

YEAR 21, ISSUE 7

DECEMBER 13, 2023

ODYSSEY



ORACLE

WOMEN OF COURAGE



Emily Auerbach, Executive Director/Co-Founder
Emily Azad, Program Manager; Photographer
Sarah Lensmire, Assistant Program Manager; Photographer
Christina DeMars, Coordinator; Oracle Assistant
Gwendolyn Coale, Odyssey Assistant Coordinator; Oracle Assistant
Beth Auerbach, Oracle Designer

emily.auerbach@wisc.edu/608-712-6321

www.odyssey.wisc.edu



SELFLESS WOMAN

BY DONTAEVA ACKLIN

What makes a woman strong? That answer simply lies in the eyes of the beholder. Fortunately, along my journey I had the blessing to meet a fantastic woman who is strong because she had the options to give up on life and leave for good, or face life head on continuing through all of life's waves and stillness. She has shown selflessness through her acts of taking in three additional bonus children although she was already going through her own tribulations; she still decided to take in her cousins and add them to the immediate household. Finally, Kita Thompson is someone who chooses peace and suggests five steps to calmness.

A woman in strength does not give up: she finds her purpose when things get rocky and follows God as he redirects her. Kita lost her home and her job many years ago. She thought this would be the end of things. She began to find herself drowning her life in sorrows with alcohol; this became something that was implemented in her lifestyle. She had lost her job, her career, her passion, and her joy. She lost her housing stability and comfortability. What does one do when one loses everything? At this time, Kita felt she didn't have purpose and found herself living in a black hole. She later then had thoughts of suicide and ending it all—she strapped her children in the car, then entered the vehicle herself and took off with pure thoughts of death. She imagined that would be the last day she would have to suffer; she wanted to free herself from the shackles life had on her. Shortly after, something amazing happened: Kita instantly thought about what she was actually doing. She took a second to reflect and think about her innocent children and herself. She remembered she doesn't get to decide when things are over, God does. God has the last say so, not her; God decides when your fight is over. Kita then was able to reflect. She realized that something needs to change and change needs to happen now. She realized she couldn't spend the rest of her life feeling sorry for herself, and that change starts with her! Kita then went to the job that she was terminated from and wanted to know why. Why was I terminated? What did I do wrong? What do I need to do better? These were all very important self-reflecting questions to ask, and quite a way to put yourself out there in an uncomfortable situation to feel comfortable, but it was all necessary. She didn't give up. She conquered, and three months later was accepted into a new place to call home.

Kita raised three adult boys 20+ years ago, and she took on an additional challenge by adding three more bonus children to her household; they called her cousin Kita. Kita did not have to take on this task since her baby cousins were placed into custody with Kita's mother, until one day the mother decided that it would not be a good fit for her to keep the children under her custody. Mental illness played a big part in the children's life already due to the trauma of their own parents. Kita had to do some self-reflecting trauma work from her childhood to understand things more clearly. Kita knew the kids deserved better and did she want to see the kids in the system or split apart. Kita saw similar patterns that she recognized





as trauma from her childhood, and she did not want the cycle to repeat itself. At this time Kita was also dealing with the loss of her father and found herself falling down the hole. She began to drink her pain away, washing all the hurt, all the sorrow, and all the heartache down. Kita then came to a realization that her life as well as her loved ones mattered. Kita got inspired, grounded herself, and decided to get off of the alcohol and focus on the things that mattered the most. She knew drinking her pain away would only be a temporary fix; she needed a permanent fix and to re-find her purpose and walk in it. Once Kita put the bottle down and cleaned up, she decided to legally take in three beautiful children by the names of Zay, Willow, and William. Kita did not have to take on this responsibility, but she

decided to because she is selfless. She felt in her heart that they deserved better because it was already heartbreaking enough that their own parents gave up on them. Kita stated, "Only God can see us through this, so take a leap of faith, get the kids, and take it step by step."

Maya Angelou wrote, "A woman in harmony with her spirit is like a river flowing. She goes where she will without pretense and arrives at her destination prepared to be herself and only herself." I chose this quote to describe Kita because Kita explained just because you suffer through something, that doesn't mean that you have to live through it. Always stay true to yourself. Understand that obstacles are thrown our way in life, but we have to understand what we have control over versus what we have no control over. Don't try to control the uncontrollable factors in our life; let life flow like a river.

While speaking with Kita I asked her a few very specific questions. "As a black woman what would you say to the little black girl reading this? How do you not let the negatives of life get the best of you?" Kita then dropped some knowledge on me and stated that women need other women. What does that mean exactly? Think about it like this: as a young girl you look up to your mother, if you don't have your mother then you go to the next female figure to look up to, and shortly after that you find yourself imitating that





woman that you in your heart believe is strong. That's exactly why it is so crucial to have these strong female role models to look up to, because that little black girl we are talking about is the future. Kita explained women create the worst out of other women, and she was fortunate enough to look up to Ginna, her god mom, her auntie Anne, and her auntie Lady bug. Kita later goes on to say that having a group of strong women around her who showed her love inspired her and helped shape her into the woman she is today. Kita explains the steps she takes to stay calm and peaceful:

1. Look at the person in the mirror.
2. Take a deep breath and root for yourself (You vs You). Speak positive affirmations to yourself.
3. Understand at all times that you got this.
4. Take a second to remember the things that you have and all the things that God has created for you.
5. Find peace in the little things, like by staying connected to nature and oneself.

Kita is a woman of courage as she goes above and beyond to support the individuals in her life. A woman who's endured so much pain in this life, she continues to get up every day, know her value as a woman, and walk in her purpose with her head held high at all times. Kita is strong willed because she doesn't give up on herself or her peers. She is selfless due to her characteristics of putting the needs of others before her own. Lastly Kita is peaceful as she comes up with different techniques to remain calm during situations. She focuses on her energy and her carbon impact. "Some say day by day, but I say step by step, it's up to you to live through life. Life isn't made to be perfect, it's about how we go from there," says Kita Thompson.



PHENOMENALLY, MY MOTHER BY CARISSA ANDREWS

"And to a man, the fellas stand or fall to their knees. Then they swarm around me, a hive full of honeybees. I say it's the fire in my eyes, and the flash of my teeth, the swing in my waist, and the joy in my feet. I am a woman, phenomenally. Phenomenal woman, that's me." —Maya Angelou

With her standing at five foot seven inches tall, you could never imagine that you would be able to hear this woman coming from a mile away. The way she stepped was as if there was a stampede coming, heading in your direction. Her long, brown, curly hair and puppy dog eyes can give the illusion of one who is timid. You would never imagine that her presence is so strong that it could shift the energy of a room, for better or worse. While navigating every traumatic event that she has been faced with, she has continued to overcome, be courageous, and be a fighter, phenomenally.

Growing up in a large family with ten children and being one of the oldest was anything but ideal. It was a two-parent household, yet the struggle was still evident. My grandmother worked tirelessly in an effort to keep a roof over everyone's head, and my grandfather was an alcoholic who was home with the kids. Her early childhood years were spent moving across the country because of her stepfather's alcoholic antics. Everything from fighting, to burglarizing: the question is what didn't he do? I believe an unstable home life is what led to the cycle repeating itself, with my mother becoming an alcoholic.

Alcoholism is one of the many traumas my mother has faced in life, and, quite frankly, I can understand why she drinks. When my mother was a child, she endured countless acts of trauma, which thus caused her to open the door for another. Throughout my thirty years on this earth, my mother never let her addiction stop her from being a great mother; she never gave up. We always had food, clothes, a home, and plenty of love. Now that I am older with a child of my own, I can understand just how hard it is to wake up every day fighting your own demons, and having a little one looking up to you in everything that they do.





In 2007 my younger brother, Cailen, was diagnosed with acute-lymphocytic leukemia while we were in Wisconsin visiting family yet living in Pennsylvania. Our whole lives were flipped upside down. The one thing I remember by mother telling myself, my stepdad, and other family members is that "Death is not an option." How can someone who is looking at their sick child still have the strength to grab the disease head on and fight? Over the span of two years, I watched her drive one hour each direction to get me ready for school in the morning, and again to come home and make dinner for our family, all while my six-year-old brother was a live-in resident at the Hershey Medical Center receiving chemotherapy. I witnessed many trying times, yet I never saw my mother break a sweat. Looking back, I don't recall seeing her breaking down in front of us, nor being unstable with her emotions. Hell, it's been twenty years and I'm still in amazement, with being a mother myself now.

Overall, the impact this woman has had on me has been nothing short of amazing. People are drawn to her like honeybees swarming their hives. She radiates strength and what womanhood is all about. I've learned that crying is normal and acceptable. You don't always have to be strong; you just must give life effort. Giving up is not an option. Most importantly of all, I've learned how to be a good mother. A great woman was something I was born into, but because of the abuse she endured and sacrifices my mother chose to make, the cycle was finally broken. I was born into chains that were tighter and shorter than bearable, yet through knowledge, wisdom, and understanding from my mother and God, I am becoming a phenomenal woman; that's me.



LOCKET: A LINK TO CLASP

BY LUCAS BENFORD

Picture a locket, radiating the golden hue of memory, gently worn with wisdom and containing the roots of my existence. Open the locket and you'll see two exemplary women: my grandmothers—Marilyn and Laverna—women of spectacular courage. Both these women overcame men and culture that were rooted in outmoded thinking and strove to create their own narratives, woven from their dreams. Dearest grandmothers, thank you for being forcefully you in a time that said “no”; for persistent courage when met with the adversities of homelife; and for the exuberance of love and wisdom you infused into my existence as love requires an abundance of courage. Their existences meld in me, so I'll set out to merge their stories into this memento.



Both my grandmothers were children of the Depression, and the scarcity of that age taught them many valuable lessons about self-reliance, perseverance, and gratitude. Both women were dreamers and strove to be more than the age said that they could be: mothers and wives; and they were wonderful mothers and wives. My grandmother Laverna was an accomplished jazz singer in the 40s and 50s before becoming a nurse after my father was born. Imagine her in a cream-colored dress delighting audiences with her melodies and graceful movements. My grandmother Marilyn wanted to join the service during WWII but was too young, so she went to radio school and eventually earned a teaching degree and then a master's degree. She did all this without the financial support of her family. Her father offered to pay for college for her brothers, but the offer was rescinded because she was a woman. Both of these women



encountered resistance to their dreams: Laverna wanted to sing to integrated audiences in the States but was forced by “the color line” to perform predominately in Canada. The papers called her the “Sepia Songstress,” a coded epitaph for her brown skin—referencing the brown color of early 19th-century photographs. Marilyn was one of the original women in STEM; her education in radio school was unique for the 1940s. Picture her in a jumpsuit working on the intricacies of a plane's radio with a determined smile on her face. My grandmothers were able to challenge narratives about what could and would be acceptable for a woman in their day. Narratives rooted in misogyny, racism, and the prevailing wisdom of the day were uprooted to plant the seeds of promise for future generations.

Both my grandfathers could be challenging men to love, especially for the intelligent and driven women they loved. One woman chose to remain married, and the other chose divorce. These relationships display two different facets of

courage: enduring courage and the courage to know when enough is enough. I love both my grandfathers but recognize that they were men damaged by the patriarchy. They had been raised to believe that marriage was not a partnership but a relationship where the husband would be steward to his wife. Laverna rejected this idea, and the final nail in the coffin of her marriage was her desire to return to the workforce. Marilyn was married to my grandfather for 66 years—courageous in itself to pledge to another for such a long time. But my grandfather could be a grump and a bully, and it hurt to see all the ways that he would try to diminish my grandmother. Memories of childhood contain many instances of seeing my mother and aunts wince as my grandfather would try to suppress one of my grandmother's lively stories or yell at her for some trivial reason. Divorce was simply out of the question for Marilyn as her Catholic faith was strong. Her marriage was not only a covenant with my grandfather but also with God, or maybe she simply could not envision another way. One grandmother decided to leave a relationship that did not serve her. She wanted to use her talents and intellect as a nurse and helped care for many in the sunsets of their lives. Another chose to endure a relationship that could often be toxic. She did this with a great sense of duty, for the stability of her family and for her commitment to her faith. The fortitude of both women illuminates some of the many forms of courage.



Courage is love activated. Courage can be setting aside self-interest and acting in the service of your loved ones, the community, the greater good; it can also be taking a stand for yourself in the pursuit of your purpose. Courage can happen in an instant or over a lifetime. The deeds and thoughts of our exalted matriarchs form the bedrock of our existence, and I feel blessed to know that their inspired lives live through me. They live through me in my intellect (We have an imaginary affliction on my mom's side called "Hyperliteritis" where we feel compelled to read everything, and I'm sure that's Marilyn's fault) and my inherent love of music, an inheritance from Laverna; and in my care and endurance (traits both women shared but exemplified here by Laverna with a "plate" for anyone that walked in the door). They remind me of the fortitude necessary for the long haul and for the nerve to stand up for yourself and exit a situation that no longer serves you. Their mettle motivates me to strive towards one's highest purpose and love with openness and determination. Without my grandmothers I would not exist—could not be the unique individual that I am. Without their stories I would have no roots in the past from which to draw inspiration.

Here is a locket, safely tucked away in a nook reserved for the most treasured of possessions. Open the locket and you'll reveal two women from two different worlds, yet both women were discontent to be only what was expected of them. See their lucid eyes and the gentle smirks of those that have a vast and complex world contained within. Feel the warmth that radiates from the locket; the warmth of powerful and sustaining love—the kind of love that is cultivated through and despite hardship. Now the locket gets a bit hot to the touch. Fiery ambition and hot-blooded nerve course through this object. Let the energy of the locket flow into you—it is the fortitude of womanhood—a current that extends through time and space all the way back to our every mother in Africa. Thank you, grandmothers, for life and the courage to love.

MY GRANDMA AND THE COURAGE TO LOVE

BY JASMINE BENSON

“Love your neighbor as you love yourself, taking good care of yourself and your life.” (1st John Chapter 4: verse 18) This is one of my grandmother’s favorite Bible verses. My grandmother would speak it and say to me, “How can a person love you if they don’t truly love themselves?” Before I could answer she would say, “it’s in the Bible. You don’t tell love, you show love.” My entire life my grandmother has shown love rather than just saying it. My grandmother afforded me the opportunity to be a kid again living in Milwaukee and Madison in spite of my parents’ shortcomings due to drug addiction and incarceration. From 3 to 15 years of age I lived with my grandmother off and on. It was with her I felt safe, seen, heard, and, most importantly, loved. My grandma has shown be love through loving, caring, and raising me.

My grandmother became a safe place for me as a child and is that for me still to this day. I was young the first time I moved in with Grandma, and she would tell me how to say please and thank you. When I was a toddler, she would exclaim to me how to address her friends: “It’s Mrs. or Ms. and you say ‘excuse me’; don’t just interrupt.” She would hold me until I fell asleep, and she made breakfast; compared to foster homes, this was amazing. Even as a toddler, I knew that this must be that love word I kept hearing about.



One day my grandma picked me up from daycare and told me I was moving back with my mom and my sisters. I never wanted to be there, but it wasn’t up to me. My mom, my sisters, and I moved around a lot almost instantly due to my mom’s addiction. We ended up living in a few shelters; in fact, we ended up leaving Milwaukee and living in a few shelters in Madison. My mom’s addiction took over, to the point it took her away for days at a time. My sisters and I were used to it, but that’s not ok. When we were staying in shelters, they called CPS (Child Protective Services). Instead of us going directly into foster care, guess who showed up? My grandma! She kept us together until we were able to be placed with family members and weren’t completely separated from each other.



Living with my grandmother was always my only goal as a child. When I was 15, my grandmother informed us that she was moving back to Milwaukee. Living with my grandmother had been my safe place, so what would come of me now? Who would protect me? Who would make sure I could still be a kid? I didn't want to be selfish, so I begrudgingly told my grandmother I'd be fine and to live her best life. I managed to finish high school on time and started adulting with help from the lady that raised me still being there whenever I needed her to be. The older I got, applying my grandmother wisdom was a necessity and has helped mold me into the woman I am today.

My woman of courage is definitely my grandmother. Where love and protection were needed, she showed up despite her own needs. There are no words that show the amount of my gratitude and appreciation for her sacrifice, patience, guidance, and guardianship. We weren't rich with things but love we had plenty. You can't put a price on being seen, which I always felt in my grandmother's presence. Showing courage isn't always brute force. It can be showing love and doing the right things because it's the right thing to do. If it wasn't for my grandmother's courage to raise me and give me love unconditionally during what should have been her twilight years, where would I be?



MY SISTER, MY FRIEND, ALWAYS

BY DANIKA BETHEL-JOHNSON

“No hay mal que por bien no venga.” This was something that Janice’s mother would tell her as a child. This loosely translates to “Every cloud has a silver lining.” Janice Alvarado Ugalde is a proud Costa Rican woman who embarked on a huge odyssey moving to the United States at the peak age of 14. I call Janice my sister as she has shown me the true love that only a sister can give. Janice overcame many obstacles in language barriers, endured extremely uncomfortable living situations, and succeeded in being a mother of four beautiful children as well as an inspirational sister to me.

Janice’s birth name is Janice Alvarado Ugalde. Being in America, it was difficult for people to pronounce her second last name, so she dropped it and was presented as Janice Alvarado. Janice was 14 years old when her mother forced her to move to the United States from Costa Rica. Her entire life she spoke Spanish, but mainly English is spoken in the U.S. Within the first six months she couldn’t communicate with anyone unless they spoke Spanish. Janice would sit in the back of classrooms to avoid conversations with anyone, as she just couldn’t understand anything that they were saying. It was in the middle of her eighth-grade year that she was finally able to speak to classmates with a limited vocabulary. With hard work and determination, she has excelled in her knowledge of speaking clear English, and now she has it as her second language.



When Janice moved to the United States with her mother in 2001, it was with a friend of the extended family. This family had been exchanging people for decades. They weren’t the most honest people. In Costa Rica, Janice’s mother, Sheila, was a teacher. The father of the family told Sheila countless lies, one being that she would be able to come to the U.S. and still be able to teach. He ensured her of a job working within a business. Sheila worked making minimum wage, and he would take more than half of their income just for them to continue residing with him. This job entailed working with clay making inset carpets on floors. This was hard manual labor, and she did it for more than eighteen hours each day. As they were struggling for funds, Janice and her mother were forced to pay half of all the bills in this home, including toiletries, down to the toothpaste they would use. They were unable to eat the food in the home unless they bought it, and the father would mindlessly stare at them when they would eat at his



table. He was a hardcore cheating drunk with an alcoholic wife. Three quarters of the way through eighth grade, they finally were able to move into a one-bedroom apartment with nothing but the clothes on their backs. But it was home.

September 2008 I then met Janice. I was 14 years old (same age she was when she moved to the U.S.) and consistently went to the Lussier Community Education Center. She was a teen advocate there. After meeting with her, we instantly clicked. I was not the most obedient teenager, but Janice sure corrected that. Sharing the life experiences that she endured opened my eyes to the kind of woman that she is, and I aspired to be that one day. She showed me how to do my make-up for Homecoming, how to color coordinate my outfits each day, maneuvering through high school drama and dealing with boys. Fast tracking to March of 2014, she became a mother. I'd never seen her glow so much before. All the attributes that she had instilled in me, she was about to give to a child of her own. She now has four beautiful children and is destined to have well-mannered, behaved, blessed children.

Fifteen years later, Janice is still active in my life, and she's everything I needed in a big sister. She's always been there for me, even at times I didn't know I needed her the most. Her life experiences inspire me to be a better woman, and I want to be able to give my knowledge of life to someone as she did for me. It takes a strong woman to pause her everyday struggles and assist another young woman. Janice did just that and more! I'm proud to call her my sister and thank her every day for the love that she unconsciously showed me. Janice is like an angel, with love that always glows. She is one of the greatest gifts my heart will ever know. She is and will always be my Woman of Courage.



HEROISM

BY MIA CANNON

A bachelor's degree and many lives impacted later, this woman is not only an inspiration to five children but also to many members in the community. This small glimpse of her life story represents strength, hard work, and trials as well as success.

My mother has always been the “bread winner.” She was present for her children’s extracurricular activities when applicable, all while working to provide us with stable living conditions. With that being said, I did not come from a household where the man took first seat; in fact, my dad took second seat. He was the parent at home with us. This in result made my mother the wo(man) of the house. I am more traditional. It is my belief that the role of “head of household” belongs to the man of the house. I highlight this because it is one of the many traits that I noticed about my mom that I carry myself, and it has essentially become a problem in my own relationships. I have a hard time adhering to the “woman’s” role because of the mother I grew up with.

My personal opinion is that it all started when my mother became an intern at the Urban League. My mom has literally always been hardworking, but something about working for a nonprofit shifted her. She very quickly went from an intern to front desk receptionist, and from there moved to overseeing MANY different things from fundraising to becoming a workforce coach. Then BOOM 10 years fly by and all of a sudden thousands of connections are being made, lives are being changed, and everyone knows the infamous Michelle. I often joke and refer to her as the busiest woman in America but it’s true! She was/is my very own example that hard work and sacrifice pays off.

Juggling starting her own business (“Sweets by Sweet”) with being an active parent while also having many hands in the community events and giving guidance to others, this crazy lady decides to add school to her plate. Growing up black and living technically under the poverty line, I always had very limited examples of black success. Do you know how life changing it is to see my mom achieve a degree? She never worked less to compensate for school; she simply found a way to juggle both. She never stopped being an active mom even to her adult children. She juggled both. We lost my grandma, my mom’s mother, and do you think that stopped her? Hell, no. At age 23, I watched my mother walk the stage and obtain her degree. I am more than

positive I brag about it more than she does because that’s just how proud I am. It was life changing for me. Something shifted in me, and in that moment I decided I wanted to make my daughter just as proud of me as my mother made me.

While watching my mom graduate, I was laid off from my job of three years. It was one of the hardest times in my life. Looking back, I am beyond grateful. I went from sitting at a desk for three years to feeling lost. I called my mom in pure agony when I got the news about losing my job, and you know what my mom said to me? “What are you gonna do about it?” Now I run around like a crazy lady and take a hand in fixing smiles. I applied for hygiene school and was accepted. I’m sitting in Odyssey right here with you, and that is solid proof of the impact. Witnessing my mom never let an obstacle break her and literally overcome the impossible was enough proof for me to apply the same mindset to my own life. Her trials and successes inspired me, I want to be that same inspiration to my daughter. I know many people will read this, but to the one reader that matters, thank you, Mom. <3



KAREN CARR: MY LIGNUM VITAE

BY VERNELL CAULEY

My mother is the definition of perseverance. I believe the strength I have today comes from her. The Lignum Vitae stands to be the strongest tree to ever exist with a given name of the tree of life. What does the Lignum Vitae tree and my mother have in common, you might ask? My mother is my Tree of life; she stands to be the strongest woman I've ever known. While she faced many traumas, including losing both parents by the age of 18, becoming a widow with four kids by the age of 28, and burying two of her children, her faith gave her the courage to overcome her challenges and become a successful single parent and nurse.

My mother was born in 1958 in Chicago, Illinois. During this time Black people faced challenging times throughout the entire United States. By the age of seven she was afflicted with her first heartbreak from the loss of her father, who was murdered in Los Angeles during the Watts riot. Eight years later, while she was still healing from the pain, her mother suffered a stroke and passed away. This devastating loss put my mother and her four siblings into foster care. Refusing to go, my mother decided to run away and live with her grandmother. Adjusting to the responsibility of overseeing her brothers and sister within the foster care system was difficult. However, a positive change came when she met a young charismatic man full of joy and laughter. His love and affection helped heal the wounds of her broken heart.

Before long, they made the decision to marry and welcomed four children into their lives. During their marriage my mother was introduced to the Jehovah Witness faith, which developed an interest in the knowledge of God. During what seemed like the quiet before a storm, ten years later my mother received devastating news that my father was in a coma due to injuries from being stabbed and shot. Sadly, he passed away. In the face of a devastating loss, my mother persisted in pursuing her studies and ultimately choosing to undergo baptism.

Forced to raise four kids alone in Chicago's inner city presented more challenges. My neighborhood was troubled by increasing gang violence and drug abuse. While many around her indulged in heavy alcohol and drug use, my mother took a different path—she went back to school to advance her education in Nursing. Her ambitious spirit resulted in her becoming a certified registered nurse. She worked hard at times covering two jobs to make sure we had what we needed to successfully complete school. Devastation was not far behind with the unexpected loss of two sons. She credits her faith in Jehovah God as the reason for her peace today. Holding tight to her belief in scriptures that states she will one day be reunited with all her loved ones brings her joy.

Learning how my mother overcame all the challenges in her life gives me hope. While she lost a mother and father, I never got a chance to meet my grandparents. While she lost a husband, I lost a father. While she lost two sons, I lost two brothers. My mother showed me what the power of keeping faith in God can do. *Courage is defined as strength in the face of pain or grief.* Karen Carr is a woman of courage!

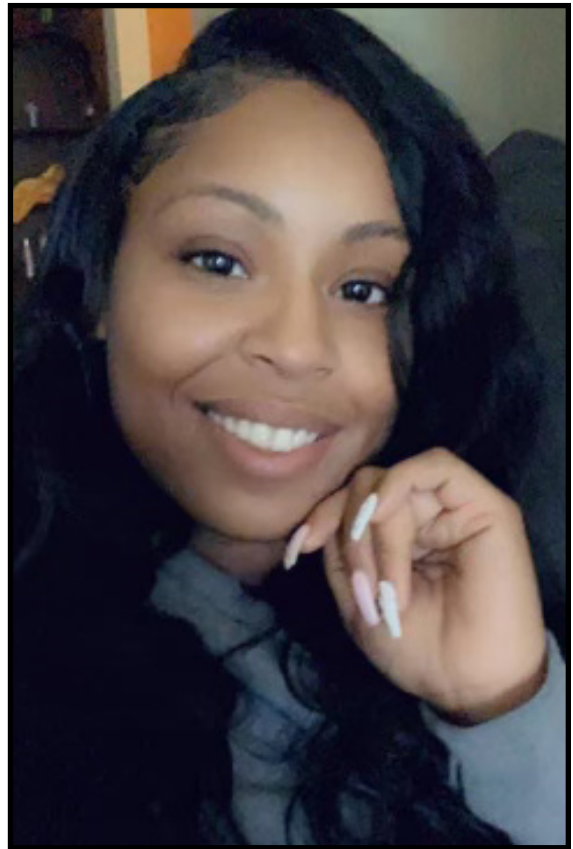


RUNNING FROM WITHIN

BY FATAESHIA CLARK

I was a part of her story, but I never knew her whole story, and until this day I wish she would have written it. She was so young yet so strong. How did she manage to keep going? How our bond is today, I know she'd be surprised I had something to say. But I do, and this is to you, my sister. A woman of courage! My sister was a child with no guidance or a mother to teach her from right and wrong, raised her younger siblings, and then struggled when she had her own. Having more to live for and realizing the route she was going was wrong, she turned it all around and made choices to better herself, her situation, and all the kids still in time.

She was the oldest of five and a mother to all four. A young child herself still growing, my sister had her problems like everyone else. But who was there to support her? She was in and out of home, running away, with neighborhood drama and fighting, and she was even put at a few foster homes. I look back now questioning how she managed to play the role of our mother! It was my sister who I saw before and after school. It was my sister who made us hot plates and told us to wait until it was cool. It was my sister every night getting us ready for bed, with bubble baths and then we would all pile up in her bed. You did a great job, my sister!



She was a child raising children basically until she had her own. I can see now that there was more than a lot going on. She was 20, but that was still young. But that was the age she became a mother of her own son—her first child, her first son. I treated that boy like my own. I dressed him, fed him, taught him right and wrong, and did basically anything else that had to be done. I owed her that much. She was there for me; she was there for us. Who was there for her? Now was the time for her to take care of business and have her fun.

I didn't know what she was doing. All I know is she got it done. She was always out taking care of business, even before and after hours, so then I questioned what was being done. My sister was in the streets, selling this and selling that, thinking it was for the better until the police clapped back. She was doing no good thinking she was putting us in a better position. She lost almost everything, now struggling even harder to get it. She was getting put out of homes, living in cars and hotels, and sometimes having nowhere to go. I think that's what really made it home. My sister enrolled in school and received her GED, which expanded better opportunities. She now works a job and has been content in a home, still making it all happen, while being a single parent doing it on her own.

I think of my sister as a woman of courage. She raised me. She raised all my siblings. She is a woman of courage. From the beginning to the end, I know she had to feel alone. She made the struggle look good and turned what was bad to good in the end. She beat the odds and turned her life around. Now look at her working, taking care of the elderly, and surviving as a single parent of three.

WOMAN OF STEEL

BY MEKICIA DAVIS

"Hold the sheet, while I come down. Once I get to the bottom then you come." The crisp air cutting across her ankles as she slid down the knotted linens that were wrapped tightly against the bunk beds. "Hurry up, Fe!" her eager party-struck little brother called as he scanned the room from the door back to the window cautiously and continuously. A head from below looking for the weekend's new gossip peeked out her window and looked upward at my mother sliding down from apartment 304, while howling out "I'm telling Mary!" It was clear from the beginning the amount of courage my mother had, to be sliding down sheets from the project's third floor, attending a party her mother Mary had forbidden her from going to. It would set the tone for how she maneuvered through her trauma-filled journey of being a caretaker for her mother, becoming a single mother, and becoming a widow. As a child she was resilient, strong, and outspoken. She knew in life she would have to be equipped with these tools to be her, her as in Felicia. My mother is no ordinary woman, and her journey I will be taking you on unlike any others is unique. Many yearn to live the life my mother has lived and still be able to say she made it to the other side. Unscathed? No, Broken? A little but not beyond repair. Above all else, a living testament of a woman who has courage.



The doctors told my grandmother Mary she would have a short life, since the beginning of time she suffered from heart conditions and a host of other health issues. My mother, the third out of five, took on the responsibilities of cooking, cleaning, babysitting, and fighting for not only herself but her siblings. She was adamant about finding ways to make my grandmother's life easier, and at times, as all teenagers do, harder. My grandmother had five kids by 25, living in the projects with a husband who took on being a rolling stone the majority of the time. My mother had no choice but to make the most out of her situation, with almost little to no money, living on paper food stamps and eating government cheese. She



picked up doing hair and building useful connections around the city to barter for what her family needed. Amid her prime teen years, she became pregnant at 16 with my oldest brother, Deandre. She was a kid with a kid just trying to find her way and provide for her family and now young son.

My mother sacrificed numerous opportunities such as the Army, school, and dreams of traveling for her children. She will never directly say what put a hold on her dreams, but it is clear that her first priorities were always and still are her children. She endured endless judgement from those when her oldest son who went off to college was labeled a murderer; she uprooted her entire life in Wisconsin to be by his side during trial and slept in hotels for a year to be able to visit and be present in the trial. They shared my brother's personal life as they do in trials and ripped my mother to



shreds regarding her life and what they felt a mother should have been doing to prevent this situation from occurring in her son's life. Upon returning home with the victory of her son's freedom, she dealt with her other two sons' behavioral issues and a daughter whose father couldn't stay out of jail. She had no time to dwell; she had no time to complain. She made meals even if it wasn't much. She was Santa making sure to never skip our house and most of all she was a hero whose lights were sometimes dimmed but never off. She was no sculpture, but she made statues of importance in the lives of her children. Perfect? No. Dedicated? Absolutely.

In terms of dedication, my mother was with my father for over 25 years. Most of the years he spent wavering in and out of jail suffering from mental health problems and taking the title of an alcoholic

while home. There were many fights and many times where she could've walked away but didn't. In 2014 they said their vows in front of family and friends and danced the night away in each other's comfort. Of course, it was short lived due to the hold being institutionalized had on my father. It wasn't until 2022 and 2023 when my father started to get his life together and steer clear of alcohol. He was loving his wife and righting his wrongs with those he loved. My mother stood by his side supporting him through the many years where she herself felt unseen and sometimes a prisoner. They were arguing over things that old couples do, like who ate what and the right answers to tv shows. She spent his last days dancing, cooking, and serenading each other with love songs from the Motown era. She was the one to find him after a long night of celebrating my daughter's birthday. She held him into the end of time and was there in life and death, never leaving his side. I won't know the pain my mother has experienced because I can't fathom being with someone for so long and then one day never having them again. They were together longer than I've been born, and I know she's changed because I see it in her eyes when I look at her, when I hug her and she holds on for a little longer. She has pain yet still manages to cook every Sunday, to get her grandchildren at 6 am so that I can go to work, to braid her grandson's hair, and to occasionally do her son's laundry.

What I can say about my mom is her love knows no boundaries and her heart has no limits. There's not a day I don't go to sleep and pray for my mom. She is still the life of the party and at the same time the calm in a storm. She is what I think about whenever I hear the words woman and courage. Immediately my mom moves me with her words, her wisdom, and her warm hugs. She's the first love of my life. She has never let a situation change her completely. She is a bible, she is a dictionary, she is a quiz, and she is the book of all answers. She is my world; she is my mom. Unscathed, no. Broken? Yes, but not beyond repair. Above all else she is Felicia, and Felicia is my mom.



STRONG MAMMA

BY ANDREA EVANS

Being a Mamma takes strength you didn't even know you had. My mamma does everything for me, my siblings, my kids, without looking at day or night. She supports me and my siblings every time to achieve our dreams and forgets her own. She inspires me, even though she is having her own challenges. She stays there to listen to all my problems, she cares for me; my mamma is the one who really loves and cares for me unconditionally.

My mamma always has that wish to see her kids happy and healthy. In making her kids happy, she even forgets to take care of herself, just to see her kids smile. Even if the budget was tight...she would make sacrifices that we didn't even know about. The reasons why she does/did everything without letting us know her prayers for us are always for our success, health, and achievements; my mamma is always praying us more than we pray for ourselves. She sacrificed her own needs, just to fulfill our desires.

Also, she never hesitated to surprise us on our birthdays, even if the budget was tight. All the sacrifices she made and keeps making just to make sure we still don't feel incomplete. She sacrificed her time, her work, even her life, too. Everything just to make sure her children are capable in this world that makes such great importance of a mother in our life. Indeed, it takes dedicated efforts to achieve something in life. It also takes LUCK, yes, my mom is my luck, a power of sources. My mamma is my hero of my life, a true warrior. I can always find her there, when others are trying to bring me down. She is still here for me even though I am an adult with my own family. She is always there and keeps inspiring and motivating me. Indeed, she is an inspiration and never fails to motivate me.



My mamma is my only well-wisher who really cares for me. When a situation presents, she transforms herself into a particular role. When I need to learn something, she becomes my teacher. When I am frustrated and low in life, she becomes my coach. Like a source of inspiration, my mama will never let me feel down. She stays there with me until I come out of the hard phase. When I am hurt and lost in life, she becomes a healer and cures my scars. Even though I have children of my own, she continues to be my strength. She is my go-to when things are falling apart and my wisdom. I finally understand that being a powerful parent isn't about control or taking over, it's about being present and helping your children grow as people.

A mother's love for her children is pure and unconditional. Her selflessness, kindness, and caring nature is always loveable. My mamma takes great pleasure in showering me with love. I know that I will always be her baby no matter my age. My mamma is my idol, my role model. She brought me into this world and prioritized my needs even during hardships. I have searched my whole life for a role model to look up to, but I never knew that it would be her. It took me so many years to realize that! You have always loved me with all your heart and soul. No matter what I have done, your love for me has never changed. I am glad that we are such great friends; in fact, you are one of my best friends. I can call and discuss absolutely anything with you, and I know you will never judge me! Thank you for being you and being my mamma.

MY FOREVER FLOWER

BY ALEESHA FLOWERS

My mother was a vibrant and vivacious blonde who endured abuse at home. Escaping poverty and pain, she fled to Wisconsin. She married and became a mother at the very young age of 17 without her parents' consent. My mother struggled with alcohol and depression ever since she was a teenager. She experienced many traumas and trials throughout her life. She dreamed of a beautiful loving family of her own one day, but her misfortunes led her to jail and/or prison for most of her and my life, limiting our time together. She was courageous in all her struggles including her final battle with stage 4 cirrhosis failure.



My mother, Victoria Flowers, was born in 1954 in Las Vegas to Betty and Ed Cox. Ed was a security guard at the MGM hotel and Casino. Betty was a cocktail waitress there as well. Her father was a very mentally and verbally abusive alcoholic. At 17 years old, my mother ran away to Wisconsin to find safety. She and a friend hitchhiked from the Southwest to the Midwest. She met my father, Freddie Flowers, three years later. Her parents disowned her for marrying a black man. My mother chose her husband with the reality that she may never see her parents again. The reality became that my brother and I had never met our maternal grandparents.

My mother's life was interrupted by chaos and the devil. Her battle with depression led her to alcohol, which unfortunately led to prison. She was first sent to prison in 1985 for forgery and attempted robbery. The drinking led her to do many things with no thought of the consequences. It was very hard to adjust to her being gone. It seemed like the more she drank the more she went to jail. When she was not locked up, she took care of her family. She worked as a cook for Dane County HeadStart and owned her own cleaning business. She managed to hold both jobs even with her dependency. Others' needs came before hers. She always said to me, "if there's a will, there's a way!" There were more times I could count on both hands that my mother went to detox or rehab. There were resources to get help, but she could not stay sober. The only times I can remember my mom in happy spirits or smiling were at our visits in jail. She had no choice in sobriety while she was incarcerated.

My mother has been in jail several times for her drinking. Now it's 1998 and my mother has been arrested again. She was booked into the Dane County Jail. We knew she was on her way back to prison for probation violation. Roughly a week later and still in jail with no bond, she kept getting nose bleeds nonstop. Our phone calls were so brief, and her speech was becoming slurred. She asked staff several times to go to the hospital, but they denied her. A week later she was vomiting up blood. Now they decided to take her to the hospital, where she was cuffed to the bed. The following day, several tests showed she had end stage Cirrhosis of the liver. I was called to the hospital and stayed by her side every moment, every minute. I was yelling at the police sitting outside her room, "My mother can't go anywhere! Why are you still here? She can barely move!!" My mother kept telling me in her weak and faint voice how much she loved me. I told her the same as I held her hand. She passed away two days later at 43 years young.

My mother experienced many hardships in a very short time. It has shown me how to cherish every moment of our lives. She was courageous in fighting her own demons while caring for family. Her illness was a disease that she fought throughout her life. She was strong when she became a woman and mother at a young age. Her strength led her to run away from pain. Her strength and courage have impacted my life in many ways. I will never take anything or anyone for granted. Life is too short to not be happy and live your best life. She was my mother who loved life and her family, and that's how I will always remember her. She will always be my Forever Flower.

A WOMAN'S GRACE IS HER COURAGE

BY ANDREYA GAVINS

When I think of a woman of courage, I think of my mother. What can I say? She is my favorite lady. My mother's name is Zina. Just like the character from the show "Xena," my mother is a true warrior; just the same. Beautiful, angelic, and righteous my mom is to me.

Zina is a mother of six. Amazingly, she gave birth to two sets of fraternal twins back-to-back. We are two and a half years apart. Living in Joliet was not the city she wanted to raise her family in, so we left Illinois and moved to Wisconsin. We started our new journey in Milwaukee. My mother quickly realized that Milwaukee was not a good option, so she moved us to Madison, where we now have resided for over 30 years.



My mom provided my siblings and me with everything we needed, regardless of being a single mother. When I was eight, my mother married. She was blessed with her soulmate! Now considering being a complete family, growing up, my childhood was fun. My parents made sure holidays were a success and birthdays were celebrated. We also took family trips and even had family fun nights once a week.

In the early 90s, my mother decided to find us a church home. The church was only eight years old when we started attending. So, it is fair to say I grew up a church girl. Being a member of the church, my mom desired to change her life and live for a spiritual purpose. To this day, my mom is a deaconess at our church. Outside of church my mom is the backbone of our family. Somehow my mom is available for all of us, and she holds a loving relationship with each of us, too. For 20 years my mom was a special ed teacher and all the kids loved her. I used to get jealous of my mom's relationship with other kids. Girls that were bullies even got love from my mom. Boy, I hated that!



Even after retirement, she still worked. She waitressed for a couple of restaurants and was a fine server at that! She served with grace, and her big smile just made her shine so bright while working the room. I followed behind my mom's footsteps and waitressed in my past. I proudly learned good waitressing habits from her while working together at the same jobs. Now, being in school, working, and having my own family, I do not get to spend as much time with her as I used to. But doing acts of service by cooking or running errands for her is something I try to be available for. Telling my mom that I love her is given. But showing her is that extra that confirms it. I am my mom's biggest fan and I look up to her, still.

THE AMAZING JEANETTE AND HER COURAGE-FILLED JOURNEY! BY SHANIGEL GOODWAN

She has been through a lot in her life and still finds a way to wake up with a smile and thank God for giving her and her family another day here on God's green earth. No matter what, she has always been there for me and the glue in my family. She is a huge reason for me to continue to fight for better days when it seems like everything is cloudy. I want to become a better version of myself so I can make her proud. I choose her because despite a childhood of abuse and teen motherhood, Jeanette created a career and life for herself as a Certified Nursing Assistant and a woman of God.

The second oldest of 12 and being a twin, you would think you'd have your person for life, right? Born in a small dusty city called Pine Bluff in Arkansas with long dirt roads that seem to never end, she had a loving, welcoming home. While still having to find love outside of her home, she met my grandad, who showed her the love she thought she needed. He made her feel safe. While only being able to go on to 9th grade, she still knew that where she was wasn't where she was meant to be. At the age of 13 on her own, she left her small hometown. In those days if your mother said it was okay then you could leave.



She moved to Chicago because my great-grandmother on my grandad's side lived there. Her first job was at Sears Distribution Center in Bolingbrook, Illinois. She had her first child at the age of 16, and by the age of 19 she had three children. She had all six of her children in Illinois while they were all teens or younger children.

In 1991 she left Illinois because my grandad heard you could make higher wages here in Wisconsin than you could in Illinois. Also, her twin sister lived here, so that made the move a little easier as well. She packed up my mom and my five aunties, and then she and my grandad left for Wisconsin in March of 1991. She received her Certified Nursing License.

My grandmother is now currently retired. She's been widowed for the last 25 years. I don't think she felt as if she would find the same kind of love again. She ushers and helps with her church, and, most of all, she enjoys being with and watching her family grow and make her proud.

A PIECE OF MY HEART BY MIKAYLAH HARRIS

A woman of courage may mean many different things. To me, a woman of courage is someone who takes chances, learns from her mistakes, and rights her wrongs. Most importantly, a woman of courage does not and will not let her past determine her future. My mother, Lacresha Wright, is a woman of courage. She jumped over every hurdle life threw at her and never got discouraged during the whole process. She is someone who loves to give and considers herself last. It is my pleasure to honor her in this paper. Sit back while I share a piece of my heart with you.



Lacresha dropped out of school in eighth grade and had her first child at 16 years old. The baby was a stillbirth, and this broke Lacresha until she got pregnant and gave birth to me when she was 17. Then, by the age of 21, she had her fourth child. Things seemed to be going great for her, but it was all an illusion she created so her kids could experience an innocent life of just being a child. Lacresha was being physically and mentally abused by her kids' father, so badly that she fled from Chicago, Illinois, her hometown for 21 years. She took a major chance when she left. Young and just figuring out life, she left with nothing but her four kids, \$20, and one bag. Leaving all of her family, friends, and support behind, she found herself in a domestic violence shelter filled with other women of courage in the state of



Wisconsin. With support from the daycare provided by the shelter, Lacresha was able to work during the day and save every penny she could from working two jobs at the time. Within a month, Lacresha had saved enough money to move her kids into an apartment. This was a big win for her. This was her very first apartment! However, her troubles did not end there.

With being a middle school dropout, it was hard for her to find a decent job that could support a family of four. Unfortunately, she found herself working multiple jobs to make ends meet and make sure children had what they needed. Growing up, I remember times when we would come home and there would be five-day notices on the door, or when we flipped the light switch and no lights turned on. As kids, we didn't quite understand why those things were happening because she was a very hard worker who always considered her kids. We were her best friends. We thought there was going to be a day where we would be on the streets, but she always seemed to make a way. We always had a roof over our heads, new shoes, or clothes for going back to school, big feasts on holidays, and presents underneath the Christmas tree. Even if it



meant signing her kids up for Toys for Tots, or programs that gave out Thanksgiving baskets, she never let her pride get in the way of providing happiness to her kids.

After tirelessly working multiple jobs that allowed her to live from paycheck to paycheck, she landed a job where she was comfortable and able to live off of the income provided. She loved the job so much that she worked there for 13 years. While establishing happiness in her work, Lacreasha was able to repair her poor credit score and save up enough money for a down payment on a house. Eventually, she closed on the house and became the first person in our family to buy a house! Sadly, after she bought the house, she got some devastating news. Her mother's cancer had come back, and she was informed that she only had a few months to live. Lacreasha—along with the whole family—was in disbelief and shock because her mother had gone to every doctor's appointment and chemotherapy. Doctors said she was cancer-free. How could

this be? These thoughts ran through the family's head, but they had to face reality soon as Lacreasha's mother's health started to deteriorate quickly. She was in hospice care at home, and within months she passed on. The family grieved deeply, but her life was celebrated with joy because that's the kind of person Lacreasha's mother was. After the celebration of life, Lacreasha moved into her new home. With now being an empty nester, Lacreasha has time to finally focus on herself. She has always wanted to go back to school and now she has the time so she's taking advantage of the opportunity. She has given herself a timeline to obtain her GED by the end of the December 2023 semester and start her college career at MATC during the 2024 Spring semester.

Lacreasha's childhood and path to success wasn't the same as a typical people, but with great determination and a strong love for her kids, she was able and will continue to accomplish everything she ever wanted in her life. As a kid, I didn't understand all the things she was going through. When you're a kid you don't understand why you barely see your mom during the day, or why you don't have the same things as other kids. Because of this, my mom and I have had some falling outs. Now being 24, I've come to understand her actions and sacrifices more and more. She is a great mother, an even better grandmother, and the greatest woman of courage in our family's eyes.



THE GLUE THAT MENDS A VILLAGE BY SYNQUAR HARSTON

"If I don't, who will?" A simple but powerful quote to sum up who my grandmother is and what she strives to be. My grandmother has been blessed enough to see 67 years so far. Life has not always been easy, but it's been a beautiful, loving journey. She fell in love with someone who was not capable of being her equal, so she had to find the courage to leave with four daughters. My grandmother was the oldest of her siblings so she automatically took to being a giver. She never verbally said it, but I knew it took strength and courage to constantly give beyond your children and grandchildren. After so many years of watching my grandmother give so much, it's refreshing to see her travel the world and regain her own independence. Now that my siblings, cousins, and I are all adults, my grandmother is finding the courage to live alone after 27 years and regaining the sense that her life is hers to live as she wishes.

Janice Wilson embarked on starting a life with Decarlos Harston in Chicago, Illinois. They married in 1979 and gave birth to four daughters, who brought them twelve grandchildren. Over the years my grandfather struggled with alcohol, which led him to become mentally and physically abusive not only to his wife but to his daughters as well. My grandmother decided it was best to leave my grandfather and demonstrate what self-worth is no matter how much you love someone. Even though my grandfather was an atrocious husband, my grandmother still allowed him to be a father to his four daughters. Now as a single mother, my grandmother had to find strength in raising four girls and then to help her daughters raise their children. My grandmother remained motivated and resilient and ended up raising a village.



Leaving a marriage with four daughters was not easy doing it alone on Chicago's south side. But somehow my grandmother was able to provide a home to her daughters, her sisters and their kids, and her daughters' friends. Growing up I never understood why our house was always overcrowded or why my grandmother always hosted big family outings at our house. But I always grew up with a sense of family, and that's because my grandmother went to work every day to provide a house for that feeling to grow. Being my grandmother's first child, I always felt jealous because she was always a "grandma" to everyone else, but officially I gave her that title. My grandmother and oldest aunt took my two cousins because their mom was battling with drugs at the same time. Not only does it take courage to be a single mom, but it also takes courage to take in kids who are not yours. I can recall a period in time when my brother and I returned back to Chicago to live with my grandmother. It started with my aunt and her three kids, my brother and me, and my grandmother in a two-bedroom apartment. I can remember my grandmother getting



up every day to go to work to provide for us all. Looking back now it makes me sad that she felt like all that weight was hers. Our time living in that apartment ended with me, my brother, two aunts, eight cousins, and my grandmother. My grandmother has become the first person I call when I need words of encouragement. My grandmother has come to my rescue plenty of times when I was incarcerated. My grandmother instilled in all her children and grandchildren that there is no victory in being half-ass no matter where you are in life.

Since I can remember, my family has always lived together or close by, and my grandmother has always been at the center of that. My grandmother has given up her room, bed, freedom, and money to help her family. Now that we're all grown up and trying to survive adulthood on our own, my grandmother is now facing new challenges. For the first time since having kids, my grandmother is now living by herself. After coming home to someone for 45+ years and now coming home to be met with silence is scary to say the least. My grandmother travels outside of the country at least two times a year now, so it's beautiful to see her live for herself now rather than live for us. I could list countless ways my grandmother has shown me to be loving, strong, obedient, and understanding no matter my circumstances. If I could have anyone's strength it would be my grandmother's. Even through her own personal battles, she made it a mission to be a beacon of light to everyone she considered family. In my eyes my grandmother has always displayed the courage it takes not only to build a village but also to keep it together.



WOMAN OF COURAGE: MY GRANDMOTHER (DECEMBER 23,1947-JULY 18, 2014)**BY CIERRA JACKSON**

When I was growing up, my grandmother played a crucial role in shaping my life and that of my four sisters. I'd say we all looked up to her and had her as a role model growing up. She was not only a nurturing and caring figure but also a dedicated nurse. She's the only one I ever remember being there when I was sick or sad, or even if I had a question. Her unwavering commitment to her profession and strong religious beliefs made her an exceptional woman, leaving an unforgettable mark on all of us.



As a nurse, my grandmother's impact extended far beyond our family. She dedicated countless hours to providing quality care and comfort to those in need, always going the extra mile to ensure their well-being. Her patients often spoke highly of her compassionate and gentle nature. Through her example, she taught us the importance of caring for those in need and how to make a positive impact in the lives of others. For example, we were very poor growing up, but I rarely ever saw my grandma pass up a person holding a sign or asking for help. She knew she didn't have it to give but she gave anyway. She always said no matter how bad life seems for you, someone out there has it worse. I'll never forget that saying. Her selflessness and dedication to her patients and family in general left a deep mark on our hearts.

My grandmother's influence on our upbringing was intense. She instilled in us the values of compassion, empathy, and service to others. The fact that she worked what seemed to be three to four full time jobs left a lot of responsibility to my two oldest sisters. This also caused my oldest sisters to grow up far faster than normal kids would have. Even though my sisters wanted to complain, my grandmother's love demonstrated that we all need to help each other. Most importantly, we only have each other. This is something I've also instilled into my two children. I tell them they're all they have, and they have to stick together. Her steady commitment to her community inspired not only her friends but also those around her, including her grandchildren, whom she made sure attended church every Sunday no matter how many hours she had worked.



Religion played a significant role in my grandmother's life, shaping her values and actions. Her strong faith provided her with a sense of purpose and guided her in her interactions with others like how she never passed a poor person without helping them out. She found comfort and strength in her religious beliefs, which she shared with us through her teachings and actions. This also was instilled in me because whenever I'm having a hard time in life, I listen to church music or go to church. I've always known where my help comes from because of her. Her spirituality was a driving force behind her compassion and dedication, making her a beacon of love and kindness.

In conclusion, my grandmother's influence as a nurse and her unwavering religious beliefs left an unforgettable mark on my life and that of my four sisters. Her dedication to her profession and her commitment to serving others were a testament to her character. Through her example, she taught us the importance of compassion, empathy, and the power of faith. I am forever grateful for the lessons she left behind and the love she shared, as they continue to shape who I am today.

MY MOM, MY WARRIOR

BY BLANCA LAINE

My mother, Maria Teresa, is a woman of boundless courage who imparted words of enduring wisdom to my siblings and me that still resonate in our hearts, as if they were spoken today. She says, “No matter how arduous and protracted the path I must tread, I shall exert every conceivable effort to ensure that your lives surpass mine in prosperity and happiness.” It is not easy to talk about my mother. Speaking about her, I recall a mix of emotions, and tears invade the depths of my soul, rising in my heart and gathering to my eyes. But here I am, honoring her name, her battles, her dedication to us, and her unconditional love.

I recall her variant struggles against the shadow of domestic violence, a plight engendered by my father’s affliction with alcoholism. I remember the days when we knew that my father wasn’t at home; it was a sign that he was getting drunk and would come home violently to beat my mother. My siblings and I were very young, but we felt how fear ran through our veins at that moment. To protect us and protect herself, my mother would make us wear warmer clothes, grab a blanket, and lead us to hide in the bushes to sleep under the shine of moon and stars; those days we were lucky. However, some days we weren’t so fortunate. My father would suddenly appear, and we knew what would happen. Quickly, my mother would ask us to leave the house to protect ourselves while she stayed inside resisting my father. How many beatings, how many humiliations my mother tolerated from my father because despite everything my mother loved my father and wanted to conserve her marriage and family.

I remember her unwavering defense in the face of prejudice, shielding us from the scornful gaze of racist people who sought to belittle us due to our attire and language. Many times, the school of my town would summon my mother, complaining that she should dress us better, with newer clothes, urging her to put us in pants or dresses to look more respectable. My mother would reply that the clothes we were wearing were clean but that she will work harder to buy us better clothes. Didn’t people at school understand the enormous sacrifice my mother was making for us to send us to school? How could they not see the bruises on my mother’s face and her worn hands from constantly washing clothes in family homes? How for them was it more important to see us in better clothes than to see us in a better emotional state?

Despite numerous obstacles, my mother held a steadfast conviction that investing in our education would be the most potent weapon to fight discrimination and domestic violence. She toiled diligently, washing piles of laundry in different families’ homes and earning no more than a solitary dollar for her labor. She established a modest organization where these women, including my mother, harnessed their skills to craft handmade goods. These crafts were then sold in the town market once a week, providing an additional source of income. This not only contributed to the education and nourishment of their children but also fostered their independence, reducing their reliance on men and helping to combat domestic violence.

My mother had nine children and she never got tired of raising us, giving us everything she could. She would go out and find any job she could, all while taking care of us and ensuring we went to school. She never ceased her tireless effort to change not only our lives but also the lives of some women of my community. Only her demise could halt the pursuit of her dreams. My mother, my warrior: she is my all, my inspiration to not stop working towards my dreams. Poverty separated us prematurely, but her legacy to help others and to see me succeed in prosperity and happiness will never die. My Mom, My Warrior.



“AYE COMO FRIEGA”
BY ROSANNA LOPEZ

I recall hearing my mom and abuelita talking in the other room about how the teachers were telling my mom not to speak Spanish at home to us kids. They both seemed to be in shock and disbelief. But I remember when Abuelita said, “Aye como friega.” She said that she will continue to speak Spanish and so did my mom. My mother is a woman of courage of many, many things like compassion, encouraging one to better oneself, and always being persistent!

My mother had an impact on me to have compassion, keep improving, and never give up! With four siblings we were all so different. She knows to treat us all differently. Especially if one of us is unhappy, she will see how to make it right as best she can. My mother sometimes sees someone struggling in English and helps them out with English. I find myself doing this too!

She never gave up on me no matter how many times I failed or did bad. She’s always in my corner, always saying she believes in me when I didn’t. She told me many times that she knows that one day I will go back to school and get my GED and that one day she knows she will see me go to college. She always reminded me that I’m a good mother.

My single mother supported my father, who was in prison. She paid mortgage by herself along with help from my abuelita. I remember things were getting hard to buy food, that my mother asked for help from the church, and the church helped us with food and resources. We didn’t know about food pantries. She did miracles at every holiday. She was always strong for never giving up! Even now, she reminds me to not only put in work for money but also put in work on your body. She has even taught me to eat healthier since my mother is diabetic. She taught me to be mindful about food. She is also showing me to be spiritual, to have peace of mind. My mom always wants to make sure that all her children are getting along.

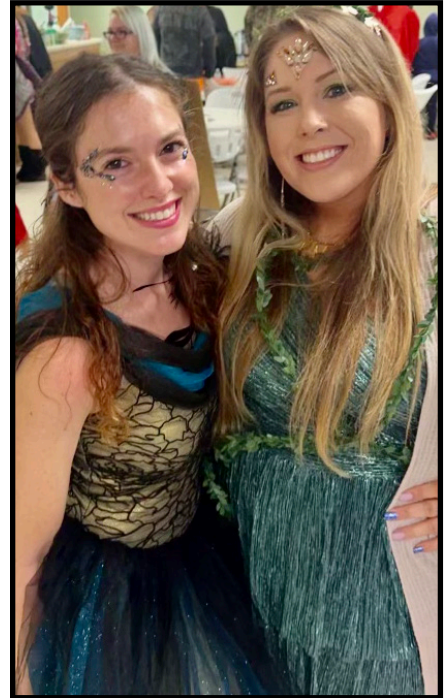
My mom taught me to have compassion, to never give up, and to keep improving. I miss my mom when she goes to Mexico. I love you, Mom. Thank you for making me strong.



SHANNON OF COURAGE BY GIANA MASON

“But I’ve never saved anyone from a burning building,” Shannon bashfully giggled. For this reason, women like Shannon deserve lines on a page, room for their story to be told. Although she has not encountered treacherous flames and billowing clouds of smoke, she found the courage to stop suffering in silence, end an abusive relationship, and make the gratifying choice to finish her degree.

As a child, Shannon suffered silently. She remembers feeling guilty when she would think of taboo things like suicide or death. Her body would respond with an overwhelming sense of panic and in the third grade, thus began Shannon’s battle with panic disorder. This was crippling for her, as she would become physically ill. Shannon sought out help for her anxiety and depression at the age of 19. When I asked Shannon what asking for help looked like for her, she responded, “It looked like me not telling anyone close to me what was going on but I finally spoke to my doctor because I desperately wanted to be able to connect with others rather than being in a constant state of anxiety. I finally sought help because I was feeling a lot of social anxiety which was leading to depression and hopelessness.”



Shannon realized she was no longer in love and just attached when she found the courage to leave an abusive boyfriend. She understood she had formed an attachment to the what if, the what could be, the idea of who the other person might become someday. Shannon had been in a four-year relationship with an emotionally and physically abusive partner from the ages of 23 to 28 years old. “This relationship was fueled by sex, drugs, stealing and fights,” she explained. “It was long distance, so each time I visited him I would relapse. When I ended that relationship, I knew I had truly committed to my recovery. I was able to walk away because I finally believed what my friends, family, and sponsor had been telling me, which was that I deserve better and that I should trust my instincts.” She expressed the importance of time away from her ex and how that gave her clarity to see the toxicity of the relationship. She began to understand that she was never really in love with him; she loved the idea of someone being in love with her. Now, Shannon realizes that the feelings of attachment to someone and caring are not the same as being in love.

After Shannon had committed to six months of sobriety from drugs and alcohol, she felt ready to embark on school. She had begun school at UW Lacrosse in 2011, and she was in a place of balance to complete her degree in Marketing in 2020 at the age of 28. She did so successfully. Shannon hopes that her degree in marketing will lead to a fulfilling career path, but these days, she directs her energy towards her recovery. “I have found that I experience the most growth when I push myself outside of my comfort zone and work with other alcoholics and addicts. I am proud that none of my nieces or nephews have ever seen me drunk or high.”

I met Shannon in June. Shannon is my sponsor. I took quite a while picking out a sponsor because I guess I was always hoping I could stick with this person forever. A sponsor is someone who walks with you through the twelve steps. They listen and guide and have been where you are. They’ve been through the pain, the uncomfortable moments of early recovery. Shannon reminds me of my grandma Judy. She is light. She has an angelic presence that makes others feel blanketed in warmth. I am honored to know her and am impressed by the way she does life. I think for women, sometimes it can feel foreign, this title of courage. I wanted Shannon to know that she saved me from a burning building with flames invisible to most eyes. Thank you for seeing me, Shannon. I see you too.

MY SAVIOR, SYLVIA SUGGS BY TANISHA MILLIGAN

“Girl, who is your momma?”

“Momma, come here. This lady wants to talk to you.” That was the first time I met Sylvia Suggs. My daughter and I just moved to a new neighborhood, and her son and nephews befriended my daughter. Over the years we have become so close. I choose this most courageous woman because throughout all the things she has been through, like losing her parents and brother back-to-back, graduating and getting her master’s degree, and doing this all while being a single mother of three beautiful children, she stood strong and rolled with the punches.



While working as a SEA at an elementary school, Sylvia decided she wanted to go back to school to be a special education teacher. She went back to school to become a regular ed teacher in 2021. She finally graduated with her master’s in education. She has taught in several schools in the Madison Metropolitan School District. This amazing lady is the reason I got into the district. She encouraged me since I was the auntie with all the kids at my house. That is how I originally met this inspiring woman.

In 2013 she lost her mother to cancer. It was very hard for her and her siblings, but she stood strong for them and her dad, who also lost his wife. In June of 2022 they unexpectedly lost her dad. He had been dealing with some health issues, but losing the love of his life really took a toll on him. Shortly after losing her dad, she lost one of her older brothers in April of 2023. While struggling with the loss of her loved ones, she pushed through and held strong for her siblings and children. She knew that they depended on her strength and courage to get through life.



Sylvia has three kids that she is raising by herself and is doing an amazing job. She has a daughter in college, a son in high school, and a son in middle school. Family is everything to her. I believe that’s why we connected from the start. We are single mothers trying to do what’s best for our kids. The day she met my daughter outside of our apartment, we became family. From that point on, we became a family taking the kids to do things. I became her youngest son’s godmother to even dressing alike for holidays.

You ask me why I chose this amazing woman over all the people in my life? Well, this woman chose me and my daughter and brought us into her family. Sylvia is the woman I always wanted to be. I admire the way she loves and takes care of all the people around her, made the decision to go back to school to get her master’s degree to become what she was destined to be, and being an amazing and inspiring teacher and single mother of three all while losing the people closest to her.

JOVITE'S JOURNEY TO THE UNITED STATES BY SOULEYMANE NIKIEMA

My wife, Jovite Rayaisse, is a woman of courage. She demonstrated her bravery on many occasions, but the day she decided to come to the United States was by far the most courageous decision she ever made before. How did she come to that life changing decision? What reality did she face once she came to the United States? How did she manage to face the unexpected challenges of moving to a new country? Jovite is a woman of courage because she decided to settle in a country completely new to her; she then faced the realities of her new life and managed to get by.

Jovite is from Burkina Faso. She received a phone call in 2006 from her brother, Thierry Rayaisse, who used to live with his wife, Aida, here in Madison. Thierry suggested to her the opportunity to come and live in the United States. She had never thought of this idea before. We had already been dating for five years, but what made her decision so difficult was that she was so attached to her parents. As the youngest of a family of nine children, her parents gave her more attention, more protection, and more love. In addition, Jovite's father was old and was suffering from a disease that finally took him away. Her decision was mostly motivated by the fact that she could continue her computer science education here and seek opportunities for a better life. She is passionate about computer science; she spares no effort in fixing a computer, installing a network, or performing computer maintenance. She even has a bachelor's degree in that field.

After making this tough decision and going through different immigration procedures, she came to the United States in October 2006. Thierry, who initially lived in Madison, had a great opportunity to pursue his dream in Toronto, Canada. He could do nothing but take the opportunity and leave even before his sister arrived. Jovite lived with her brother's wife for three months; Aida then left to join her husband Thierry in Canada. Jovite was now by herself in a vast country, with no plan, no mastery of the



language or the culture, no money, and no contacts that could really help. As if to push the desolation a little further, she discovered that she was pregnant a month after arrival. The dream of going to school and pursuing her passion for computer science was now annihilated.

After a couple days of crying, praying, and self-introspection, she finally got herself back together and found the force, the courage to face the challenges such as basic needs: food, clothing, and shelter. She had to take care of herself and to prepare for her baby's arrival. I was working during this time, but I was not making enough money to regularly



support her. At the time, the currency exchange rate was \$1 for FCFA 500 (FCFA is Burkina Faso currency); I recalled sending her \$100 a couple of times—but most of my support was moral. She started to work at a hair salon, making scarcely enough to pay her rent. But she did not give up; she kept on hoping and looking for a better situation. She was taking ESL classes when she found a job at a daycare where she still works today. Things changed in her favor when she learned about the Odyssey Program and was accepted. The program changed her life in different ways. She had a chance to master her speaking and writing for free, so she was then able to interact comfortably with colleagues and to work her way up. The Odyssey Program also helped her understand the culture and integrate into the community. Her everyday life was now less difficult. Only someone who struggled with a second language in the United States could really estimate the importance of the Odyssey Program's impact on a student like my wife. A new door of hope and opportunity was opened.

She managed to obtain a better situation including her own transportation, her own place, and a good school for our daughter, long before I was able to join them here in the

United States on Christmas 2014. She showed the courage of a heroine, and she is now a source of inspiration for me and our children.



BUILT TO LAST: MY GRANDMOTHER, JESSIE PEARL NIX

BY TERANCE NIX

My grandmother was a wonderful, brave woman who came from nothing but gave everything. Born in 1926, she grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas. She had five sisters, and her mother was an American Indian named Nelly Ware. Coming from poverty and Southern culture, my grandmother and her 12 children (including my mother) picked cotton at 10 cents a pound. My grandmother and her children weren't slaves but they were treated like slaves. My grandmother had a couple of husbands, and the last one was the most abusive. In 1972, she escaped to Madison and went to Bayview.



When she got there, it was a kind of freedom, but she fell into alcohol and using drugs. At that time, she took into her house a lot of people from down South. She had an open house and would help anybody. I have family I'm not related to because she would take them in and treat them like family. Even though she had her addictions, she would help anybody. That has always been a trait in my family: just help people. We never had anything, but we gave everything we had to help anybody out.

Because of battles with drugs, my grandmother's house was raided by police seven times in one year. Her house was called the biggest crack-smoking house in Madison. My grandmother spent six or seven years on probation when she was in her sixties. She quit drugs and alcohol cold turkey. After that, she got her life together and became in my eyes a regular grandmother making cookies and things like that. I didn't know any of the bad things until I started asking questions because of writing this paper.

My grandmother had sadness in her life in 2008 with the death of my mother (her child). She was super strong. At the funeral, she made sure she didn't drop a tear. She was the strongest person in the room. After that, she just continued to keep our family together and tried to help my uncles and aunties. She tried to be the bet role model she could be. She was the staple of the family. Coming from the South and coming from poverty and racism, she always had the best heart and didn't hold animosity or hatred towards others. She always made sure that anybody who was struggling would get help—and also food. She would fix up a plate that would make your day, with pig's feet, cornbread, greens, and baked macaroni that were out of this world.

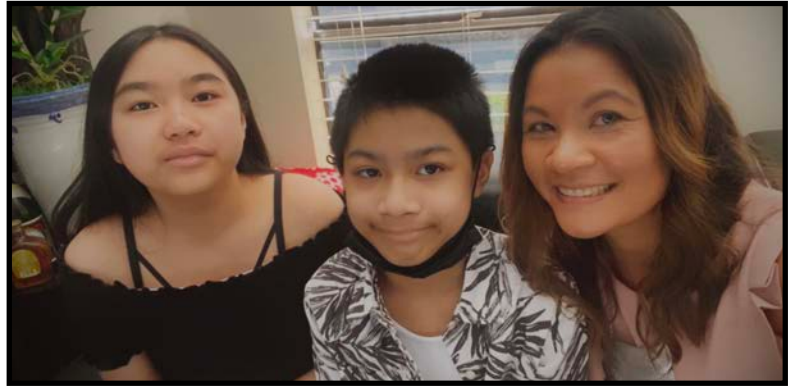


My grandmother had a lot to do with how I am today. I had a terrible past. What I got from her is to be strong enough to get over my failures and to not end up with bad feelings towards anyone. She gave me the trait to be built to last, to go through everything and not crumble. When we buried my grandmother in 2011, it rained terribly as we were putting her in the ground next to my mother. I felt relief because she kept saying she was ready to go home. My grandmother was strict and stern, but she taught me to be built to last.

STRUGGLES TO STRENGTH

BY SALLY PHELPS

I grew up in Dallas, Texas with my older sister. We were raised in the very traditional Laotian culture. My sister is the second oldest female sibling. We were raised that women were supposed to be submissive, but she is my woman of courage because she is resilient, independent, and nurturing.



She resiliently supported our family. For example, she gets up every morning and cooks sticky rice. In our culture it's important to have rice with every meal. No matter what kind of food we make, it has to have sweet rice "aka sticky" or jasmine rice. Another way she helped was financially. Summer of 1996, I'd moved to Madison, WI to be on my own for a change of environment. She was there for me when I needed money for rent because I didn't have a job. As years passed, I found out my sister got married to her second husband and had two children. She has three beautiful, disciplined children, two girls and one boy.

She independently raised kids. She was married to her first husband, who was an alcoholic, and she became a single mother. After high school I was living with my sister in a small two-bedroom apartment. I saw my sister raising my niece and my daughter while working fulltime in a manufacturing factory. I consider my sister a selfless person and a very hard worker. She would take her daughter and mine to school, then she would go to work. At the end of the day, she would pick them up after school; then when she got home, she would prepare food to cook for dinner. I heard a few years later, my sister was divorced from her second husband. She did not share the cause of her divorce. My sister, once again, is a single mom, now raising three children. She never once shows her emotions or grief over her circumstances. She is relentless, she is resilient. For example, with everything that has been going on in her life, she would have broken. But she shows no sign. I know no one in our family would express our appreciation for each other. Because of this I would occasionally express myself to her and thank her for all the things she is doing. My sister is amazing and phenomenal. She is very independent, working full-time and raising her kids with no support, and she was able to purchase her own home.

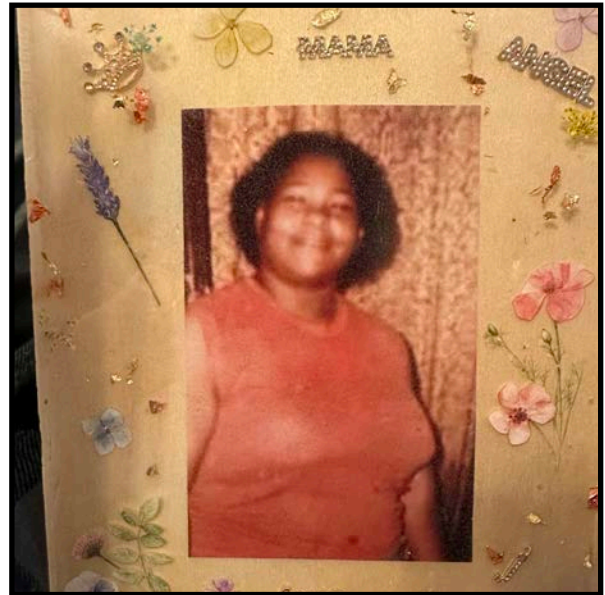


My sister is also a nurturing person. My mother is living by herself. My sister goes over to take care of her and make sure she is cared for by making her food or running errands, taking my mother to the grocery store, or picking up her prescriptions. She would do all this before she went to work.

Looking at my life and my sister, of the things we're experiencing, she never hesitated nor complained. She showed me how courageous she is by doing everything that she does. She is the most hardworking, selfless person. She always comes through for me or the family no matter the circumstances or situation, even when she's going through hard times of her own. Even now, my sister remains a single mother, and she continues working hard, raising her children while caring for my mother as well. She is the most resilient person I know.

JUST KEEP LIVING BY ISIAH PICKETT

No one knows how life will play out; you grow up thinking things will always be the same. My mother used to tell me to never judge anyone because I don't know what they are going through. If I would see somebody on the streets, I would say, "that couldn't be me" or "this will never be me," and her response would always be, "Just keep living baby, just keep living." My purpose in saying this is because we have this mindset that we could never be in a traumatic situation until the traumatic situation makes itself present. Then we are faced with the question of wondering "why me?" or "how could this happen to me?" My mother left this earth with as much courage she could leave with in her 55 beautiful years on this earth. Follow along with me as I guide you through her life, her dreams and challenges, and how her accomplishments help me to keep my promise to her no matter the obstacles.



Her name was JoAnn Pickett, considered in the zodiac world to be an Aquarius. She was born in Greenville, Mississippi to Ellen Thomas Pickett and Benjamin Pickett. Benjamin was born in Pennsylvania, Mississippi, which is one of the most segregated and racist parts of Mississippi to this day. My mother was of the lighter shades of her race, being mixed with Native and Puerto Rican. Until the age of nine she resided in Mississippi, then Chicago was the city where she stayed and raised her nine kids. I call my mother a woman of courage because growing up and in her adult years she struggled with knowing how to read and write; due to racism she dropped out of school leaving her with no education. My mother had my oldest sister at the age of 16 while going through the death of her father of lung cancer; this took a huge toll on my mother. My mother had things that she liked to do to keep her mind clear of the bad things happening around her. She enjoyed sports, such as basketball, and Michael Jordan was by far her favorite player. She also enjoyed boxing; her favorite boxer was Floyd Mayweather Jr. She always had the DVR and recorded his fights so she could watch it whenever she wanted to. Her passion for music is where my passion stems from. Michael Jackson, Usher, Earth Wind and Fire, and so many old artists that at the time I didn't like until she would always play them. Ironically out of all those artists her favorite was Snoop Dog; in fact she bought me my first Snoop Dog album. Most things that my mother used to do are the reason why I take a liking to those same things. My life while my mother was still alive had some of the most confusing yet best times of my life. I could do no wrong in her eyes compared to my brother and sisters, which is something I may have taken advantage of, but I loved being a momma's boy. What can I say?

People always say your relationships with your parents tend to have an effect on the people you choose to date. My mom always told me the type of woman I would end up with, which made me look for the opposite of what she had foreseen. Since I grew up watching my mom do certain things alone or with little to no help, I grew up with the mindset for the women I dated that they should be independent. Now when I say independent, I don't mean that in a bad way; I just want my women to know how to do things with or without me. When I started having kids my mother was still alive. I have in total four kids. My two youngest kids have never and will never get the opportunity to meet my mother, which breaks my heart

because she would have loved them, especially my little girl. My mom always told me I wouldn't have a daughter until I was ready. My daughter is 19 years younger than her oldest brother, which proves that I've waited years for my princess. I love all my kids and I know if she was still alive she would too. Having my mother around to help me raise my children or to just be a part of their lives plays a huge role on how my kids act or how they treat other kids. She always taught my kids kindness and to treat others like you would want to be treated. I never understood as a child why bad things happen to good people. My mother could never do wrong in my eyes; she was a saint. The things she had to go through. if it was up to me, she would have never gone through them, at least not alone. I was always by her side no matter if I physically couldn't help out. I always wanted her to feel my presence, to know that she wasn't alone. She was my hero, my better half, the forever missing piece to my puzzle; she always told me when I was wrong but in the same sentence telling me how much greatness I had in store. She was very honest and direct yet the sweetest most kindhearted woman you would have ever met. I've learned so much from watching her while taking her lessons and applying them to the real world. It has prepared me greatly, but nothing has prepared me for losing you.

I still talk to my mother all the time, especially when I need advice or I'm having relationship problems. I know what you're thinking, so what's the point? The point is feeling that comfort that you used to feel when you're talking with someone you love. I tell her about my children and the things they accomplish or the things I'm struggling with when it comes to them. I cry to her, I pray to her because even from beyond the grave she is still my safe place. I made a promise to her before she passed that if I did nothing else, I would graduate school and take care of all my children. So far, I have been maintaining my promise, and it feels really good. I want her to know if nothing else that I won't let all her hard work go to waste. I saw the effort and sleepless nights she put in to make sure we had a good life.



Writing this paper was one of the hardest things I've had to do in years. I wasn't mentally prepared to go back inside my brain and actually remember things and talk about them out loud. It takes time to talk about the things or the people that really matter to you especially when they are no longer with you. She taught my siblings and me that family is important no matter if you don't always see eye to eye. Love your family, cherish your family, invest in your family. She taught me that being scared is okay. JoAnn Pickett left this world with the most courage I've ever seen from any man or woman. She was persistent, she was determined, and she always knew the right things to say. I always tell people that my mom was the only person who could put me in my place in the nicest way possible and I would never get upset. I take that into my adult life by accepting criticisms on how I can always improve myself to become the best version of her son. I go through life with the mindset that life is what you make it and to never judge anyone by their situation because it can easily become yours.

MAGGIE'S COURAGE

BY RODNEY POE JR.

Where do I even begin? Maggie Theresa Jackson (aka the reason I am here on this earth) is the strongest woman I have ever met. Maggie is my grandmother born in the south of Clarksdale, Mississippi in 1934. Her first marriage didn't last long due to her first husband committing suicide. After that is when she met my granddad, Samuel Tribble. They packed their bags and moved to Chicago, Illinois for a better opportunity. Unfortunately, my grandfather was shot and killed, leaving her a widow for the second time. Back to square one, a single mother of 14 kids. Can you even imagine? But overall, my grandmother made it work because she had her kids, my uncles and aunts, and my mother depending on her.

Even though my grandmother grew up in the south, she didn't have it too bad. They had a farm so they grew their own crops where she learned to cook, which explains so much because there is no cooking like Grandma's cooking. They cooked everything from scratch, so she held on to that as I was a little boy growing up. She took pride in growing things herself and her garden. I remember just loving spending time with my grandmother in her garden. Memories like that I will always cherish because that's when I would see her smile the most.

Maggie was a savage and did whatever she had to do to protect herself and her kids. Of course, being a single mother of 14 kids, the road was far from perfect. They had struggles of keeping the lights on, water, food, gas, etc. She also had to suffer the pain of losing one of her sons due to the hands of another one of her sons by stabbing him to death in her own bed while she was at work trying to provide for them. That same son was the reason for so many of her struggles as he was kicked out of the house but would sneak in when she wasn't home and steal from them.

Back to when I said Maggie was a savage, it's not because she wanted to but, again, she did what she had to do. Maggie was three months pregnant with my mother at this time, and she was being attacked by my grandfather, which made her make one of the hardest choices she has ever to make by shooting him in order to save my mom's life. If it weren't for her making that decision, I would not be here. She made a choice that day that had to be made, and I am not mad at her about it. If she were here today, she would tell you that my grandfather, Samuel Tribble, was the love of her life, but if she had to do it all over again, she would. Shortly after, my grandmother was arrested while she was three months pregnant and eventually had my mother while she was incarcerated.

Through all of the trials and tribulations my grandmother has been through, in the end, she managed to keep that beautiful smile on her face. She had 14 kids and outlived over half of them, lost her first two husbands, and still stood ten toes strong and tall standing on business and not giving up. My grandmother is the definition of courage in my eyes. She lived a long and beautiful life that I am honored to have been a part of.



OUR FAMILY'S SPECIAL ANGEL

BY KIMBERLY ROGERS

It's so hard to say goodbye. My family and I recently lost our family member, Diane O'Neal, due to an unexpected and tragic accidental death while on vacation. Our family, friends, and loved ones are heartbroken from this loss. I pray that God will help us all to learn to live with the loss of Diane. Diane was a woman of courage because she went out of her way to protect her family, fought battles that weren't her own, and left the Chicago housing projects to become a role model.



I remember the time my oldest brother, may he rest in heaven, was being bullied by an older guy who lived in the same apartment building as my cousin Diane. He would chase my brother home from school every day as my brother passed the building the bully lived in. He chased my brother until my brother was out of breath by the time he came home. My brother had asthma and would be short of breath when my mother opened the door for him. When my mother asked my brother what was going on, he replied that the moon-faced boy was chasing him every day. This situation went on for a while until one day our cousin Diane ended that s**t in short order. Please excuse my French. I'm so sorry that I still get emotional about that story. May God please forgive me! After Diane stepped in and ended that matter, the moon-faced boy never bullied my brother again. Diane had fought other family members' battles along the way. While growing up in the projects, we cousins would get into everything. Diane was the opposite: she never got into anything. When our friends, cousins, and I would see her coming, we would stop doing wrong and straighten up as if we were so innocent. She wasn't going to tell our parents about our wrongdoing—she would deal with the matter herself.

Diana's bravery comes from growing up in one of the biggest Chicago Housing Authority projects, where there were many families that had apartments stacked on top of one another. I'm talking thousands of families. What was so amazing about my cousin Diana, she never was influenced nor fascinated by anyone that would cause her to live her life against God's will. Diane was one of the few people that I knew who lived on the low end from her childhood until she retired recently and moved to Texas to be with her son, grandchildren and her great granddaughter. There was nothing that could break her. She lived her life with class, modesty, dignity, and respect. That's who Diane was.



Diane was one of my cousins who was a great role model, as well as my two sisters. People say you can take the kid out of the project, but you can't take the project out of the kid. But Diane beat the odds. She changed the game. I feel my cousin Diane was very strong minded, brave, and honored and respected, more of an auntie versus a cousin. She was very intelligent, beautiful inside and out. She was also cool and smooth. Throughout my trials and tribulations, I wanted to be like her. I was inspired by how well educated she was. With the confidence that she showed within herself, she appeared to me to have grown to know who she was and where she was going in life early on. She made great choices for herself; she started teaching HeadStart and advanced into a productive career as one of the greatest, a Chicago schoolteacher. Until she retired, she also was a great mother and an amazing cousin.

It saddens our family that we lost our special angel. She will be truly missed by family, loved ones, and friends. Words cannot express how sorry I am about the tragic accident that happened on vacation and ended her life on October 6, 2023. I love you, cousin.

THE BRAVE AND BOLD OF COURAGEOUS BY MARCY TIBBS

In my life, Lesley Sager is a remarkable woman who exemplifies courage and determination. She is not only a woman of courage but also a professor in design and a successful business entrepreneur. Her unwavering spirit and relentless pursuit of her dreams have inspired me greatly through the various roles I have seen within her. She has shown immense bravery, resilience, and creativity. She is a role model and mother figure to me and many others. Becoming a businesswoman, she has impacted many with her sense of delivery and giving. Lesley has changed the lives of others by teaching people her ways of learning, showing us what it means to be a successful business owner, and traveling the world to give back all she has gained.



As a professor in design, Lesley imparts her knowledge and passion to aspiring students nurturing their creativity and pushing them to explore new frontiers. When teaching students of all different races with her background and dedication, she touches my soul with her courageous ways of teaching. I've seen students come and go as she welcomes them into her home for any kind of lesson; it's as if Lesley recharges her battery of life while catering to the needs of anyone who needs her help. She fearlessly challenges conventional thinking by encouraging her students and others around to embrace beauty and innovation. Lesley's virtuous heart shines through her commitment to empower others. As she would say, "It takes a village to raise a child." And through every child she has taught, I see her light shining through them, only fostering an environment of growth and inspiration.



Beyond the classroom, this courageous woman channels her entrepreneurial spirit, venturing into the world of business. Lesley started a nonprofit organization called Merry-Go-Strong, which helps the women in many of Kenya's villages achieve their lifelong dreams and gain stability. Her brilliant mind guides her through the intricacies of entrepreneurship, allowing her to establish successful ventures. Lesley fearlessly takes risks, seizing any opportunity that comes



her way and turning them into impactful endeavors. Her ventures not only contribute to her personal growth and experience but also create opportunities for others, displaying her heart of gold and her selflessness.

Traveling the world is another realm where she excitedly explores diverse cultures, landscapes, and perspectives. Lesley's insatiable curiosity drives her to embark on transformative journeys, experiencing the beauty and challenges that different states, cities, countries, and people have to offer. With an open mind and a compassionate heart, Lesley seeks to understand and connect with individuals from all walks of life. Hell, she took me in. She gave me a job to care for her parents without prejudgment

and prejudice, and I've been there through it all. Lesley leaves a positive impact wherever her feet land. Lesley has traveled to places like Iceland, France, Germany, and Kenya. Lesley is very well connected in Kenya and has been going there since 2012. She has since gained the popularity of all that have met her and even those who have profited from her business assignment. Merry-Go-Strong helps Kenyan women build stronger lives around making beautiful baskets, which helps them buy livestock, fund education for their children, and build new homes with a ground level structure using materials such as brick, stone, cement, and wood. She not only gives back as much as she can, but she charges nothing to use or have her love and knowledge; if you ever ran into her, you would know exactly what I mean. Her giving heart fuels her desire to make a difference in the lives of those who are less fortunate, supporting charitable events and causes, and actively participating in projects around the world that promote social justice and equality.

I have known and worked with Lesley for the last four years, and every day since I walked into her home, she has blessed me with the sweetest personality I have ever known. What sets this courageous woman apart from others is her virtuous heart and brilliant mind working together in harmony. She not only pursues her personal goals while helping others with theirs, but she also uplifts them with kindness and her philanthropic endeavors. She is an irreplaceable value within my life. She is not only a woman of courage but a brave and bold one at its best.

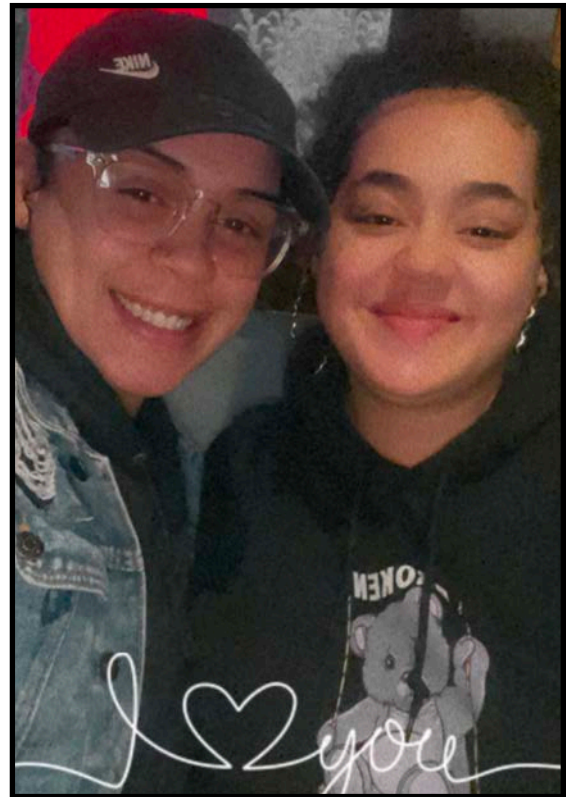


A HEART OF GOLD

BY AMANDA VON BEHREN

I met Corrie eight years ago, and she's had such an impact on me and on my kids' lives. Although she is several years younger than I am, she is someone that I look up to. Despite having battles in her adolescence and facing serious health problems as an adult, she has always had such a positive attitude and a smile on her face. After losing her mother in 2009, she had to maneuver her way through life without her. She went to foster care and several treatment centers, found a job that she loved and moved from the bottom up, and had several serious health issues after the birth of her second child.

Corrie Artilla Thomas was born July 7, 1997 in Madison, WI. She is one of 12 kids. Her mom passed away in 2009. After her mother's passing, she went to live with her grandmother. Her grandma took her and two of her siblings. After a while it was hard to care for them, so she was sent to live with her dad. With all the traumatic and new changes happening, her father also wasn't sure how to handle it as he was also taking care of two other siblings whose mom also passed four years prior to Corrie's mom. One day her father got physical, and Corrie went to school with bruises on her legs. Noticed by the gym teacher, CPS was then called. Corrie went to a foster home and struggled very hard. She was not



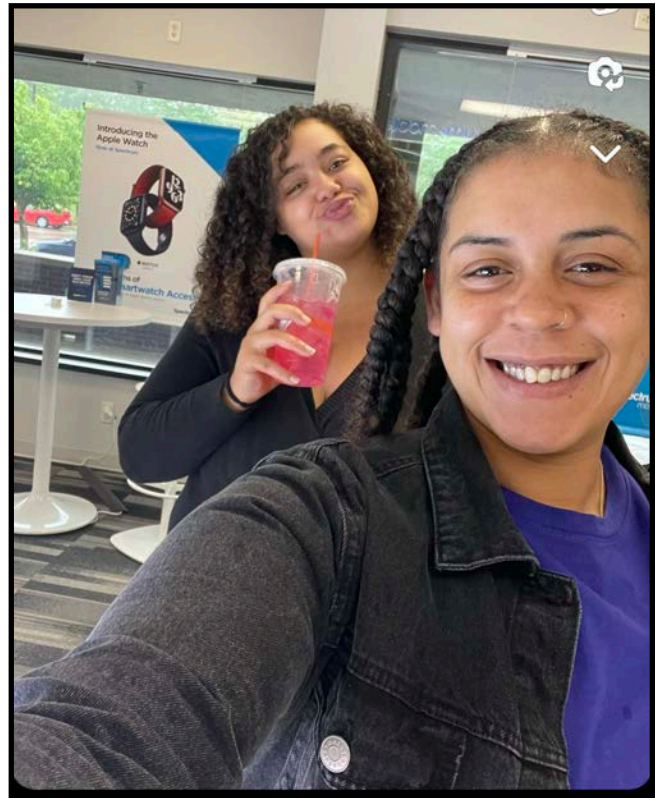
making the right decisions, skipping school, smoking, drinking, stealing pills, and using them to cope with reality. She was then sent to the shelter for struggling teens. Corrie was transferred from the shelter to a treatment facility to get help. Corrie soon decided she wanted better for her life. She was released from her last treatment center and was sent to live with a foster family.



Her first job was in 2014 at Jim's Meat Market as a cashier. Straight out of treatment in 2014, she decided to keep pushing to graduate. She found out she had extra credits from the treatment center that transferred. She decided to do ceramics, woodworking, child development, and ASL, and through it all made it across the stage in 2015. After graduation she decided to look for another job. Corrie started working at Benvenuto's as a host. She worked both jobs but decided to leave Jim's Meat Market and work at Benvenuto's full time when she turned 18. The company decided to have her serve, and

soon after that she was training to bartend. In 2017 she was granted part time manager and in 2018 she was offered the AGM Position. In 2020 during the pandemic, her location took a hard hit and ended up closing down. The company reached out to her and wanted her to know she was an asset to them. Benvenuto's then transferred her to a new location. She is just as much in love with working there and now serves, bartends, and part time manages there.

However, life took a turn for the worse after she gave birth to her second daughter. She developed blood clots and had a massive stroke. She ended up in the hospital, having to learn how to walk and talk again. A few days after being cleared, she ended up back in the hospital with more blood clots. She had to have heart surgery and have a pacemaker put in. Despite the situation, she always had a positive attitude. Her daughters really brought her strength. It was a long and complicated road to recovery, but with lots of support she was able to return to the active morn/TT she is.



Corrie still to this day continues to put other people ahead of herself. I found she has so many of the same qualities that I see in myself. My oldest boy's dad and her daughter's dad are brothers. I am so grateful that he brought her to visit me and Baby Celly. Not only did my kids gain a forever aunt, but they gained a god mom. And I gained a sister for myself. Growing up the only child, I always wanted a sister to share life's ups and downs with, and she has been my biggest supporter since she came into my life. Never dropping the ball when it wasn't even her catch, she lifts me up even when I see no light at the end of the tunnel. That heart that once needed fixing is one of the strongest that I know.

A MOTHER'S UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

BY ENDIA WALLS

The courage that my mother displayed for myself and my siblings goes a long way. As her children we would never understand the struggles with her health that she endured, but she kept pushing to keep us in good health and spirits. Adopted at birth by family members, she would go on to be a very smart, intelligent woman who graduated from high school at 16 and got her bachelor's degree in English Literature at 20. At 21 she married her first love and would marry two more times and have three wonderful children. A single mother who worked as an English teacher and case manager in Illinois, she did her best to provide for her family. A sudden illness and diagnosis of a chronic lung disease would slow her down at times, but that wouldn't stop her from providing the love and care she gave to us. I am grateful for having a mother who instilled so much love and compassion in myself and my brothers, which is why she's my choice for Woman of Courage.



Lynda and her sister were adopted by family members due to her mother's drug addiction and street life. As a child she was very smart, skipping second grade and graduating from Eisenhower High School in Blue Island, IL at the age of 16. She attended college on a full scholarship at the University of Kentucky in Louisville, KY where she obtained her bachelor's degree at the age of 20 in English Literature. My mother was an English teacher for over 20 years in the Chicago Public School system and later became caseworker for the Dept. of Human Resources. The joy she got out of helping others was unmatched and effortlessly beautiful, which is why it came so naturally.

Along with having a full-time career, Lynda was also a full-time wife and mother to three beautiful children. My mom often spoke of her first marriage as a learning experience. She married right out of college to her first love. They had very few struggles but it lasted about six years before they went their separate ways. The second marriage was not so good as the first one, but love conquered her. She made the best of her marriage until a car accident took her spouse away. At this point she stopped looking for love, focused on her children and career, and strived to be her best no matter what.



When I was younger my mother often spoke of how she wouldn't be with us forever and that she wanted me to handle things accordingly if anything happened to her. My mother was diagnosed with sarcoidosis when I was five years old and battled with it for over 20 years. In and out of the hospital frequently, she still managed to be a great mother and worked all the way up until she retired at the age of 65. Sarcoidosis got the best of her that same year, but she fought all the way 'til the end. The work and family ethics she instilled in myself and my siblings is reflected in the way I work today and have love for my own children and nieces and nephews.

What a wonderful mother I was blessed with, and I'm even more grateful to have had 26 years with her. My mother was an absolute inspiration to me, and the memories of her will be with me forever.

A TRUE SUCCESS STORY BY RONALD WATSON

My Woman of Courage is a lady that I've known for three years and fell head over heels in love with. The Woman of Courage in my life is my wife, Ericka Booe-Watson. Ericka had the courage to move out of her environment of 27 years, decided as an older adult to get an education, and let down her guards to give love another chance.

Ericka was born, raised, and spent more than half of her twenties in Gary, Indiana. Gary lacks progressive opportunities. She was a mother of three boys in Gary, and that was her reason to want more out of life. She said she also understood it wasn't going to happen in her hometown. In the moment she was lucky. Her brother was released from prison, and he figured Gary had nothing to offer him either. His kids' mother lived in Madison, Wisconsin, so he moved there, and he extended an invitation to Ericka. She said she had witnessed a lot of people around her who had sons struggle to keep their sons in school, out of jail, and even alive. With Gary being infested with criminal activity and economically challenged, she decided to take him up on his offer and move to Madison.



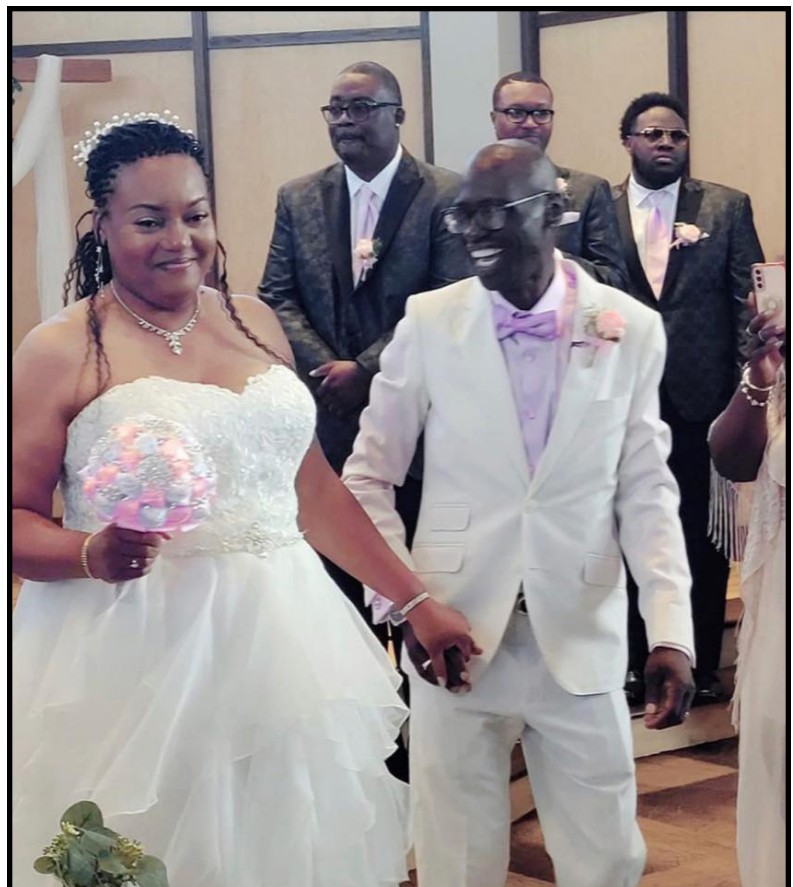
Ericka quickly knew she had made the right move, and the rest of her family slowly migrated to Madison to have a better life. She was able to get housing and jobs. But she said the real experience of growth was to grow away from all the trauma she had experienced in Gary and be able to now live without all the negative experiences she had encountered and experienced. While in Madison she had boy number four. Boy four really encouraged Ericka to want more out of life. Her oldest son was graduating high school, and she was also hearing positive messages from the soon to be 44th/45th president while he was campaigning. Barack Obama was calling on older adults to return to school and rejoin the workforce. This combination inspired her to return to school. She never got her diploma when she was in high school. She went on to gain a GED. She gained an associate degree in Applied Science. She completed UW Odyssey core classes and completed four alumni classes. She won two scholarships. Her future educational goals are to go earn her bachelor's degree in social work.



Life hasn't always been completely perfect for Ericka since she's been living in Madison. She experienced domestic abuse from her partner of about a year. She showed courage by getting out of the relationship right after the experience. Of course, she protected her heart after this experience. I tried dating her but got a bit of a cold shoulder from her. I stepped back for a year and then decided to try again. I gave her mind and heart time to heal. When I asked her out again, she gave me a chance. After about a year of dating I asked her to marry me. She said yes. Ericka puts my well-being first. She convinced me to apply for the Odyssey Project. We got married and I started the Odyssey Project four days later. The courage Ericka displayed by marrying me after such a traumatic experience further lets me know that she is my Woman of Courage.

Ericka's story has encouraged me to pile through adversities. It makes me feel like I owe it to myself to pursue my happiness no matter how old I am or how many barriers I face. She built up enough strength to move away from the only environment she's ever

known to give her sons a better life. She mustered up enough strength to pursue her education even though she had to start at square one with not finishing high school. She was strong enough to throw the hat back in the ring after healing from trauma by opening her heart back up and allowing love back in. I'm glad I was the one on the receiving end of her love. She is such a strong woman, and I hope I can continue to draw from her courage and strength. Ericka is a very courageous woman. She moved from Gary, Indiana to Madison, Wisconsin as a single mother. She went on to gain her GED, went to college, and gained an associate degree. She did all this while maintaining fulltime employment, being a fulltime mother, a caregiver for her mother, and the helper of others around her. She quickly recovered from an abusive relationship and moved on to open her heart back to love. Ericka Booeey-Watson has overcome real adversities and has become a true success story.

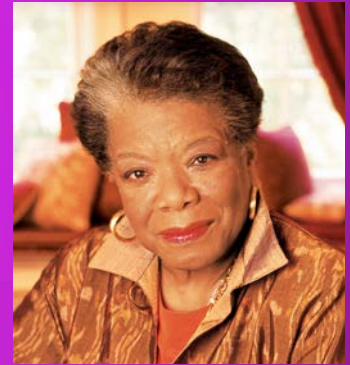


FAMOUS WOMEN WITH THE COURAGE TO WRITE



"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