living there, so I started saving money for my own place. I was able to move into my own apartment within three months, and no one knew about it until I was packing! **(LaBresha Green)**



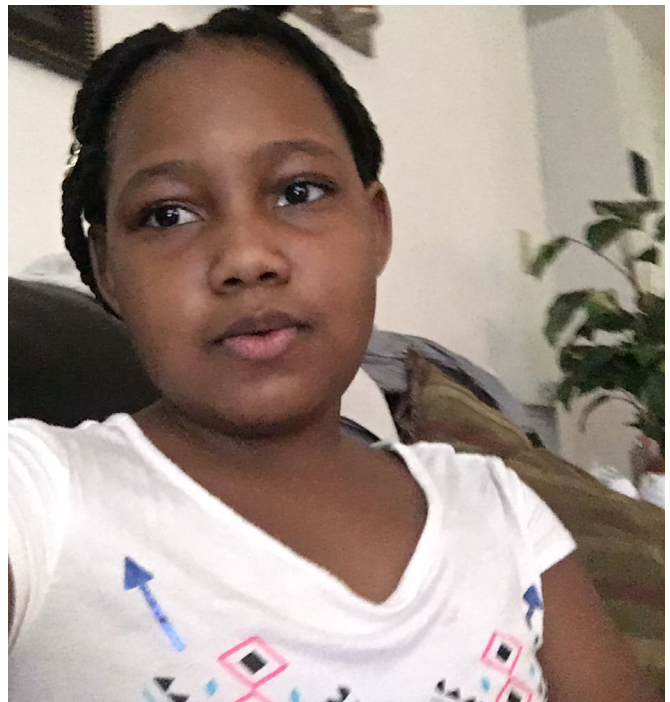
On Oct 1, 2009, I had my first child, a beautiful baby girl named Ka'Trionna, via C-section. It was the happiest moment of my life. That day turned for the worse when I bled out severely and had to go to the ICU for weeks to recover. The doctor recommended, "Cashae, you have a lot of scar tissue from prior surgeries. We want to let you know that if you decide to have kids you may run into complications."

Years went by, and on April 14, 2012, I had yet another bad experience in my life. I had an ectopic pregnancy and had to get major surgery done to remove my baby from my fallopian tube. After all this, I ended up in the ICU with major complications. I ended up losing one ovary, one fallopian tube, and a child. The doctor told me, "Cashae, I don't think it's a good idea to have any more kids. Once again, due to many health issues you have had, you have scar tissue, and this makes it complicated to have kids."

I insisted. I was very scared, and I took many sacrifices with my life. I didn't listen to the doctor. The worst was yet to come, but I didn't give up. On January 13, 2013, I was 37 weeks pregnant with my

first baby boy. I was so excited because I had kept the courage to keep trying. It finally happened, and I was about to have a baby boy. The doctor did a heartbeat check to see how baby was doing before my next C-section to come. The next words I heard left me breathless; I couldn't breathe. My soul and heart were snatched and torn to pieces. "Cashae, we cannot get a heartbeat." My baby was gone inside of me, fully developed. I still had to give birth via C-section. It took so much for me to be brave and go through these steps. I was beyond scared not knowing what was next to come. I wanted to die with my child; it was devastating. I was told over and over not to try again. I lied and said I was taking my birth control and everything.

On April 16, 2015, I had another beautiful baby girl, De'Aria, via C-section. Another precious treasure to my heart was born. This was the smoothest birth ever!! There were no complications, and it was just a very simple healthy birth. The doctor recommended once and for all, "Cashae, we think it would be a good idea to tie your tubes while u have your C-section." After all, that is what I did. I used all my courage and strength to have my kids. After all the pain, grief, and suffering I went through, I knew what I was capable of, even if it took my life. I can say it was all worth it. **(Cashae Davis)**





My moment of courage happened not too long ago. Both my sons share the same date of birth, November 11th; Samuel & Solomon were born just two years apart. So,

for my boys' birthday this past Tuesday we had a private movie screening to go see the movie *Tenent*. Anyhow, circumstances occurred, and Saturday I misplaced my cell phone and truck keys. All this led up to riding the bus to pick up the birthday cake, decorations, balloons, and food, and cab rides over \$150 for hair appointments. We did not know who all would show to the party at the movies. It was raining cats and dogs! We hastened forward in two separate cabs because we could only have three to a cab at once.

Upon arrival, we found two parents and four kids standing out front, as the birthday entourage and I were encroaching on being an hour late, but they



gave hugs and all smiles. I scrounged up everything in me to NOT complain or mention the two cabs we emerged from at the theater. Then came that moment of courage to ask for a ride home from BOTH the parents.

This day was filled with doubt and dismay. I could have cried so many times but did not. Grace was bestowed upon us that day, and the movie was great! **(Sarah Galinski)**





The moment of courage in my life was when I was 17 years old. I became a teen mom after just having had my twin boys. Through the changes I faced, I didn't give up.

I was turned down from a school that doubted me because they thought I wouldn't make it because I had twins. Between work and the boys, they said no, which meant I could apply again the next semester and that they can't turn me down a second time. At the very moment I was hurt because that meant I couldn't graduate on time. At that point, I chose not to give up. I chose to apply for a second time, and I got in. It was important to make it worth it. I beat all odds because I never missed a day, even on my most tired days. I would look at my boys every day. I would say to them, "I am doing this for y'all. I will graduate high school and give it my all."

In that moment I realized I had the courage to make it. I am a teen mom and I will graduate and I did, knowing that anything is possible when you have courage. **(Yvonne Johnson)**



The moment I became pregnant, I decided to put Londyn's needs before mine. Having kids is a scary and painful thing, but it's all worth it in the end. Nobody will ever understand the pain and joy it causes all at the same time. I'm still in a dark place, and nobody knows. I would do anything for Londyn Paris Hatcher. That's why we are so blessed. I never knew how strong I was until August 10, 2017: that was the day I gave birth and was reborn. Before then, I felt I was weak. Because of everything I have been through, let down after let down, lies after lies, not being able to trust anyone, I told myself I was never having kids because I didn't ever want my child to feel or go through what I went through. But I'm not living in the past anymore. I'm not settling for anything less than what I deserve so I can show my daughter she doesn't have to. She can be anything, and I will be right there, right or wrong. **(Paris Foster)**





The most courageous moment in my life was not when I crossed the border; it was not when I entered my first English college class without knowing much English; it is not enduring almost twenty years without being able to see my family.

No, the most courageous moment in my life has been when I had to accept being wrong.

I've been wrong in my life many times; yes, I am not proud of that. Sometimes our egos do not let us accept that we are wrong because we feel a sense of loss, a sense of being less; but in reality accepting that one is wrong is one of the most beautiful moments in one's life despite the feeling of being a loser. Accepting that you're wrong is part of human growth, and growth is such an important part of our lives as it helps us become a better self.

I don't want to get into a particular moment where I was wrong because like I said in my introductory paragraph, I have been wrong many times; however, each time I was wrong it was a moment of courage to me because it pushed me outside of our comfort zone. Humans are known to be the happiest when we are in comfort zones; however, comfort zones are also dangerous, in my opinion, because they do not let us to become a better self and see what we are made of. Being wrong and accepting it shows good character, good morals, and good manners. This is why accepting being wrong is one of the most courageous moments one can experience. **(Henry Irisson)**



This may not seem all that brave to some, but to me it was a very big deal! I am an introvert. Yes me. I have a big personality and intimidating look, almost like a porcupine with its quills out ready to shoot or a cute black and white skunk that attacks

you with a horrible spray. It is simply a defense mechanism. I have had these as long as I can remember. I have always been a sensitive lady but somehow give off a tough aura. So personal life and feelings I keep bottled as well. A few years

back I entered an experience with a company called Breathe for a Change. I wanted to get my teaching certification for yoga. This was not just that. I found out quickly that this was a big social learning experience for all types of teachers. It was for credit in further education and a bonus yoga certificate. I was intimidated and almost left the program immediately. I was not a teacher yet and wasn't trying to get all in my feelings with all these weird ladies. For almost 30 days straight I was in a complete panic.

The very first day as I am getting settled and finding a place to be in the meeting area, the only male Mexican instructor walks up to me. He gives me the biggest hug and says something along the lines of, "Thank God! I am not the only one. We are going to get through this together, girl!" It gave me a sense of ease and extreme anxiety at the same time. The whole experience was very difficult, but I found the courage to push through. I complained like crazy the first couple days. Then I had emotional overload days and full meltdowns. Speaking out loud about some my experiences brought out traumas. Many times, I was going to say, "Screw this, I am not strong enough to handle this." This was more like a counseling session for me, and I was a study subject for the others. It was agonizing and uncomfortable. I felt tricked into being the token "black girl." I could tell who was genuine and who was there for the credit. It felt like being a monkey in a cage. Undoubtedly, some of those men and woman probably felt exactly that way about me.

I ultimately was there to heal. I knew regardless the situation I needed to get this stuff out in a safe environment. I knew also that sharing my life experiences as a mixed majority I was teaching and giving some knowledge that they had never experienced before. Regardless of how many were receptive to true acknowledgment of white supremacy in all aspects of our culture, especially how a teacher can be so detrimental in shaping a child's trust and outlook on people and especially since so much time is spent through adolescence with your teacher, it was important [that they hear me.] This is for sure one of the bravest experiences I have encountered. **(Feather Lloyd)**



New Year's Day 2020 I walked up to the City County Building excited. I was going on a field trip with youth from the detention center. Or that is what I was told by Jose. I should have known better. Jose was a recruiter for a gang back in the day.

I know this because he recruited my brother, and I was constantly removing my brother from his house many years ago. Now Jose volunteers with youth at the detention center. Jose asked me if I would go on New Year's Eve to have pizza and take a select few youths to a movie. It sounded like the perfect way to start 2020.

I walked in the building; Jose was late. I introduced myself and met a few other people that were getting ready to go in the room with the youth. All of us were briefed on rules when talking to youth, then escorted in a locked room. I saw about 15 teenagers sitting and watching us as we walked in. We were told to sit on the side. Then when it was our turn we could go up and teach a bible study, sing a song, or tell our story. My heart started beating fast. I did not come here for this! I hate public speaking, plus I did not have anything prepared. My palms were sweating, and my

stomach was in knots. I kept looking at the door, but there was no way I could run out because it was locked. I had no idea what to say or do. All I wanted was to yell at Jose, "Why did you do this to me?"

Well, after about 15 minutes of anxiety, it was my turn. I walked up to the front of the room with all young eyes watching me. I thought about making myself throw up and say I was sick so I could leave. Then I thought to myself, for whatever reason Jose wanted me here because he knew I could relate to these young kids. I took a deep breath and asked God to help me through this. I started to tell my son Brandon's story. As I was talking, the room got quiet. I was able to hold everyone's attention, even the guards. Before I knew it, I was done telling my story and was answering questions from youth and the guards.

When I walked back to my chair, I felt an instant sigh of relief. I had the courage to face one of my biggest fears: public speaking. I still do not care much for public speaking, but I know if I must do it I can. Fears only hold you from your true potential. Face them and become a better person.

(Michelle McKoy)



A most recent moment of courage for me would be applying to this program. I had tried college years ago and messed up bad. I did not complete anything or receive one credit. I was

very nervous about the idea of going back to school after failing miserably before. I had told myself I should have been further ahead in life already. I had wasted so much time in life that once I thought about going back to school the idea resonated a lot of fear in me due to my age. With the encouragement of my support system, I mustered up the courage and applied. Things are tough, however; I see now that I am capable of so much more than I was telling myself. I decided I will no longer let my past or age define my choices that I make today.

(Jessica Jacobs)



I'm not sure I've ever done anything all that courageous. I don't say that to be self-deprecating; it's just not how I see it.

Whenever I've confronted someone about their behavior, I've usually ended up regretting it and thinking I'd have been better off just accepting them as they are. "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone" etc.

I've sung, performed, and generally made a fool of myself on stage many times. But that only requires not thinking, and if you believe what you're doing it's not too bad.

I came to America with no money but that was more desperation.

Okay, here's one: On the outskirts of my town there's a cliff that drops 40 feet into the dark Atlantic. It's not too tall, but tall enough when you're a short arse. And the water's freezing. My first attempt I stood a long while, up on the whistling rocks, shivering in my swimming togs. Then I turned off my mind and jumped.

(Farren McDonald)



Most of my life I thought I knew what courage was. I was taught, and taught myself, that violence went hand in hand together with courage.

That was until I had my daughter, Lilyana. I remember being up all night the first night she was home, smoking weed, pacing back and forth from her room. I've never been so scared in my life. I kept telling myself I couldn't do this. I think by the millionth time going into her room, she woke up. I made her a bottle and held her. Gazing into her eyes, I melted. All my fears and failures disappeared. We've been with each other since. She is my world. **(Fernando Galindo)**



When I was around 12 years old, my mother and I went to Woodman's Grocery Store to get a few items. We went from aisle to aisle, collecting items on our grocery list. I noticed the same group of people ending up in every aisle my mother and I

came upon. At first, I thought it was a coincidence until they approached my mother and one guy said, "Hey, you and your daughter are beautiful." Although this was a compliment to most, it made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. My mother thanked him and called me to her side. She then said that we needed to hurry and get out of the store because she suspected that group of people was following us. We checked out fast, loaded the car, got in, and locked the doors.

As we suspected, they had been following us because the group of people began to tail us out of the parking lot. My mom was driving fast, and I could tell she was panicking. She kept making turns and intercepting traffic until we lost them. At that moment I had to find the courage to keep calm because I knew panicking would not make it better. We called the police and filed a report, but we never saw them again. **(Asia Pearson)**





When I found out I was pregnant with my daughter, I was scared. Like most soon-to-be mothers, I wondered if I was going to be able to do it. Financially I was fine, but mentally I went through doubts of if I was going to be a good mother and would I be able to protect my child from the dangers of EVERYTHING in this harsh world. With the depression I used to experience, am I going to go through post-partum depression? It was a lot to take initially, but I knew she was exactly what I needed and my support system was amazing.

Fast forward two years later: we are flourishing, and she is healthy and extremely smart. I couldn't begin to think of experiencing a life without her. When I think back to all the emotion and fear I had finding out about her, I don't even know why I was worried. Children aren't for everyone, but Milani was specifically meant for me. She came at a time I needed her most! **(Tawania Alston)**



My moment of courage in my life is when I decided that I wanted to stop drinking. Drinking was interfering with some things in my life. It was affecting my work life and the healthier parts of my life, like my workout sessions. I didn't

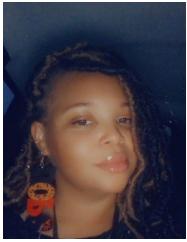
like the hangover feelings anymore, and drinking was putting a big dent in my pockets. It has gotten me in to trouble with the law. Also, my energy level started to go way down. It wasn't fun to me anymore.

So, I made the decision to stop! I was very nervous at first because I didn't know how my reaction was going to be without drinking. It has been part of my life for quite some time. It was a big social thing in my life. In order for me to get over this, I would still go out with friends, but I would order a non-alcoholic beverage just so that I could have that feeling of the bottle in my hand. Also, the epidemic that's going on right now helps big time because everything is closed down as far as all the drinking social places goes. Eventually, it became easier and easier to quit! **(Valeria Gordon)**



"Moment of courage" for me is funny because the thing I feared most was living a "normal life," something I am still figuring out. My whole life from a preteen until my early thirties I lived on the opposite side of the law. I never feared the two most likely outcomes of my lifestyle: death or jail. After my last time going to prison, I decided I would not go back even if it meant leaving the street life which I had grown to love. I feared working a "9-5" job living paycheck to paycheck, possibly losing the respect and fear I had garnered in the streets.

I decided to attack this life with the tenacity as I did the streets. It's a very slow process that I'm still learning to maneuver my way through. I have had my moments with financial struggles that made me want to revert and swallow my pride when I felt disrespected, thinking "this fool must not know who I am." These moments made me feel weak; however, I came to realize weak would have been giving in to calling from my past. It took strength to get to where I am and to continue to be in this struggling position when I have an "easy way out." **(Calvin Balentine)**



April 22, 2012, was the day I said, "Enough!" I was sick of the physical abuse by someone who told me that he loved me. My kids' father was drunk as always that day. He asked me for some money and I told him no. He started cussing me

out and I asked him to leave. He said he was not going anywhere, and he started beating me in my face. I kicked him in his groin and ran out of the house with my panties and bra on. When I got out of the house, I realized I did not have my phone. But I kept running. After running a block, I saw the police parked on the corner. I ran to the car and told them what happened. They took me back to the house. He ended up getting arrested. The next week I moved to Madison, WI. **(Tisha Butler)**



A moment of courage in my life is when my grandfather died. My grandfather was weird and did quirky stuff. We weren't that close but still had great moments together. Around this time of year, it's hard. Christmas time was

his favorite time of year. We would listen to the Temptations holiday album and ride around in his beat-up green van. He passed away in November a few years back. During his funeral, I didn't know how to grieve. When I saw him in the casket, I felt numb. I didn't visit much in the hospital so I felt guilty. I felt like I owed him an explanation. But I couldn't because he was gone.

I finally cried at the funeral. There was so much to be said and done. When the funeral was over, we went to go bury him at the graveyard. There was a snowstorm that day. The ground was slushed and cold with ice. I was freezing, and so was everyone else. The preacher preached fast so everyone could get out of there. As everyone began to run back to their cars, I walked up to his casket as they lowered it. My mind was telling my mouth to say goodbye. But then when I opened it, I began to sing. I couldn't hear myself and didn't even know I was doing it. But when I was done, I turned around

and the crowd was back, with all eyes on me. That was the most frightening moment of my life because I had stopped singing a year earlier due to an embarrassing moment in high school. But when thinking about my grandfather, I knew he loved my voice and always told me it was beautiful. I guess that was my way of saying goodbye.

Overcoming my fear of singing took a lot of courage, even though I didn't know I was doing it. Moving on or just letting go after someone passes takes a lot of strength and courage. Also, because the guilt hung over my head, I had to let go and keep moving forward. **(Brianna Johnson)**





I could write a book with all the moments I have felt courageous in my life. Sometimes I feel I have lived multiple lifetimes because of that. One moment stands out to me in particular and is very hard for me to share, but I would like to write about it.

About two years ago my father was diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer. It was the most shocking and surreal time in my life. I was 29 with a seven-year-old, and my father was 54. I do not think anyone is ever really prepared for something like that. He was having trouble with pain in his leg and went into the ER to have it checked out. He was admitted that day and stayed through his first chemo treatment during those first three weeks. I stayed by his side as much as I possibly could and moved into a bigger apartment so I could help him with his outpatient treatments and he could be with his family. I signed my lease and had my father in my house for about 5 days until they had to move him into hospice where he passed. That was 3 months into his battle. I had to continue life without my best friend.

I find myself constantly trying to find that courage to continue on in life. Raising my children has given me that strength. I miss him more and more with every passing day, but I have that courage and strength passed on to me from him. Even writing about this has taken courage I did not know I had.

(Sarina Benford)



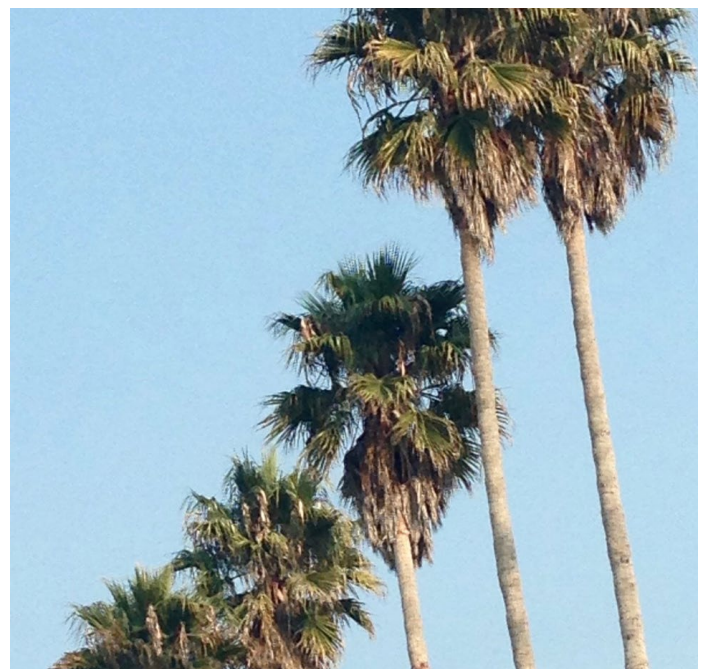
For my 21st birthday, my mother offered me a plane ticket to go see my newest friend, Michelle, who lived in Los Angeles, California. I had met Michelle three or four years prior as we both attended a summer engineering college program here in Madison. She was someone who was not a part of the demons of my familiar.

I was excited and nervous at the same time. I had never been on a plane before. I had never traveled alone before. I had never been more than 300 miles away from my familiar. And I had never been given

the responsibility of more than a hundred dollars to take care of myself. On the day of my travel, my mother helped me prepare for departure. In our talk as we said our goodbyes, she suggested that I might like it so much out there that I might want to stay. After that, she handed me \$200 dollars. It registered, but I gave it no thought. Or at least I thought I didn't. My friend and her roommate made me feel comfortable and relaxed as they showed me around beautiful sunny California. And they made it look so very easy and simple to live there.

I struggled with the thought of me leaving. The demons and challenges I faced and overcame had become my comfort, my familiar. And now you tell me to look forward, past my familiar, into a future I don't recognize, a life facing uncertainty. I felt I had eventually rejected and put those demons behind me. But in truth, those demons and mental restraints were unbreakably interlaced in my familiar.

After several days of mental restraint, I shrugged them off and allowed myself to look at and accept the possibilities of me living a new life in the intoxicatingly beautiful and sunny California. In the beginning the struggle was indeed hard. I met with some pitfalls of depression, but the surrounding beauty of sunshine and the socially calm atmosphere became my new familiar. **(Diane Walton)**





A projects kid, born and partially raised in Chicago, Illinois, I was uprooted and relocated to Madison, Wisconsin due to some unfortunate family circumstances. This is where my life had changed drastically.

There was little to no indication that a child like myself would grow up with a bright future. So, anything I did other than get pregnant or addicted to drugs made my new peers think I was some sort of special edition poverty-stricken black person. With little to no guidance, I fought my way through life, earning and learning most things the hard way. Despite my keen ability to get distracted and procrastinate, I've been able to somehow push through.

The moment of courage I am most proud of happened a couple of years ago. Without a college degree, I have been able to earn close to \$30 an hour, the most money I have ever earned in my life. I worked in banking, what most would consider a respectable job. Well, I was not treated well, and I quit that respectable job! Almost everyone thought I was nuts! Why would I quit a job like that, you wonder? Integrity and dignity were the main reasons, although I could go on forever. Oddly enough, I am grateful for the experience. I learned who I didn't want to be and that you don't have to mistreat people to get ahead. **(Faleshuh Walker)**



My moment of courage was when my grandmother passed away; I was only nine years old. Death was already a hard topic to understand for me at the time, but to make things scarier my life was also drastically changed overnight. When

my mom got the news, she took the first flight out to Mexico, leaving my dad and me behind without knowing when she would be returning. For two months I had to adjust to not having my mom around, and that sucked! See, my dad was a terrible cook, and that meant I had to use YouTube videos to try and teach myself how to cook meals for my dad and me. **(Erika Gonzales)**



Having courage throughout these unprecedented times can be tough. My moment of courage stems from me going through what's going on now. I never thought COVID-19 could knock on my door and take over. I felt alone. But once I spoke to people from school and really understood that they really cared for me, it made me want to keep the fight going. I'm still fighting day in and out, but I feel like a courageous champ because I never thought this would happen, nor did I think I'd have to be picking up the pieces to my life. I am taking care of myself and my daughter to ensure we still are living to the full extent. I thank God and the UW Odyssey Project for the love and support I get from them. It's unconditional, and it helps me feel the courage to keep going.

(Burnett Reed)





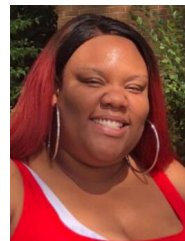
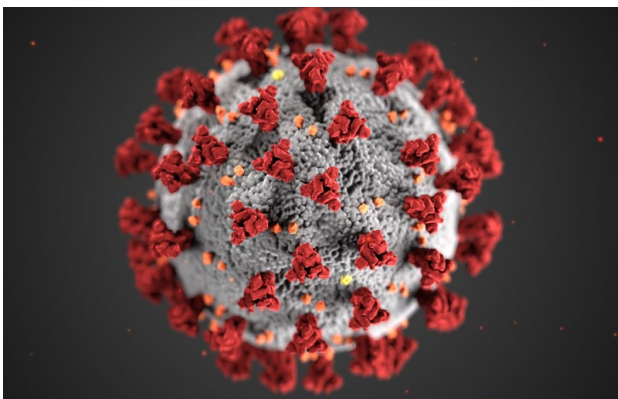
My moment of courage is NOW with the pandemic going on. I'm currently a mom, teacher, friend, etc. That's totally OK with me. I believe it's a blessing to be with my kids as much as I want to. I was supposed to

start a job with the school district in March, but COVID-19 stopped that. My family is grateful to have a home and food on the table despite the challenges of getting employment during this time. It could be worse. I'm just a mother trying to bring happiness and peace inside my family and my life scenery. 2020 is my moment of courage! **(Dana Stokes)**



It took me some time to figure out my moment of courage. At first, I didn't think I'd done anything courageous. Then it came to me. As you all know, I had COVID-19 in August. I was really sick in the hospital for three days. My oxygen

was 88%. I had every symptom there was to have. I was also sick for about a month. My heart rate is still 100-110. A normal heart rate is 60-80 beats per minute. I work at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in the Infectious Disease Clinic. I'm around people all day. Sometimes I'm really nervous about going to work. We have COVID patients. Even though I am terrified about getting COVID again, I still go to work. When I was sick, my nurses were so sweet and took great care of me. Helping others warms my heart. I just try to stay positive, not panic, and pray. **(Sunni Walker)**



A moment of courage for me would be this year when COVID-19 happened and basically changed everyone's life in similar yet different ways. It came with hardship, ongoing restrictions, and losses for so many. They say that

the only constant thing in life is change which can be for better or worse. COVID-19 made sure it changed a lot of things for better and for worse.

I felt like this for a while before I decided not to think about it anymore and let it deprive me of the little joy I had from the memories I had before COVID, so I decided to use the time away from the people I love and care for, the time away from having fun and going places due to COVID-19, to better myself not just financially but also mentally, spiritually, and academically. I've taken on two jobs, three online classes including Odyssey, job trainings for a better job, as well the necessary classes needed for certification to open my own daycare, which I'm one step away from doing. I also got a better job as well. This is my moment of courage because I was able to exchange the ugliness of change the pandemic brought into something beautiful, not letting it keep me unhappy, worried, or in the same place I was when it started. I beat it physically (by observing all guidelines and restrictions), mentally, and financially. **(Stephaney Obi)**



death means. Some days I practiced brushing it off, making it the feeling that this is only a dream. But it's not, and death is a part of life. Learning to acknowledge this was temporally hard for myself, but acknowledging what has happened helped me some.



The meaning of courage is doing something that frightens one. Sometimes you don't realize this moment when you must put all your strength in one bag. Sometimes you do realize the moment and take the time to build courage. Recently [when my daughter's father was murdered], I didn't have as much time to build courage as I thought I would. I faced a heartbreaking event, for myself and for my daughter. I battled day after day to see how to handle my feelings. Truth be told, when facing such tragedy, you really don't know how to handle things. You may become angry, frustrated, or even mentally unstable. Losing someone has been never easy, especially someone who makes half of your pie become a whole pie. It brings a feeling of emptiness, like something has been taken away from you. It brings the thought that everything has come crashing down in tons.

Every day I sat with my brain unsure of the things that were going on or maybe the thought of just not wanting to believe what has happened. For myself I quickly had to learn that being depressed or giving up wasn't much of an option. I fought a battle over and over in my mind of how I would explain something to a three-year-old who doesn't have the knowledge or understanding of what

My moment of courage is acknowledgement. It has taught me that keeping his memory alive to my daughter will not only help me explain but also show that he's still with us. It has taught me no matter what to love every day. It has taught me to turn my negatives into positives, which makes whatever you deal with a lot easier than you'd think. Acknowledging has opened a new outlet for my child and for me. I'm not going to say it's easy to acknowledge. Some days are hard, but my vision has become clear. **(Keyanna Wilson)**



FAMOUS WOMEN WITH THE COURAGE TO WRITE



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

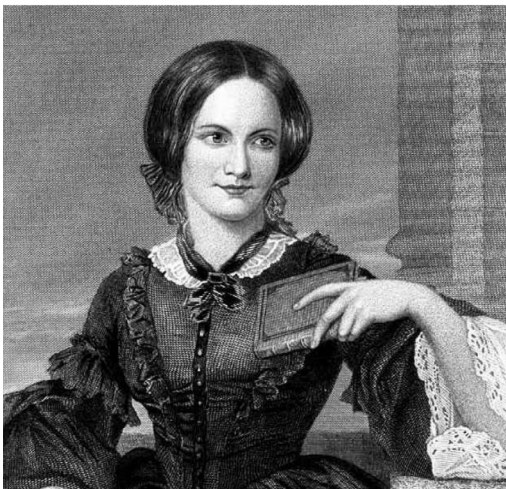
"Courage is the most important of all the virtues because without courage you can't practice any other virtue consistently. . . . I believe that the most important single thing, beyond discipline and creativity, is daring to dare."
—Maya Angelou



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



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



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



"You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, 'I have lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along. ' You must do the thing you think you cannot do."
—Eleanor Roosevelt



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

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

—Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl*



"You get in life what you have the courage to ask for." —Oprah Winfrey



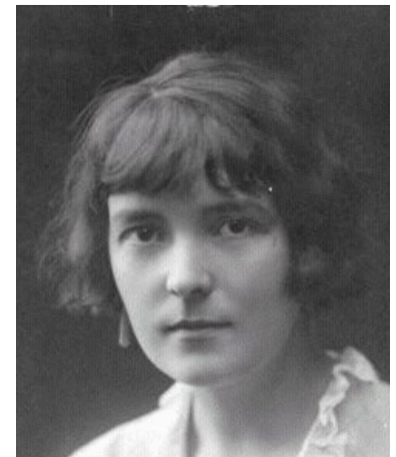
"I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It's when you know you're licked before you begin, but you begin anyway and see it through no matter what." —Harper Lee



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



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



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