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ODYSSEY ORACLE

WOMEN OF COURAGE



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Not Like Other Women

By Shaimaa Ahmed



“Live as if you were to die tomorrow, learn as if you will live forever.” —Gandhi

In a strict culture, my mom challenged the difficulties by raising three daughters on her own while my father was captive in Iran. My mom then started searching for a job to provide money for her kids, and she built a house on her own.

My mother was pregnant when my father was caught. I was four years old, and my younger sister was two years old. I still remember how my mother treated us when we heard that my father was in Iran and we couldn't see him again. I lost my voice at first, but with a torrent of love from my mother, I braced my voice. In our culture, single women with two girls can't live alone, but my mom faced that and said, “No, I live alone with my daughters to give them hope that one day their father will come back and we should wait for him.”

Later, my third sister was born, so we needed someone to take care of us while my mom started searching for a job. My mom decided to move to her father's house. My mother had only finished secondary school, and that made it difficult for her to find a good job. She started to take classes to become a secretary and finally she found a job in a company. At first, she was very slow at typing. Her boss complained about that. But she never gave up, so she bought a second-hand typewriter to practice at home. I remember her typing all night, and that noise didn't let me sleep. After that, she improved herself in her job and became the best.

My father and my mother were always exchanging letters. One day a letter came from my father, and he was upset. He wrote that he felt like he was losing his time without doing anything. That made my mom think of building a house. She thought that when my father came back to Iraq he would find his own house. But another problem she faced was that a woman can't oversee the builders alone. At first, her father went with her, but that made him complain about the pain in his joints. Later, she took her mother. Sometimes she took us to see the house while it was still under construction and show each one of us our room. She always made us dream and gave us hope and strength, and that had an impact on me. I have in my mind a special image that she is not like other women. I have always been proud of her in school, as all of my teachers talked about her and how she made her Empire.

One day I asked my mom, “Do you think my father will come back?” She told me something I will never forget. She said, “I live as if your father will be back tomorrow, and I work hard to support you like your father will not come back.” In the beginning I cried, but later I understood what she meant. After nine years, my father came back home, and he was very grateful for what his wife had done for him and for us.



Paving the Way for Many

By Nickitia Cooper



I have lived here for over 20 years now, and never in all 20 years have I encountered a force to be reckoned with like Brandi Grayson. She has stepped out into the forefront, representing those who want the issues dealt with but are too afraid and apprehensive to face them on their own. She is causing conversations to take place that many don't want to hear.

Brandi Grayson, a 35-year-old African American female, began her struggle in Madison, Wisconsin, at the age of 10. When she moved here with her biological mom, who was on drugs, it caused Brandi to need the support of the foster care system. Brandi later had her first child at the age of 13 and aged out of the foster care system at 17. Once she graduated from high school, she took classes at UW-Madison, where she began to partake in community activism and organizing. She has participated in black student unions, run campaigns encouraging other students of color to get involved in student government, and supported the LGBTQ community. Clearly, her voice speaks for many!



Brandi Grayson's engagement with issues that bind people of color seems to be infectious. Her ability to face issues head on, with or without support, causes her to have an audience of support rarely seen in Wisconsin. Just this past year she has rallied and protested against disparities (racism) in many areas. Her tenacity rained down in the cases of Tony Robinson and Cierra Finkley.

Now Brandi's admirable character exudes her genius, genuineness, and passion for creating change. In her past, she was a licensed foster parent, an assistant social worker for Joining Forces for Families, and a caseworker for W2. She currently holds a position with the YWCA as the director of employment, all while being a full-time mom, companion, and the co-founder of Young, Gifted, and Black.

Brandi Grayson, the educator and innovator: I'll take her. She to me is a breath of fresh air and heir to her throne. She cries with me, screams for us, and paves the way for many. Brandi says the things some don't want to and the things some don't want to hear. She causes the discomfort that needs to be felt. Brandi, you have come full circle, from foster child to foster parent. I salute you, Brandi, and stand behind many of your beliefs. We need Brandi Grayson. Hands off!

Making Her Mark

By Kelly Dixon



Courage: It can morph into many different forms, affect us in immeasurable ways, and make us thankful for the chance moments we did not let slip away. My woman of courage involves my mother, Julia, and one of her dear friends, Janet, who, to me, will always be a surrogate mother for personal reasons I cannot fully explain. It was the fifties, and although their encounter started at the campus of Virginia State University, my mother's history is reminiscent of many women who have overcome economic, educational, and other restrictive hurdles to be the success stories they are today.



Julia grew up in the Portsmouth-Chesapeake area of Virginia. Equal and fair opportunities were nonexistent for a person of color. My mother shared with me that many families feared for their female children, insisting that one day they may run off with a military man as a survival tactic because the south was oppressive and one-sided. My mother grew up poor, started working at a young age, and dealt with a mother (my grandmother) who was verbally abusive and did not consider her to be beautiful. My mother had wonderfully smooth, milk chocolate brown skin, stern yet loving brown eyes, and a voice that let you know she only had to call you one time to find out what she needed. In the fifties, a light skinned black child in the same family was always treated better than their sibling counterparts that had darker skin and typical African features. Because of my grandmother's emotional abuse and a deep need to succeed, my mother knew she had to make a change for the better and find a way to leave Virginia.

The Portsmouth-Chesapeake area is home to many different military bases and units as well as a port of entry for the United States Navy. Many history lessons explain the obvious—that is, if you were black and poor during this time and had limited resources, there were not many offers available to improve your economic circumstances. Somehow my mother found the skill and strength to hold her head high, and this was an art that I can only imagine. Julia had much pride and common sense, and I guess that is why, at times, I can be stubborn as a rock. She had a job that only provided a five-dollar-a-week take home, which continued to be a no-win situation. My mother studied hard through high school with a no-quit attitude and got into a segregated college, where she took a German language class from Janet.

Janet was a lady who was going through her own struggles at that time but was able to offer my mother a chance to relocate to Wisconsin. Without this opportunity, I know deeply I could not be here today. Being firm and determined, with a strong work ethic and, again, a need to succeed, my mother got through the tough times while readjusting to life here in Wisconsin. She made her mark as a State of Wisconsin employee, raised three children, and battled cancer. Like many mothers, she shielded me from what she could and educated me on the importance of being able to love and knowing how to love. Unlike my grandmother, my mother always told me never judge a lone cookie that's sitting outside of the cookie jar because that could be the one that keeps you from crumbling.

In conclusion, Leo Rosten wrote, "Courage is the capacity to confront what can be imagined." There have been many layers of my life where I have been ready to call it quits for good. But then I am reminded of the women in my life, the history lessons of ladies before me that were able to manage through the tough times and the tears and find a way—a way to leave their mark and their memory.

Respect

By Bettye Emmanuel



“Family is everything” is what this great woman used to say. Rosella Betha Johnson was a wonderful gift from God to me. Rosella underwent a lot of challenges in her life while growing as a woman. Her death took me by surprise. Watching her as I grew up taught me how to respect people as they are—not what they do, when they do it, why they do it, or how they do it.

Rosella Betha Johnson was born October 6, 1968. She was an identical twin with my mom, Roselind Renee Johnson. At age 16 my mom had already had her second child, which was me, while my aunt was still a virgin. In 1992, my mom decided to move to Madison, WI. When my aunt was told that we were moving, she took it hard. As kids, my aunt and mom made a pact that whoever had their first girl would switch. So I was my mom’s first daughter. I was asked if I wanted to stay with Tiny (which was her nickname) instead of going to Madison. I could remember jumping on her bed, getting under the covers, and saying, “Yes, yes, yes, I do.” My mom was like, “Not now.” I remember crying the whole bus ride home.

Tiny was a wonderful, respectful, outgoing, beautiful work of art. She finished high school (Dusobo High) and went to Martin Luther King College in Chicago. She was very intelligent. She had her first child when she was 19 years old. His name was Joe. He got suffocated by his aunt on his dad’s side of the family because of drugs. My aunt was what you call a functional drug addict. She worked, took care of her children, and made sure we had a roof over our heads. She just smoked crack. I still loved everything about her.

Drug overdose from heroin is what the coroner said she died from. Although my aunt never did heroin, her baby’s father overdosed her after she told him her second child wasn’t his. My aunt had dozed off and he injected it in her arm. I can’t control my tears still to this day as I write and continue to pray.

In conclusion to this wonderful, brief bio of the most awesome person that has ever crossed my path, Rosella left behind four beautiful children who still love her dirty drawers. My aunt wasn’t the best, but she was the one who I looked to be the most amazing person in the world. My aunt had a baby girl on 09/15/1999 who was a month premature and was my aunt’s first daughter. My aunt passed away on 10/31/1999. While my mom and grandma and I cleaned her room, my mom found a letter that my aunt wrote that she was going to give to my mom. I’m not going to quote this because I don’t remember verbatim what was written, but she was writing to tell my mom, “I know we agreed to pass our first daughter, but I think I want Lady to get Mania when Lady gets to be 18 years old.” So my mom raised Mania from 7 weeks until she was 27 months with the help of my grandma and my mom’s girlfriend. I received Mania on December 23, 2002. I was overjoyed. I did what my aunt used to do to me—I pressed her hair every Saturday with the same Blue Magic hair grease. I love the smell of burnt hair because it brings back so many



memories. I put one cap of bleach in her bath water every night. It's those little things that keep her presence alive. Mania is a beautiful 16 year-old with NO kids. She is in tenth grade and works at KFC. She helps edit the Simpson Street Press paper and has a BIG heart in a little body. I'm grateful for the knowledge that was instilled in me by Rosella Betha Johnson. Her theme song was Aretha Franklin's "Respect." Her motto was, "You have to give respect to receive respect." My favorite song is still Aretha Franklin's "Respect."



P.S. I know I cry at least once a day when I think of her, whether it is a happy thought or a sad thought. I may laugh when crying. I'm not always sad when I'm crying over her presence. I cry if I smell Red Door, her favorite perfume.

Verna Mae Crowe, Woman of Courage **By Raven Fabal**



Verna Mae Crowe spent 78 years on this earth. None of those years were easy, but she never gave up. Courage and determination are what made her an extraordinary woman, and optimism was her stock in trade. Her many challenges included interracial marriage, prejudice from her husband's dysfunctional family, and raising three daughters in the same small town as her sexually abusive brother-in-law.

When Verna Mae met William Crowe for the first time, she knew that she had met her true love. Even though she was told by friends and family that she should try to find someone within their community, someone Cherokee, like her, she did not listen. Her Cherokee community had nothing good to say about her "pale faced" gentleman. When Verna, a dark skinned half-blood Cherokee girl, married her white, Irish beau, there were few besides her mother who would still talk to her, and none accepted them as a couple. "You are diluting our race!" her elders said. Eventually the pressure became too great, and the couple decided to move to William's home in Georgia.

William's family in Georgia was not at all thrilled about welcoming a dark skinned "squaw" from Oklahoma into their midst. Three little girls later, during WWII, William left for the Army. William's family gave little support to Verna. The only consistent offer of help was from William's brother, Lloyd, who was known to be sexually abusive with women in the family. Since Lloyd had already tried to molest Verna once, she did not mince words with him. She let him know that his twisted assistance was not welcome. Although the rest of the family seemed to look the other way, she would "scream loud and long and be sure he was reported and punished" if he ever tried to touch her or her kids. She mentioned other things, including some ways that a "squaw" could disable his desires, but fortunately, these extreme measures never became necessary.



So, left pretty much on her own, Verna had to find creative ways to make ends meet, so she worked full time in almost impossibly difficult factory jobs. At four foot eleven inches, the diminutive Verna surprised everyone when instead of taking the simple and very lowest paying jobs as a secretary or machine worker, she opted to take on the job of "mattress thrower" at a

local factory. “Poor folks have poor ways,” she said, “and I’ve got to feed three young’ns, so I’ll do what I have to do!” For ten to twelve hours in a row, Verna had to stand in the production line, grabbing mattresses three to four times her size from one side of a conveyor belt, flipping and flinging them to the other side of the line, so that the seams on the other side of the mattresses could be fed into the huge sewing machines. It turns out that a little woman with a big heart can accomplish surprising goals because she did that job for years and did it well!



Verna Mae Crowe, devoted mother, loving wife, defender of children, thrower of mattresses and keeper of the family hearth, taught me by example what a strong, loving woman should be. In a world that showed her prejudice, abuse, and challenges that would have broken a lesser person, she not only survived but thrived. She never lost her sense of humor. In fact, she often used humor to diffuse tense situations in what turned out to be a very dysfunctional family. She was always there, on the side of justice, tolerance, and mercy. She loved her family and her community, and she enriched every life she touched. She took bold steps when she had to, went where her heart led her, and never regretted it. She often took the harder road when it was best for her family. That’s why when I hear the phrase “Woman of Courage,” I think of Verna Mae Crowe.

Sister of Courage: Mikyla Mobley

By Jayvonna Flemming



“We must embrace pain and burn it as fuel for our journey.” —Kenji Miyazawa

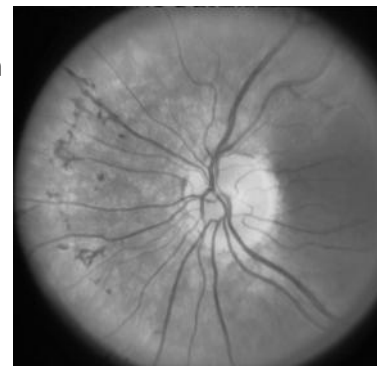
She’s one of the strongest young women I know. She’s an ox and reminds me so much of myself. My profoundly loved baby sister is an indication of true courage. I am my sister’s keeper, and she is my inspiration. My sister has jumped through so many hurdles in her life thus far, but she has remained standing through it all. My sister is strength. She isn’t perfect; she is human. She is my eyes, ears, and backbone. I love my sister, yet I don’t tell her daily. I know she knows how proud I am of her and how blessed I feel to have her as a part of my life forever. Her courage extends throughout being adopted, having the eye doctors tell her she’ll be completely blind by her early 20’s, and taking extra strides to stay on top of her education.

Being the only child out of six children to be adopted was hard for my sister. Not only was she alone in her new placement and with her new family, it was challenging to adjust to their culture, background, and belief system. She was confused and lost, trying to figure out this process and what it meant as her life continued. I remember when my sister used to call me to tell me how she hated being put on a schedule and told that greasy food was bad for her. Now imagine that, a little black girl growing up watching her aunt and uncles cook fried chicken and sitting there—not close enough to where the grease pops out at you, but there, in the kitchen, smelling all the seasonings dispersing from the pan—the salt, pepper, accent, season salt, and garlic powder, anxiously waiting for that delicious, crispy fried chicken to get done. It was hard hearing how my sister felt like she didn’t fit in, and her new family told her everything that she was used to and adjusted with in life had to be rearranged. As the years went on and my sister adjusted completely, her old life was no more. To see her



change and feel loved and stable, now that's strength. She taught me a lot through it all. It doesn't matter what color, culture, or belief system we have, we are all one and the same. And that family gives my sister the love and push she needs, and they believe in her as much as she believes in herself. The biggest challenge my sister faces today is finding her place among us. She has changed and is a completely different person. She says sometimes she doesn't even know what to talk about around us—her choice in music, food, and fashion is completely different from ours. My sister has overcome it all. She has learned and grown and built herself up into this beautiful 16 year old, and even though this isn't the only obstacle she is facing, she remains strong through it all and embraces it.

Retinitis Pigmentosa is a disease that causes a slow but progressive vision loss. In each of the eyes there is a gradual loss of the light-sensitive retinal cells called rods and cones. The symptoms are night blindness and loss of peripheral vision. A couple years ago, my sister did a presentation at her school about her disease and how rapidly it increases. It hurt me so badly that the pain was unbearable; I was sad, confused, lost, and just completely torn. To know my sister would never be able to drive or see her mate's outer appearance, or pick out her nail color at the salon—it drives me crazy to know my baby sister, my only sister, got dealt this card out of the deck. There was something about hearing and seeing my sister's presentation that showed me how strong she was. When all her classmates were asking her questions about driving and crossing the street, she answered with such certainty and acceptance. I knew right at that moment that she was a lot stronger than I thought—shoo, stronger than I was! Strong enough for the both of us. My sister now uses a cane everywhere she goes. The first time I broke down about this was on Halloween this year. We were going trick-or-treating with my kids and my friend's daughter, and it was about 5:30 pm. My sister grabbed my arm and said, "Lady (my nick name), can you hold onto me? I can't see." Here, to me, it still appeared bright, but my sister only heard the sound of children's voices and everything else was a blur. We walked to the next door bell, and a man came out in a wolverine mask. I started to cry, right there—not because I was scared, but to see how bad it had gotten, how rapidly it had increased since I saw her last. That moment was just letting it all out and accepting the truth. There was nothing I could do, true enough, but I wanted my sister to know how much love and support she has. We went to a few more houses and headed home. We ate some pizza and talked about how she was studying braille, which she had almost mastered. When she talks about this disease, it's like she has no worries. She cannot be broken. Her strength amazes me. I just can't believe sometimes how many obstacles my sister goes through and she still keeps her head high. She is my little motivator and inspiration.



My sister is a member of the Black Student Union (BSU), which provides a community for students that holds them accountable to grades, community service, and mentoring. The BSU holds at its core a set of principles, like Truth, Justice, Propriety, Righteousness, Harmony, Balance, Reciprocity, and Order. My sister loves attending meetings and traveling to different states. She says the group keeps her connected to her cultural background. She also receives tutoring in math from another member who is in grad school. As if this isn't enough, she also participates in the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) College Prep Program, which helps teens achieve higher GPAs and enroll in more advanced placement and honors courses. My sister is definitely driven, and her education is primary. She makes me proud constantly and is always eager and ready to learn. I'm a true believer that if you're there and you stick with it, you can get through it. My sister is a prime example of not letting negative circumstances defeat her. When you see her, she keeps a smile on her face; even though she struggles with math, she definitely

knows how to turn a negative into a positive.

No matter how challenging life can get, embracing your weakness is the act of true courage. My sister has overcome adoption, and she embraces her new family's culture and beliefs. She still struggles with going blind by her early 20's, but she doesn't let her eyesight become an obstruction. She is learning new ways to communicate and get around. And, through it all, school is still her number one priority. She continues to meet with her tutor twice weekly and keep her grades above average. I am extremely satisfied with my sister's strength and eagerness to continue to move forward and pursue all things possible in advancing herself. Her life reminds me of a quote by Franklin D. Roosevelt, "When you come to the end of your rope, tie a knot and hang on."

Her Own Boss **By Jalisa Galvin**



When I think about it, it's really crazy that my cousin Myesha and I have so much in common. I always wanted to do my own in-home daycare, become a social worker, and adopt, and so has she. She knows me really well. The one thing I can say is that I can confide in her, and I don't have to worry about her judging me. She is a woman of courage because she is a very kind hearted person.

She would help you if you needed the help. She is very willing to help in any way that she can. My cousin Devan moved to Milwaukee, and he needed a job. Her husband Bill owned a security company, so he got her a job doing security. For me, personally, when I had car trouble and she stopped by, I told her about my difficult times. She said, "You know you can always call me because if I needed something, I would call you." I was scared to ask for her help, and I didn't ask because of my pride. Now when I look back, I should have because she was willing to help me.

She really loves kids, and she has made a career out of it. Myesha opened her in-home childcare when she was 22 years old. It was not hard for her getting started, but it was hard at times to keep up with her enrollment. She has a passion for kids and loves them. When she opened her childcare, she started with day shifts, and when the parents needed nights, she did them both. As the years went by, she added pick-up and drop off services—her husband would pick kids up and drop them off if they needed it. Now she is looking for a new building to expand her business.

She has a passion for kids, but she can't have kids of her own. It was a difficult time for her when she lost her daughter during her pregnancy, but she still found children to care for. She raised her husband's daughter from a young age. Our cousin Little Tommy asked her if she would take in his son because he didn't want the baby going to another family. She talked to her husband about it, and they agreed they would take the baby in and go through the process of adopting him.

I doubt myself sometimes and think that I'm not going to make it and become a social worker. Then I say to myself, if she can do it, I can do it. I have to have faith in myself. All she has accomplished amazes me, and she does what she wants to do. She sets up contracts, she is her own boss, and she makes things happen.



She Never Gives Up

By Karina Gómez



Christine's childhood wasn't easy. Since a young age, she had to face bullying at school and deal with it on her own. Depression and not feeling happy like the other kids was part of her life growing up. She became a mom at a young age, and it wasn't easy to be the one responsible for the kid and for the house expenses.



At some point, welfare was the only option to get into college for Christine. She successfully graduated from a medical career program with honors and decided to work in the medical field. Her dad convinced her to become a firefighter. She failed the first time but never gave up. She tried again, and this time she made it into the Fire Department. Time went by, and shortly after that she reconnected with a friend from the past. They got married, but it was a very abusive relationship physically and mentally, leading her into depression and suicide attempts. After surviving the attempts, she found out she was pregnant. That gave her the courage to keep hoping for a better life, but it wasn't getting any better. The abuse continued, leading to another pregnancy just a month and a half after the baby was born. She knew this abuse wasn't going to stop. Deep inside she wanted to do something to change it. Overall, she was in charge of the house and the only one paying for food and the rest of the expenses. When she discovered she was pregnant with her fourth child, she started with the help of her mother to look secretly for a place to move to with her kids, away from all the abuse. It wasn't easy because after she moved, her husband wouldn't let her go just like that. He started stalking her. Threats, court, and lies were part of her daily life. She filed for divorce, but that process took a long time.

She continued to work as a firefighter, but one day after Christmas 2005 when the department was called to a fire, there was an accident. She was rushed to the hospital. Doctors tried to save her knee. Going through several surgeries, the doctors couldn't fix it. Retiring on duty disability was the only thing she could do after that.

The divorce was finally done after three long years, and the recovery from all the pain in her past was about to start. Then love was there again. Finally, she and her kids had a person who made them feel happy, loved, and safe. It was short because the man who came into their lives to brighten them up passed away. All those memories of great moments with him will stay in her heart and memory forever. It was a rough year going through the loss of a loved one. Then she decided to join the gym. This is where we met. From the moment I started talking to her, I knew there was something special and great about this woman.

I want to finish this with the words of this wonderful woman, a person who, despite adversity, has managed to get ahead and live her life to the maximum, making sure her kids grow into wonderful adults and have a better life than the one she had. She is a woman with courage. Christine Jacobs said, "In all this time, after all I went through, I never gave up. I suppose there were many times I wanted to, and it was a struggle not to. But I had my kids, and I knew that if something happened to me, my ex-husband would get them. I wasn't going to let that happen. I try to be kind to everyone, I try to make people's lives better, I raise my kids on my own, and I try to do the very best I can. I cry when I'm alone, smile when I'm not. I hide pain behind laughter and heartache behind dancing."

No More Hugs

By Brandice Hatcher



You never really know the feeling of someone's hug until the day you awake and nothing is there to hug but their clothing. For me this day was December 17, 2010 at 10:30 PM, the night my mom, Patricia Lee Bausley, departed from the physical to eternal life. My mother did not have what we call an age appropriate childhood, but what is age appropriate? She was a woman of many hustles and love for all. Patricia valued her friendship but lacked self-appreciation. I'll take you on a glimpse of the woman I wish I could hug one last time.

Patricia was the first born of 11 children to a single mother who failed to tell her who her father was, so already she was incomplete. Her mother had her next child two years later, and everything was going well until she got married. Patricia's mother began having more kids when Patricia was five, and not long after Patricia was forced to be a second mother to her siblings washing clothes, cooking, doing hair, and changing diapers. Patricia's mom did begin to put Patricia's childhood into non-existence so she could help around the house. Patricia began to secretly have a life outside of home when she met a young man and became pregnant. Patricia and her mother were pregnant at the same time, and that's when the big problems came. By now, Patricia had eight kids to help take care of, plus her soon-to-be ninth sibling and her own child. Patricia and her mother buried their next three kids together months apart. Patricia had three kids by the time she was 18 years old and was married and moved out. Patricia dropped out of school in the eighth grade and could barely read, but she could cook up a meal.

Patricia became a housewife with three kids to a husband who was young but very abusive and began to drink excessively once again. Patricia started to lose herself in her family and husband. Patricia left her husband and moved back to her mother's at the age of 24. Patricia began to work and develop friendships. Over the years, Patricia worked several jobs such as cashier in a bar, cashier in a flower shop, a worker in a newspaper warehouse, and (my favorite) a front desk worker at a funeral home. One day she let the electrician into the morgue, and one of the bodies lifted up. She ran and locked the electrician in the morgue. Patricia ran all the way home, never to return, LOL. Patricia did what she needed to do to take care of her kids. At times they barely had food or only enough for her kids and not herself. Patricia began to work for her brothers and became a Loan Shark; she collected well and her life

was getting together. Patricia met a military guy named O.M Bausley who was just coming home and had one son. They started dating, became an item, and moved in together. O.M accepted Patricia's kids as his own. In later years, they took in O.M's son and then took in one of Patricia's best friend's daughter after her friend became addicted to alcohol. Six years later, Patricia and O.M took in Patricia's best friend's youngest daughter That's me, Brandice. Patricia provided money and her home to many of her family and friends till her death. Patricia's mother moved in with her, and Patricia's kids and some of her siblings took care of her mom even after Patricia's death. Patricia dealt with so much pressure from her mom and lack of love and appreciation from her husband, too. Patricia started to



get depressed and eat to ease her pain; she began to gain weight at a growing rate. Patricia continued to live life and pushed her feelings aside because she loved to be around people and help all. Patricia gained weight overnight and over time, and she became more and more depressed. In the community “depression” was not in the dictionary but the phrase “Get over it” was. Patricia began to lash out with her words, telling her foster kids they would never amount to anything and calling them names, but that’s how she was talked to. So history repeated itself. She wanted to and gave them the best life she could—one she could not even give her own kids. Patricia started a weight loss program in 2005 and lost 100 pounds. Then she fell and injured her back and took a down spiral of depression for the worst. She became bed bound due to her back but mostly her own lack of self-worth.

Patricia lost six best friends and two brothers, but she started having panic attacks and breathing issues when her close friend Freddie passed away in Oct of 2015. Patricia was admitted into the hospital in October 2015. Patricia had to have a trach placed in her throat and was sedated for weeks at a time because she kept trying to remove the trach. After being sent to a rehabilitation center for two months, she finally was able to go home without a ventilator and nurse. She exceeded when doctors said she would not live. Patricia came home on Dec. 12, 2015, which was her only wish. She was granted that due to her own self will and family and friends who spent every day in the hospital with her. Patricia was glad to be home to a newly decorated home and family. On Friday Dec. 17, 2015 after family left and she was getting ready for bed with her daughter, sister in-law and daughter by her side, she said she was tired of living and that she loved them all. She gave orders for them to take care of her mom, husband, and family. At 10:30 PM I received a call from my sister stating my mom had passed away. I never knew hurt until then despite having lost my birth mother at the age of three. Patricia knew when she could not bear any more, but with her last breath she was worried about others. That’s love for all. She finally said good night.

Mockingbird

By Karina Herrejon



My mom would wait the whole week to see if Sunday would arrive a little faster than the last week, but she says they never did. Sunday was the one day out of the week she could get out of the house and socialize with people her age. My mom knew that Sunday was the day she could count on my dad to take her to church—a day where she could emerge from her world and feel that the world was beautiful again. My mom couldn’t drive and had to depend on my dad to take her to church, and she thanked God every day my dad was willing to take her.

God, for a very long time, would be my mom’s greatest consolation. He would help her through her childhood abuse, the abuse from her husband and his family, and the hardship of raising three kids by herself.

The oldest girl out of ten children meant that she had to be the most responsible and in charge of household chores. This role belonged to my mom for many years. My mom lived in a small town where it was expected for the eldest female child to care for her siblings, but this was something my mom never felt was really her responsibility. She would have preferred to climb trees, ride horses, and play games with her friends, but at the early age of seven she was responsible for the care of a toddler, her sister. Most mornings she would have to wake up around six in the morning to get some ingredients so her mom could make tortillas. The mornings were cold, and her hands would have cuts all over them. She experienced so many hardships, but the one she feels like still affects her to this day was the mental and physical abuse she had to go through.

My grandmother would verbally assault my mom if she didn't wake up on time in the mornings to get the ingredients. If my mom would want to go to the town carnival and dance, my grandmother would send my mom's brothers to go and bring her back. If she resisted, they were instructed to beat her. Her mother also physically abused her, but she remembers her father would sometimes appear just in time to save her. My mom was able to survive this abusive childhood with the immense love her grandmother had for her. Her grandmother played a role of a mother for my mom and taught her most of what she knows. My great grandmother taught her about God and his world and how he would be her greatest guide. Every day, my mom would go eat her favorite meal, lunch, at her grandparents' house. She can still describe the chicken soup, every aroma that filled the room, all the flavor that danced on her tongue, and the satisfaction her belly felt after she had shared this meal with her grandparents. Although my mom's lunch was a blissful moment in her everyday life, she couldn't bear any longer living in her home, so she decided she wanted to marry off in hopes of a better future. The future that was in store for her would not be any different than the life she led in her childhood.



My mom's courtship with my dad was short. She was married to him at 20; he was 21. She entered another abusive relationship with my dad and his family. They were not kind towards her and made her feel less than, whenever they had the opportunity. My dad's siblings made it clear that she wasn't welcome in any way they could, and my dad's parents would tell my mom that her responsibility was to stay at home and wait for him with a hot plate of food for whenever he would get home; that was the sole purpose of her role as a wife. When she got pregnant after two years of being married, her life became even more difficult because she now had to take care of one other person. My dad would not help her with any income, so she would work selling vegetables and other goods. When my sister was born, my mom would

spend all the money she had on her food in order to keep her healthy and would skip meals or eat very minimally. When she was pregnant with me, she would ask my dad to stay home with her because she was afraid that she wouldn't be able to make it to a hospital to give birth, but my dad said that she should just ask the next door neighbor to help her.

In 1994 both my parents immigrated to the United States. The language barrier that my mom faced here was unbearable, so she had to rely on my dad for everything. She didn't know how to drive, speak English, or obtain resources. In the United States my mom found out that both my sister and I were born with dislocated hips. This meant that there would be long nights, drives to and from Chicago almost every week, and many tears she would never be ready to recognize.

Although my mom's life has been full of abuse and neglect, she has managed to survive this abuse and come out strong, not for her sake but for her kids' sake. I believe my mom is a courageous woman for staying in a relationship that she thought would benefit her children, for surviving abuse from her own family and the family of her husband, and for coming to an unknown country. At first she did this instinctively, fighting to survive, but then her motives became selfless. She was willing to do everything in order to provide the best for her children even if she didn't exactly know how. Although her courage could have been seen if she left my father, it doesn't matter because it didn't happen. It's seen through the life she lived and the smile that still crosses her face every day.

No Excuses**By Steve Jones**

My mother would always say, “If you’re going to live with me, you’re either going to be working or going to school. You think you got it bad? Others have it worse.” In her life, she did what her siblings never did by moving to a big city when she was young, raising four children as a single mom, and continuing to work, even with health issues.

Bessie Wallace was born in Farmerville, Louisiana, in 1946. She grew up on a farm with over a dozen siblings and would tell us stories about how she was fast enough to go outside and chase down a chicken. When my mother was three, her mother passed giving birth to another girl. My mother’s stepmom was mean, and my mother would work hours in the garden feeding animals, doing laundry, cooking, changing diapers, and babysitting. At 18 she decided to move to Shreveport, Louisiana, a metropolitan area ten times bigger than Farmerville. She moved there for more opportunity and better jobs. She worked in restaurants as a cook. Later she became certified as a private duty nurse taking care of the elderly.

She moved away to Shreveport for more opportunity, but then she had four kids and had to raise them as a single mom. She worked double shifts, coming home just long enough to check on us some nights, and then going straight back to work. When I was young, my brothers were old enough to have their own families and my sister had three kids. Sometimes my mother wouldn’t have time to check on us, so my brothers would pop in on me and my three nephews. When my mother was home, she would cook. We would always have big Sunday dinners with red beans and rice, greens, pork chops, or chicken—it was different each time. Even though she was a single mom, we never went to bed hungry.



In her forties, she started having health problems such as high blood pressure and diabetes. When she had her teeth pulled and was still in pain, she went back to work before they thought she should because she needed the pay. Then she got thyroid problems. She didn’t know why she wasn’t feeling right but knew she had to work. One time when she was driving home from work and the school bus was taking me to school, the bus side-swiped her and she was taken to the hospital in an ambulance. There they told her she had an enlarged thyroid. She kept working up to the time of the surgery so that the money would keep coming in. She wasn’t somebody who made excuses.

Seeing my mother go through so much in her life makes me unable to make excuses. Watching someone else work so hard so I didn’t have to go without makes me appreciate the little things in life. My mother is absolutely a woman of courage.

Enough Love to Go Around

By Tory Latham



It's August 25, 1955 in Lyon, Mississippi. The unrelenting sun attacks a couple of worried cotton pickers, visibly stressed and extremely beaten by the blazing 94 degree heat. A young wife goes into labor...in an efficiency-sized rented house. Despite the unfavorable odds, it's a healthy baby girl; a small beauty, cheerful and friendly, with the ability to soothe and calm a person in distress. Those beautiful words define the woman named Charlene.

Eighteen months and a baby sister later, Charlene's family relocated to Chicago, Illinois. Big city, big dreams, the capital of the Midwest—this was not Lyon, Mississippi. Charlene spent her childhood less than a mile from the thriving Lincoln Park and the Gold Coast shopping of the Magnificent Mile in the Cabrini Green housing projects. Her parents would have five more brothers and a sister for her to raise as they worked to support the family. For a place that was frowned upon for its violence and other negatives, Charlene had many positive experiences in Cabrini Green.

Charlene began to venture into the other parts of the city but found that Cabrini was the place for her. She developed strong relationships with her neighbors, particularly a young lady named Pokey. They still maintain that friendship to this day. While she was in high school, she met a rough street fellow that would become her first husband, and they started a family. Her marriage didn't last, but it was long enough for her to birth two boys. A couple years later she found new love and gave birth to another boy. By the time her third son was born, she was alone again.

Just about the time she was ready to give up on love, Cabrini Green, and Chicago as a whole, she met a lead security guard just home from the U.S. Army. He excited her with his smooth country style and stories from other parts of the world. What she didn't quite realize until years later was that he had a drinking issue that was violent. Before she was aware of such behavior, two more boys were part of the family. Charlene and her family began to move around the city and finally settled in LeClaire Courts, another public housing complex. But this time she was able to gain a little traction.



As soon as the last boy entered the first grade, Charlene returned to school too. She also took in a nephew and a step-son. Things were going fairly well considering that she was parenting seven boys, working, and going to school. Then one January evening a phone call comes in that her father was shot dead at his favorite hangout spot. A year later, her first husband was brutally beaten to death. Times were rough, to say the least, but she kept it moving. She would lose her mother several years later and the father of her third child. This past August she lost her best friend of over 40 years and the man who became a dad to all the boys.

At birth, she overcame all obstacles and barriers laid in front of her. The death of both parents and the fathers of all her children couldn't slow her down. A grandmother to 21 and great-grandmother to 11, and she still has enough love to go around. Today she is a homeowner and a blessing to everyone who knows her. I am proud to call her "MOM."

The Most Special Gift

By Mustafa Mohammed Saed



The first word we say when we are born is “mama,” and we keep on saying it. We say it whenever we are hungry, happy, sad, or injured, and we just can’t stop saying it. Mother is the most special gift on earth, and she always wants to see us as the special one among others. A smile from your mother is better than hundreds of smiles from a stranger. My mother is a woman of courage because she raised me and did not finish her studies, learned to teach others, and studied to reach her goal.

When I was born in 1996, my mom was just 18 and my sister was one. She stopped going to school to take care of us. A few years later, my mom thought of staying at home and to leave studying for later, and she said, “That will not stop me from reaching my goal.” She tried her best to see us get the best—she sent us to the best schools, learned cooking, and provided anything we dreamed of. My sister joined the team in 2001, following her came my little brother after two years, and my mom was still the best on this earth.

In 2006 we decided to leave the country, leaving everything behind. Our lives were more important. We ended up living in Malaysia, and our English was just like a baby learning to speak. It was hard but not impossible, and we started learning and did not give up. My mom started teaching us all the subjects at home. She did not remember some of the subjects, so she started learning to teach us. My sister and I did not even fail a single subject, and that goes back to my mom’s teaching and courage. Later, she thought of becoming a teacher at a refugee center. She was a teacher at first and ended up making a new school, and she was the head teacher of the school.

Now she is a mother and student, and it’s her time to reach her goal. She is studying at MATC and working. I can see she is not looking back. She is building her own path. Sometimes she gets back tired from working, but that doesn’t stop her from reaching her goal either. I’m learning from her courage, and I’m trying my best to be just like how she wants to see me, and be proud of me. Mothers have a great courage. It makes me think of the mountains—nothing can move them.

My mother is the greatest person to me. Her family is the most important thing to her. She will keep on showing that love and courage. Nothing will stop her from reaching her goal, and she will always help others. She has two hearts instead of one—one for her family, and the other one is for helping others.



The Perfect Woman

By Umaina Mohammed Saed



"We are not born successful, it is not the trait you inherit, to succeed in life, one must have the courage, determination and strength to overcome all obstacles put in their path on the road to successes." —Rashida Nikila

My mom is a very hard working person, and she never gave up on her dreams, which is what has made her a successful person. I am lucky to have her in my life as a mother, sister, and best friend. She is the one who supports me and gives me hope for the future. I cannot imagine my life without her. When I was a baby, I used to tell her, "If you die, I am going to die with you." My mom is a wonderful woman, and she works hard on her education, housework and job. And that is what makes my mom special.

One of my mom's dreams is to be an educated person. My mom got married when she was only 17 years old, but that did not stop her from continuing her education. She used to tell me that she went to high school while she was pregnant, and when she went to the hospital to deliver me she took her books with her. One day, one of the nurses asked her, "Why are you bringing your books with you?" My mom said, "Because I have a test tomorrow and I want to study for that." After she got her high school diploma she had me, so she did not have time to go to college. She spent most of her time at home caring for me, my father, and my younger siblings. In 2006 we left Iraq, and we went to Malaysia. My mom started to think about studying because that was her dream, especially after my brothers, sister and I got older. She studied in a Malaysian school, and she never gave up until she got a teaching certificate in Malaysia. But the problem was that when she came to the U.S. they did not accept her certificate. Now she is studying at Madison College in the nursing program. She is hard working because she never gave up on her dream, even after all that happened to her.



My mom became a mom at an early age. When she got married she could not cook or do anything, and my dad's family used to laugh at her food, especially when she made a cake for them for the first time. But after a few months, she became one of the best cooks. She challenged herself to prove that she is the best. So after she learned how to make a cake, she made one for them. But they were so mean that they told her, "Your oven is good, not your cake." Also, my mom helped my dad build a house after she sold all her gold. Every day, my mom cooks, cleans

the house, and makes sure that my siblings and I are okay, and she always makes sure we have enough money to buy food. I want to be like her when I become a mother in the future because she is a really hard working wife and mother.

My mom always does her best in her job to help others. When she was in Iraq, she did not work because my dad used to have a good job and salary. My mom started working once we left Iraq and that was because she started to have a lot of free time and she wanted to help my dad, too. My mom started working as a volunteer at the refugee center in Malaysia, teaching the refugee students. The center was small and there were only six students. My mom is a very friendly person, so she became very friendly with the leader of the center. Both of them wanted to help the refugees become educated, so they worked really hard together until they opened a school for the refugee students. The school is very big. It has three floors, and they made uniforms for the students. My mom studied in that time so she could be a better teacher for the students. After one year, there were hundreds of students. Then my mom became the head teacher in the school. And now, in the U.S., she is trying so she can get a job to help others again. She is a very hardworking person not only in her house but in her job, too.

My mom is very careful in her education, housework, and job. I agree with Michael Jordan, who once said, "My mother is my root, my foundation. She planted the seed that I base my life on, and that is the belief that the ability to achieve starts in your mind." My mom helped me



to be strong by her strength. I want to be like my mom—I want to have her heart to help others, I want to have her dreams to be an educated person, and I want to be a good wife to my husband just like her, in the future. Now my mom is 37 years old, and if you see her you will think that she is my sister, not my mom. That is why I am very close to her. I am really lucky to have her in my life as a mother, sister, and a friend.

My Very Own Angel-Girl

By Lisa Partee



"Momma, a long time ago, when I was little and you were gone for a long time in your addiction, I made a decision...(deep breath) I am a lot like you sometimes, Momma. I make goals for myself and I talk to God about them. When I was little (four years old) and you were gone, I made a decision and I didn't tell anybody about it but God. I knew if I told anyone they would get mad and tell me not to say those things. I decided that it was time for me to learn how to spell the word TODAY. I told God that I was big enough to learn that word, and then I asked Him if I learned it, would He send you home TODAY."

Closing my eyes to think about the "woman of courage" I have been instructed to write about, I sent my spirit back in time to find her. I waited and waited, but time and time again my spirit came back with nothing remarkable. Who was this "woman?" Why couldn't I easily recall the features of her face or the cadence and tone of her voice? Refusing to accept there was not one woman in my past, I sent my spirit out with instructions to "Look again!" And then I just waited... Surprisingly, my spirit returned to me after a very short time and said, "I have found her. I didn't have to go very far at all. Although, the one that I found is not quite a woman yet..." My OliviaGrace! How could I have even considered another? I believe that a long time ago, God looked down on me with a furrowed brow and said, "This one is going to get very lost while on her journey... I think I am going to send her an angel now." Confessing that I left my little girl for almost four years while in the throes of a violent addiction still brings up the exquisitely painful *b i g w i d e a c h e* that I have learned to quickly wrap, immediately, in the succor of God's love and forgiveness and healing. I didn't know it then, but I have learned that even as a tiny girl, at the age of four, OliviaGrace became the model of "Love with No Limits," Unbridled Prayer, and Radical Forgiveness! And it was the resolute and determined devotion of this tiny little girl I called "Cookie" that brought me out of the wilderness and back home to her. The debt of love I owe...

Even today, turning back to survey the landscape of the last five years can and does still rock me to my very core. I have experienced some of the darkest nights of acknowledgement and



acceptance that were followed by the brightest dawns of enlightenment and transformation! But even while having to sift through the debris of my life, God allowed me the softness of OliviaGrace. While still having the last vestiges of addiction clinging to me, I was gifted with a love from this child that was so pure, so piercing, and seemingly without limits or parameters defined by man! I would sit and just marvel speechlessly at what on the surface appeared charming and childlike but was actually a very wise and patient and sophisticated type of *Love* that I had never

experienced before. I am trying to describe the type of Love that causes one to bow low with humility and be only left with the ability to offer up utterances that only God can understand. I now know that my learning what Love actually looked like was the cornerstone on which my new life would be built and, further, that OliviaGrace was the teacher of that lesson.

I cannot say that I ever witnessed it, but I have been told countless stories about the times and places that, out of the blue, my OliviaGrace would begin to pray out loud *specific*, powerful prayers for the mother that had abandoned her. She was such a quirky little girl that was often the target of abuse and cruelty from family members. They would punish her for saying she wanted her mommy and would tell her, "Your mom is not ever coming home again... and if she does, she will leave you again." But my little brown beauty would pull her tiny self up and stare as defiantly as she could at the ages of four, five, and six and raise her little voice in prayers that were so eloquent and fervent that they could have only been divinely inspired, praying for a mother that everyone else had wanted to forget.



Being loved by OliviaGrace is quite an experience! I could talk for days and days about the many life lessons she has taught me, but one that was vital was the lesson of Radical Forgiveness. Now up to that point, I can say that I had at times in my life "forgiven" someone for something or another that was done against me, but hear me when I tell you that my experiences with this notion was *NOTHING* when compared to what I was afforded by my very own angel-girl! Forgiveness by OliviaGrace can only be described as *Radical*. In the company of my darling seraph, *forgiveness* was rigorous, exhaustive, and comprehensive! I did not even always have to speak the words out loud to her. Sometimes it just seemed as though she was *sensing* the subtle changes in my spirit as I was becoming able to even understand the error of my ways and, most importantly, the pathology that had been rooted in my soul and had caused the painful symptoms of addiction.

My OliviaGrace... I love her more now than when she was born. My love for her now has nothing to do with her smooth brown skin or her thick masses of hair. I love this child now because I *know* the price of my addiction was paid with her tears. She is a small being that was sent to me with a huge job and because she is born of the flesh in this temporal world, she has felt so much pain as she executed her "job duties." She is the finest teacher I have ever had, and I am humbled and grateful in her presence. Life with OliviaGrace has been a study in learning to extract the nectar from the fruit, the honey from the comb, and finding the choicest bits of meat next to the bone! I just pray that I can be the very best mother/student I can be for her as I raise her to go forward... and back towards our Heavenly home.

Lady C.**By Rosalyn Richmond**

. . . I'm catching hell, catching hell
 Lord I'm living, living, living here alone
 Alone, lone, I didn't believe it could be
 You know all the pressure on me, all the time

Oh, I'm catching hell, well, well
 Living here alone, lone, lone, lone
 Lone, lone, lone, to tell you the truth, to tell you the truth
 I'm going out of my mind, yeah . . . —Natalie Cole



Lady C, or Mama C, as many called her, both names stemming because everyone was her child or associate---my associates, my brother's associates, rats, cats, birds, fish.....you name it, she claimed it. My mother loved cooking and creating things. Lady C was a pull no punches kind of person. You could always get a good conversation and laugh out of her. She had the respect from all STILL without people knowing what kind of mask she was

hiding behind. You see, my mother was abused and still would work public jobs and raise a family.



Have you ever worked with a black eye, risking reputation with embarrassment, with people asking questions and/or you being the water cooler gossip as you yourself are beat down physically and mentally but STILL working no matter the situation? Well, my mother knew this first hand for many years. She would walk with her head up (she wore glasses and makeup to try and hide most of the damage) as she would go to City Hall and be assistant aid to Mayor Harold Washington. My mother was one of the first black women to work in most of her jobs, such as Building Inspector for the City of Chicago or Unit Clerk for the University of Illinois. Looking back on this, it took the courage of one hundred yet was in this one lady. No matter the struggle or hustle, she was the woman to get the job done.

My mother never went to college yet achieved many levels in life. Beat down and house bound, my mother would still find time to better herself. Even in the dark moments, she would educate, motivate, and read to my brother and me. She loved reading, doing crafts, reading detective magazines, listening to music, studying the bible and watching game shows. The good thing was that he encouraged her learning and crafting because he could brag to his friends as to how smart and talented she was. He also protected her from any harm other than from him.

My mother played a lot of music which influenced how I learned to love music for situations. She would play a song by Natalie Cole, for instance, called "I'm Catching Hell." This song gave her many emotions at different times, and I did not clearly understand it until I was in my own situation. She would cry, lean, and sing. She would drink, laugh, and dance. When I hear this song I too, cry just from the pain I know now my mother was feeling when she played this song.

My woman of courage overcame the abuser by reading and educating herself. He did not think that she was planning and learning from her detective magazines how to move to a different town. She called me one day to say this was it and could I get her to my home from downtown Chicago. Mind you, I had left a situation and moved to Madison, WI. Long story short, a dear friend and I hit the road to bring my mother to freedom. Evelyn C. Richmond lived many years after becoming free and lived to see her abuser buried. Lady C is finally free from all the pain life may have offered her. Her courage shaped me into the woman I am today. She showed me that life is not what it may seem. It only is what you make it. RIH, LADY C.

Always a Solution

By Katia Robinson



My woman of courage is my cousin Latissa Westmoreland. Before I met her, she had faced many problems. Living in Chicago, she was left by her mom at a very young age with her mom's best friend. As she was living with her, Latissa started going through a lot. She was going to school and doing well until she started fighting a lot and switching schools because of this problem. Eventually she got kicked out of the high school she was going to. She then went home, and the father of the lady that was raising her raped her soon after. Her

foster mother wouldn't believe her, so they got into a big argument and she put my cousin out. My cousin then became homeless and started bouncing from home to home, not having a place to go.

After a few months, she found her mother, who was with her mom's side of the family. Latissa ended up coming to visit to meet the rest of us. When she came she began to build a connection, especially with me. At that time I was eight months pregnant, so she and I became close. I remember when she was getting ready to go back she told me not to have my baby until she came back and visited. But when she came back, she had gotten put out, so she didn't have anywhere else to go. By that time I had moved into my own apartment, so I didn't mind her moving in with me.

After a while, I knew she wanted to finish school. I gave her advice about going to night school at West High, so she took my advice. Later on she decided to stop going and started to find work, but during the months of living together she found out that she was three months pregnant. When she found out she cried, but I didn't know if it was happiness, or if she was really hurt. After a while, she made a decision to keep her child and started to do what was best. She realized that now she had a child on the way, so she had to get up and finish school and work to make sure her child would never have to go through what she went through as she was growing up.

She is my woman of courage because the things she went through have had an impact on me. It made me realize that even when you are at your worst, there is always a solution, an open door to get out. She made sacrifices and made it through a rough struggle.



Through It All She Persevered By Arkeshia Sallay



Through it all she persevered, trudging along a winding road of drug addiction, severe domestic abuse, and raising four children on her own. Collecting bruises and both mental and physical scars along the way, through it all she persevered.

My mom was addicted to drugs for as long as I can remember. She hosted many big parties at our house where they drank alcohol, played cards, and used drugs. She would sleep in and not prepare breakfast or get us children up and ready for school many days. She would be locked away in her room for days, or leave my brothers and me home alone for days, sometimes even weeks. I called my uncles and told them what was going on and they came over, busted her door down where she had been holed up for days, and toted her to rehab, where she would stay for months in order to get clean. When she finally completed the program and came home, she was clean and looked very healthy. She then got a job and continued to go to her meetings. She did, however, relapse a few times, but through hard work, dedication, support from our family, Narcotics Anonymous, and finally moving away from such a trigger-enhanced neighborhood, she prevailed and kicked the addiction.



My mom also endured severe domestic abuse at the hands of my youngest brother's dad. He would get drunk and high and beat my mom. He would tell her he would kill her and chop her up in little pieces and bury her so no one would find her. As a child, I witnessed him cutting my mom's neck. He had her in the bathroom, looking in the mirror to watch him as he cut her neck. She still has the scars on her neck today. I ran out of the house and called the police and my uncles. Long story short, my uncles found him first and that was the last we ever heard of him, and the last time my mom would ever put up with any form of abuse.

Lastly, my mom raised her four children on her own in one of the worst neighborhoods in Chicago. We were on welfare and had very little money, yet we were very happy. We had only two bedrooms, so I shared a room with my brothers. It made for a fun childhood. Although my mom was single and raising us, she still made the best of it. She had a nicely decorated house that was very cute. She painted our brick project walls pink, had a tan sectional furniture set and lots of plants. She would get on her hands and knees and wax our concrete floors. Although we lived in the projects, my mom made it comfortable and a beautiful home. With any money she had left over, she would give us some to buy an outfit or pair of shoes. Because there were four of us, we would have to take turns every month. All in all, we were happy.

Although my mom is not perfect by far, she has come a long way. She battled and conquered her drug addiction, is still alive, and stronger than ever, despite her man trying to kill her and break her soul, and she raised her four children to the best of her ability. Today she is happily married, owns her own businesses, and is drug free. Through it all she persevered.

Like a Phoenix**By Luna Santos**

I met a woman when I was 15 years old who was the sister-in-law of the man I had loved for years. Lorena and I became such great friends; we hung out and went out dancing together, and we just have so much in common. She was in an unhealthy relationship and had a daughter who at that time was two years old. Lore and I always talked about how we were addicted to these two men who ended up being brothers and hurting us so much. We talked about how maybe it was time for her to leave that unhealthy relationship and become a single mother. She always said she couldn't do that to her daughter—for her not to have a father.

On a Tuesday night when I was at Walmart, I received a call from Lore telling me she had broken up with him and it was definitely done. I could not believe it. Right after that happened, it was time for me to get involved. I had to help her feel that this was not the end of her love life. After a few days we got together and I was talking to her about going back onto a dating site, but she was so scared. . .

The problem she was worried about was that she was not good at speaking English. But I said it would be fine. Right away I made her a profile on a dating site; she was not sure if it would work. I was helping her keep up with all the men messaging her, and I was responding to most of her messages. When Lore and Josh matched and then went out on a date, I would not have guessed they would fall in love right away and then get married. For four years Lore was so happy and felt so lucky right next to the man she fell in love with. She was able to fix her status in the U.S.A. Lorena and her daughter were able to go back to Argentina for the first time in 20 years.

In March of 2015 Josh was hospitalized for cancer in the stomach; then the cancer ended up spreading up to his bones and, at the end, to his brain. I found out too late, after he had died already. I called Lorena as soon as possible to see how she was coping with it. I always knew her as a strong independent woman, but during that call she was just so down. I told her everything is going to be ok, and to think positively, if not for herself then for Josh and her daughter's well-being and future. I have respected Lorena, but now the reason why I see her as my woman of courage is simply that it takes a lot of bravery to continue after you just had found the love of your life, lived happily ever after for a few years, and then a sudden disease takes him away from her.

It seems so unfair, but I understand that everything happens for a reason. I sometimes blame myself a bit for making their meeting happen, since I was the one who made her join that dating site. This shows that Lorena has the strength to continue after going from being so happy to then having chaos come like a fire and burn it all down. But, like the phoenix, she rises from the ashes for her and her daughter. Lorena, a woman who shares many memories with me, is my woman of courage!



There for Others

By Kala Taylor



I'll never forget my first cell phone. It was a bulky, pay-as-you-go Nokia phone. My mother had gotten her income tax return, and we went shopping at Wal-Mart. That night I got home and saw that my auntie had called us on the house phone. For some odd reason, the house phone wasn't working. We ended up using my new cell phone to call her. I was so geeked up because the

thought of dialing a number on my phone for the first time excited me.

I called my auntie and she told me that my sister, Semajer, was in a car accident, and she didn't know her condition at the moment. I could feel the world around me begin to crumble as I began to lose sight of

reality. My auntie hung up on me, and then she called back to tell me that Semajer was in stable condition. I remember feeling my heart begin to beat again. At that very moment, I began to realize just how loving, caring, thoughtful, and overall resilient Semajer really was.



Semajer loves both of her parents, even though that love wasn't always returned. Semajer's childhood was a battle to begin with. She was born on the rough side of Chicago. Both of our parents were dealing with their demons in life, and they took that battle out on her. My sister and mother fought a lot, and even after all the words and pain she experienced and felt, she still has maintained a relationship with our mother. Our father was in and out of our lives. It was a struggle for her because she wanted our dad to be in our lives and gave him many chances to be a father. To this day, she still gives him more chances. Semajer wanted and needed support from our parents because, as a teenager, she dealt with a lot of bullying in school. Even though it broke her sometimes, she still stayed strong and felt she was a beautiful, big-sized girl. The love she received from her sister and overall family gave her the strength and self-confidence to battle her own demons through childhood.



I always knew that Semajer wanted to be a mother. Semajer is a single mother with two beautiful daughters, De'Asia and Semya. A few years ago, Semya was diagnosed with Autism. The news came to Semajer as a shock and later depression. She knew the struggles of raising a child with Autism because her little sister Joy has it. She feared the worst for her daughter. She felt that Semya wasn't going to get the best treatment or fair care in life. Semajer works hard every day to make sure she does. She puts her children first, even before herself. She has never put any man in front of her kids or anyone else in general. Her kids have always had a roof over their heads, the best education, and endless love from Semajer. I couldn't be any more proud of her. She works as a part-time, certified nursing assistant at an assisted care living home. No matter what struggles Semajer goes through, she has always been there for her kids.

Family means the world to her. It's her backbone. She has always had an open ear to listen, a shoulder to cry on, and is very stern and direct with her

advice. Even though Semajer has done these amazing things, the family hasn't always been there for her. For that, I feel grateful to have her in my life. A week ago, I called her and told her I injured my back doing the big move I made. The first thing she asked me was if I was going to be all right. I explained the situation in more detail, and she told me she would visit me the following morning. I remember waking up that morning and she was already there. Semajer walked into my room and sat next to me in bed. She smiled at me and asked if my back was doing better today. Semajer asked me if I needed anything or if she needed to run any errands for me. I remember feeling so blessed having her at my side. I wanted to cry, but instead I told her I was okay and thanked her for being here for me.

Starting Over from Scratch

By Marisela Tellez



What do you call a 34-year-old woman who not only wants to return to school but would also be attending the same high school as her oldest child? Courageous and determined are the first words among many others that would describe such a brave soul as my grandmother's. Yolanda Salazar has demonstrated the courage within her by putting her dream on hold for many years in order for her family to survive poverty and by returning to school in her late thirties to pursue a new career despite the sexism she had to face. She started from scratch all over again after leaving her

hometown behind.

Most teenagers remember their days involving high school events, friends, driving for the first time, parties etc. However, my grandmother did not have time for any of that. She was forced to begin working at a young age because she was the oldest among her nine siblings and needed to contribute to the household income. For this reason, she started working when she was about twelve years old while attending school at the same time. At age 15 she enrolled in secretarial school. By



the time she was 17 she began working as a clerk in the Mexican army headquarters. A few months later she married my grandfather and had her first son (my father) at age 18 and her first daughter a year later. She always dreamt of being the first one in her family to hold a college degree and be able to set an example. Nonetheless, she was left with no choice but to put her education on hold for many years while raising a family with three kids and a full-time job. At one point she had lost all hope of the possibility of fulfilling her dream.

Nevertheless, her dream came back, and she made the ultimate decision to finish her studies. My grandmother had her mind set and was ready to pursue her high school diploma, which she had put on hold for too long. It was not easy for her to return to her studies, especially because her father and husband were sexist and did not agree with her decision. They believed her only job was to devote her time to the household and family, just like her mother and the majority of women in

Mexico. Both of her parents barely finished what would be middle school, but this did not stop her from beating the odds. She kept herself focused and multi-tasked everything at hand: work, school, family, household duties, etc. With great effort and patience, she received her high school diploma three years later and went on to register for college to pursue another career. Six years later, she received her degree as a lawyer specializing in employment and labor law. She was the first in her family to graduate from college and one of the two out of all her siblings to attend college. My grandmother has demonstrated how far one can go with such devotion and hard work, regardless of the age or difficult circumstances.

Years later she found herself in a dilemma of whether to stay in Mexico or move to the U.S. Her daughter had recently married, moved, and was expecting her first child in Wisconsin. It was my grandma's first grandchild, and she wanted to be there to see her grow and help raise her. She and my grandfather packed their bags and made their trip to Wisconsin in 1988. She thought it would be like a vacation trip, something temporary. But little did she know she would be visiting the location where all her family would follow and relocate with her. Shortly after, her son, daughter-in-law, and her youngest daughter moved to Wisconsin too. She left behind everything she knew; Mexico was her homeland. Moving to the States was like entering a whole new world for her, and the transition was not easy. For example, there was a language barrier since she knew no English at all, and not many people here spoke Spanish back then. It also took her time to adapt to a new culture and surroundings. Things became hard for her because she could not find work and was left unemployed. She also felt frustrated not being able to drive because she did not have a license and was not familiar with the laws here. For the first time in her life she was left dependent on her children. She was left to start from scratch all over and with time was able to build a new life for herself and her family.

My grandmother has left a legacy full of courage and determination for her family to share among the next generations to come. She has always been known as a generous person by everyone who knows her. Putting her family's needs and wants before hers without any hesitation is an everyday occurrence. She has made us all proud and blessed to see her overcome so many obstacles in life while holding her head high. She is the masterpiece to the puzzle of our family; if it weren't for her we would not be where we all are today. In the end, her hard work, dedication and example paid off. She graduated from college, raised three kids that also graduated from college, learned to live and succeed in a foreign country, found employment with her best skills to help the community for many years, and now, after retirement, has begun to dedicate most of her time to her family. She has set an example for her family and friends but most of all paved a path for us to follow. I'm so proud to call this individual my mother.



Blueprint of Humanity and Courage

By Mai Neng Thao



Expected to conform to a traditional Hmong girl lifestyle, my sister Youa had rebelled against it all. Although quiet and resilient to all her mom's physical, verbal, and mental abuse, there was a calm storm brewing inside of her big broken heart. She carries a sad, sad story of neglect, poverty, and sacrifices. She also carries inside her a courageous woman who humbly labored for her entire family without expecting anything in return, fearlessly ventured out to pursue an artistic career, and overwhelmed her society with the audacity to marry out of the culture much later in life.

Being the oldest of eight children and without being asked, Youa had been skilled since childhood to use her hands to feed and bathe all her mom's children. Forced to take on the responsibility of her younger siblings, she soon became a second mom to them and was much more mature than what she should have been. By elementary school, she already knew how to change a baby's diaper and was often left alone with her siblings while her single mother worked. By high school, she was taking her siblings to doctor appointments and commonly got confused as their mother. Conditioned to devote and believe that her time solely belonged to her mom's callings, Youa adhered to all the household chores and not once questioned why she couldn't be involved in extra curricular activities like other kids her age. When something wasn't done right, she would get the abuse. Not knowing any other life style than this, she had just assumed all along that it was normal to live a young life of long hardships. She felt the burdened lashes of her family and knew it felt wrong, but she accepted everything and not once expected us to realize her sacrifices and love her back one day. Her labor was given freely and her efforts never recognized. As soon as her 14th birthday struck, she began working to help her mom with bills. At the end of the night, she wasn't gifted with a mother's embrace and light feather kiss on her soft forehead, but instead she kept all the hurt inside her big broken heart and closed her tired weary eyes because she knew no one was going to save her.

After high school, Youa developed a bold idea to pursue a career in photography. My mom and dad fed off each other's negative energy and were severely critical and judgmental. They told her that she wouldn't be able to make a living out of photography and should reconsider; she should become a nurse or lawyer, living up to what they couldn't achieve. My mom was very upset with her big decision and recommended that she go to school locally so she can live at home to save money and be near family. Her mom probably doesn't even realize it herself, but the honest truth was because she was so dependent on Youa that she needed her around. Even though her parents refused to sign her student loan, Youa made a daring move to Massachusetts regardless of a disgusting debt that would follow.

Shy of her 30th birthday, Youa just recently got married on a beautiful summer day this past July. Considering her age, she was well past expired for marriage. My aunts would consistently criticize her age and encourage her to quickly marry. In the



Hmong society, marriage during your early teens is not uncommon. My aunts had a fear that Youa would turn old and no one would want to wed her. While the elders gossiped, Youa was too focused on establishing her career and trying to discover her self-identity. Then two years ago Youa rocked her elders to the core when news broke about her dating an Indian man. This news in particular was quite dramatic because for someone as old as Youa, dating outside of the culture was not normal. There was gossip about how he might be after an American citizenship, but Youa kept her head high and held her interracial relationship with a sense of pride. Even on her wedding day, one of my aunts had secretively passed a message on to her saying, "Not to be mean, Youa, but are you sure about this? It's not too late to back out." Youa just politely smiled and said, "Of course." Now during our family functions, my relatives can only wish they could emulate the type of relationship with their husbands that Youa has with hers.

She doesn't know it, but she is the most influential Hmong woman in my life. I don't give her as much credit as she deserves, but her heart is kind and humble. I can only hope to be half as kindhearted as her one day. Every opportunity she gets, she tries her best to help others in need. Her mind is brilliant and rich through the many layers of negligence and forms of abuse. Despite a traumatic childhood, lack of support for her career, and shocking marriage to an Indian man, she is my blueprint of humanity and courage.

Brave Brenda **By Tasha Thompson**



Brenda Andruss was born on March 31, 1962. She has displayed courage by losing her mom at a young age, dealing with her husband's cheating ways, becoming a foster parent, and dealing with sickness during this time.

She lost her mom at a young age—age 3—when her mom was in labor having Brenda's younger sister. Brenda was raised by her father—that is, until he met another woman and married. But Brenda wasn't home much when she was a teenager. She and her other siblings were at group homes and foster homes. She was lucky they were placed in a foster home where they were loved unconditionally, and that helped her become the woman she is today.

Brenda then went on to become a great mother of two boys from her first husband. They got a divorce, and she and Berg, her new husband, had already been friends. They were together 12 years before they got married. It was a happy day, and her two boys were grown-ups by then. Berg doesn't have any kids of his own. They ended up buying a five-bedroom house in the boonies—Richland Center—with a big pool in the backyard. Berg's a mechanic and a maintenance guy. He puts engines together. Brenda is self-employed and has her own daycare in her home. When Berg's three nieces and nephew had nowhere to go, a social worker called them and made it clear they all would be taken away and split up if they didn't come that day to get them. They went out and got their foster care licenses to raise the kids.



For some reason, her husband was unhappy, despite all that she had done for him. He cheated on her with her blood—with her older sister—during a bonfire at their house in Richland Center. After she saw it with her own eyes, they both denied it. She then cut her sister off and went almost six years without talking to her. To this day, her husband still denies it, but her sister has admitted to it. They started talking again when their younger sister was passing.

Being overweight has always been an issue for Brenda. Being depressed, unhappy, and not wanting to do anything about it makes it worse. Having RA (Rheumatoid Arthritis) with joint pains and some days not being able to move at all is enough. Some days are better than others. Now, after giving up on herself, her non-supportive husband has still continued to cheat on her. Now, having COPD, severe sleep apnea, and diabetes, and being on and off steroids, she adopted a little girl and still does things by herself.

Brenda has displayed courage in so many ways. A very strong person, mother, aunt, and friend, she has gone through so much and has never given up. That is why I have chosen her. She has overcome a lot of brave situations, one being taking four kids into her home that she'd only met a few times. She is an amazing individual, and I love her for being the strong individual that she is!!

A Force to be Reckoned With **By Tamara Thompson Moore**



I was running late on my way from Windsor to Milwaukee for a four-day training conference I'd been anticipating eagerly for weeks. I hurriedly filed into a room where more than 20 women were attentively engaged in introductions. As I located a vacant chair and attempted to discreetly

settle into the seat, I was approached by a woman whose presence drew me in. She stood there with a smile and graceful poise, wearing a brightly colored *gelé* and a creatively patterned dress that reminded me of *kenté*, a distinctive pattern well known in West Africa. Her warm assurances that my apologies were unnecessary calmed me, and I readily began the class. Previously, I knew nothing

about Shafia Monroe personally, but during the days with her throughout the conference I learned more about her life story. Shafia Monroe founded an organization that would later become internationally recognized for Black African American midwives in a most unwelcome social and professional climate. As a public speaker, Monroe challenges us to closely examine the modern medical model's practices to find correlations between racial inequality and disparaging health outcomes. Even her everyday adornment is a force to be reckoned with.



At the age of 18, Shafia Monroe was given a book about assisting in childbirth and became involved in the emerging home birth movement. This early exposure inspired her to delve more deeply into the process of becoming a midwife and the history of midwifery. During this journey, she discovered that in the first half of the 20th Century, American midwifery did not disappear; it was racialized. Drawing her own parallels between the concepts of the modern midwife and the historical figures of the American South, she found that Black or "Granny" midwives were called to attend all of the births in their communities out of necessity; racial segregation meant medical care was a privilege denied to non-whites. New legislation introduced in the 1920s provided reimbursement for obstetrical care, which translated into an economic opportunity for medical practitioners who had up to that point refused to

treat Black women. Under the guise of helping the Black community, Black midwives were stripped of their honor in having expertise, labeled as dangerous lay persons, and banned. Despite the fact that Black midwives, trusted pillars in their local areas, often had better outcome rates than physicians, they were made to be scapegoats for the high infant mortality rates in the south when legislative action combined with racist propaganda was used to change an entire health care system and way of life. Rather than address the real issues of poverty like sanitation, inadequate nutrition and work conditions (all now known to be contributing factors to infant mortality rates), legislators and lobbyists attacked the Black midwives and their practices as the source. These events destabilized the trusted relationships women relied on, criminalized the calling of many community elders, and directly contributed to the development of health disparities that continue to exist to this day.

I really connected with the way Shafia carried herself; she was like a queen, so regal and dignified in her brightly colored attire. I was also proudly wearing my African patterned clothing; however, Monday through Friday I work in a corporate office where “professional” clothing is required. This is why I was really taken aback when I saw a photograph of Shafia Monroe speaking among a panel of her professional peers wearing what seemed to be her signature style. She stood out like a tiger lily surrounded by a field of dandelions, undeniably bold and vivacious. She stood at a podium, earnestly addressing a large, seemingly monochromatic audience, not appearing to be the least bit concerned about the way her presentation of herself might come across. Recently, a Black woman was fired from her executive position with one of the top corporations on the globe after receiving complaints that her clothing and hairstyle made her coworkers “uncomfortable.” She filed a lawsuit which sparked a debate about being “too black” and all of the negative connotations associated with ethnic identity. Stories like this and Shafia’s boldness provoke me to question myself about why I adopt a pseudo identity in the name of professionalism. The answer, I think, is fear: fear that I will not be accepted, that I will not “fit in” with the office atmosphere, that I will have to tirelessly deal with ignorant comments from coworkers, or that somehow it will make management take me less seriously. Challenge seemed to be what Shafia’s wardrobe was meant to do. She wears her culture like a badge, expressing counterrevolutionary views wherever eyes are laid on her.



Shafia Monroe knows something. She knows when opportunity doesn't knock, you must build a door. Looking around her academic environment, she recognized that there were few non-white women and no African Americans in her network. Despite the historical fact that the science of obstetrics was born from midwifery, which Black American midwives had championed for generations, there was an unmistakable under-representation of midwives of African descent among her peers. Yet, rather than urging women of color to insert themselves into a growing field that marginalized the legitimacy of Black midwives, she established the

Traditional Childbearing Group in 1976. Today, Shafia continues to draw national attention to the desperate need for birth workers of color, pointing out how many African Americans share the experience of having physicians and specialists who are well-qualified in their field but are culturally incompetent, having little to no understanding of their patients' diverse values, traditions, and history—key influences that shape their perception and ways they respond to preventative interventions surrounding health. Racial, ethnic, and cultural disparities exist in all aspects of society, but nowhere are they more apparent and clearly documented than in health care. For expectant Black women, this has been their burden to bear. Facing higher rates of low birth weight, infant mortality, cesarean section births, and maternal morbidity, Shafia dedicates her energies toward erasing these oppressive paradigms by embodying the 'each one teach one' proverb with her energy.

Shafia Monroe is courageous. The scars of the Jim Crow era were still fresh, and the roar of the civil rights movement had not yet faded, yet Shafia had an unprecedented audacity to start a global movement in the name of the Black woman. Shafia Monroe is a role model, being unapologetically herself at all times, breaking molds, and liberating those who silently conform. Shafia is championing the new day for justice in America where practitioners can no longer ignore the use of racist, coded language in their hospitals and clinics. Shafia Monroe empowers empowerers; she lit a fire in me, and I will not allow it to be extinguished.

My Role Model

By Guadalupe Tinajero



My mother was told by her parents not to marry my dad. She did not listen, and she married him anyway. She was pregnant with her first child, the first of ten children that she would eventually have. My mom's life was not easy—she lived in poverty, raised ten children without the help of a husband at home, and yet she was courageous enough to find a way to make sure her children got an education.

She has the courage to live in poverty. She would wake up early in the morning with many chores to do before sending nine children to school. She slept only a few hours because she would have to wake up at five in the morning to finish all the chores that she needed to perform that day. The hours of the day weren't enough for her to complete her responsibilities. It was not enough that she had to care for all of her children (including washing clothes for ten by hand and making dozens of tortillas every morning to feed us), but she also had to cook big pots of food so we wouldn't suffer from hunger.

Women in Mexico used to raise children almost by themselves. She was pregnant from when she was 21 years old with her first son until she was 42 years old and had her last son. Because of the culture and time, she did not have too much help from my dad. My dad was a hardworking man who worked outside the house most of the time. He worked in the fields; his job was to teach my brothers how to work in the fields growing vegetables and taking care of the cattle. Even though we were poor, my father grew vegetables for my mom and for sale. So, with the slaughtered animals and the vegetables that my dad cultivated, she cooked fresh, healthy, and delicious food. Furthermore, in order to make money and food for her children, she raised animals such as chickens, turkeys, lambs, goats, pigs, rabbits, and a cow, plus she grew fruit trees and a garden with patches of flowers to make our house look beautiful and relaxed. In addition, she would sew clothes for us and for other people to earn money.



She knew the importance of an education, although she did not have one. Often, parents forced their children to stay home and help with chores, especially when they had a new baby. My mom said, "I don't care if you don't help me with chores, but you have to go to school." She would do all the work and, because she couldn't afford to buy lunch for us, she cooked and brought us a homemade lunch everyday. I remember when she said, "If you do not finish your meal, then you had better not go to school. What are you going to learn if your stomach is empty?!" This was why she made sure everybody had breakfast. The school in our town in Mexico required three uniforms for each child, so my mom sewed our uniforms each year. I remember one day when I was in second grade, I tried to help her iron my uniform. I placed the iron on my uniform and forgot. When I returned it was all burned. My mom, instead of being angry, went to get more cloth to start a new uniform. Instead of having time to sleep, she started sewing a new uniform. I was so sad that night when I heard my mom's sewing machine in the early morning. I realized she would not sleep until she'd finished the new uniform.



Overall, my mom is a wonderful role model. I admire my mom: she is the best. I am using her strategies to remain in control by trying to do all that I can for my children to see them happy. I realize it is not easy, but with the good example that we get from my parents, I know it is not impossible. She dedicated her life to taking care of her ten children and made sure that we learned moral values; she taught us respect, kindness, ethics, and proper social behavior. She taught us these values so well that we all have stable, strong families.

Facing Obstacles Head On

By Jelissa Williams



"Everything went black. I couldn't breathe. My whole body felt like it had fallen into a deep sleep. I felt like I had only two choices: Stay with him and die, or die while trying to escape, knowing my children deserved a better life." Jennifer, my children's godmother and my best friend of seven years, could vividly remember the trials and tribulations life had thrown at her. She endured a significant amount of obstacles, from becoming a single mother at a young age, trying her best to flee from years of domestic abuse, and learning her self-worth despite the fact that she felt like the outcast in her family.

At the young age of 15, Jennifer found out she was pregnant. She panicked. At 16, she gave birth to her firstborn son, Damon, who weighed 7 pounds, 13 ounces. She had been induced three weeks early due to having pre-eclampsia, in which she lost a great deal of blood and needed a transfusion. She knew she had support from her mother, but she refused to let her mother be the one to raise her child. Needless to say, she finally had a purpose in life. Her son was her savior.

Hitting 21, she was pregnant with her third child, and the abuse she encountered was with the father of this child. She endured this abuse for three years. He took from her the only thing she felt she had:

her voice. Strength within her no longer existed. She was scared, not knowing whether to leave or stay. All she wanted was for her children to be safe, even if that meant losing her life in the process. She had to get out, and she did. She ran for six years, constantly moving, changing numbers, etc. In 2010, she stopped running and faced her fears. She knew that running for the rest of her life was giving him more power over her, and she needed to regain that power. . . .

She was going through a significant amount of changes over the years. Life kept constantly knocking her down every which way. She had begun to feel like the outcast in her family. "I didn't know what my next move was going to be. Here I was, a single mother of six kids and my choice of partnership was that of the same sex. One day, my oldest daughter came to me upset because she got questioned by peers at school for having 'two moms,' but she handled that situation well. She wasn't ashamed of having two moms." Despite the turmoil, she was able to overcome. She faced every obstacle head on: she stopped running from her past, found steady employment, got a stable home for her children, which for them meant no more changing schools, and she got married to her partner who was her friend of 10 years. Things had finally started to look up for Jennifer. She never lost faith.

Being her friend for so many years, I saw first-hand the pains and troubles she endured: homelessness with children, no job, no car, no way to provide. It's like she had literally hit rock bottom. On those many nights, I held her as she cried, but the next day she had her game face on ready to "go hard or go home." No matter how many times she was knocked off her feet, she never quit. I know her children motivated her. Once I got pregnant with my first son, I experienced all of these troubles, including friendships and relationships. At times, I myself couldn't find the strength to carry on, and suffering from deep depression made it no better. Her advice and words of wisdom moved my soul. She made me take a step back and look at the bigger picture. She inspired me to want more out of life. I didn't feel so alone, and she constantly reminded me of that. It's rare nowadays to find friends who see the potential in you, who try to steer you clear of trouble, who are your crutches when you can barely find the strength to walk, who push you to follow your dreams and always reach out to you, letting you know that you are loved. She's taught me a lot about love, forgiveness, and friendship. No, we don't always see eye to eye, and we've had our "I don't want to be bothered moments," but one thing is for sure and another thing is for certain—we have never stopped fighting for each other. We have always been suited and bootied, ready to go to war for one another. It feels good to have the same individual in my corner after all these years. My boys adore her, as I do.



She's my definition of a 'Woman of Courage.' Once she realized her worth, there were no more chains holding her back. She was able to set herself free.

Beautiful Soul By Ashley Wills



You don't know the plan that God has for your life, or why you were dealt the hand you have. You find yourself questioning why unfortunate things happen to you, why uprooting and reinventing your life over and over again is the only way to find common ground. Hopeless and weary, the only person you love and respect is also ripped out of your life. Where does anyone go from there? My mother had those same thoughts on her tumultuous journey, but her perseverance and faith led her to a bright future. To this day my mother thinks back on her trials and tribulations and always says, "When life hands you lemons, you make lemonade."



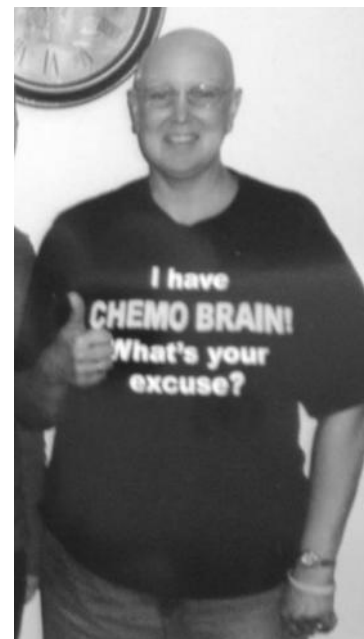
My mother was almost sent off for adoption before her grandmother intervened to keep her. The bond my mother and her grandmother shared was close through the years, and she looked to her as a mother figure. Being the oldest of eight children and the only one that lived with her grandmother, just blocks from her biological mother and siblings, she didn't have much respect for her mother, who didn't want anything to do with her. She was the offspring of an Italian mobster and never knew who the man was, or even if he was alive. She only knew that he was an insignificant human, simply a sperm donor. My mother was forced to switch places with her grandmother as caretaker, as she had fallen ill and slowly passed away from breast cancer. After the death, my mother packed her belongings and decided to turn a new leaf; she moved to Wisconsin and only brought her memories with her.

My mother's new life in Wisconsin revived her and gave her some needed distance from her unsupportive biological mother and siblings in Arkansas. Wisconsin brought new dreams for my mother — specifically, the man of her dreams. Soon there was a wedding and a baby boy. With her new family, and little to no education, my mother was a stay-at-home-mom. When her son turned one, she found that the man of her dreams was sleeping with the man next door. It didn't take her long to pack up her son and all her belongings to turn another new leaf, this time in southern Wisconsin. There is where she made a stable life for herself and son. When she met my father, she thought to herself that things were looking up. My father stepped in to help raise her son and find my mother a job.

My mother found her job and surpassed most by becoming the first female paramedic in Walworth County. At this point in her life she felt accomplished; she had a family, a house and a job. Years passed, and I was born. When I turned 18, my family's life was about to turn upside down. The year I turned 18 will be one I will never forget; right around my graduation from high school, my family found out about my mother's diagnosis of breast cancer. My mother found out her fate on a normal day. She raised her arms to put on her shirt and noticed a lump in her armpit to the side of her breast. She thought to herself it wasn't normal. Panic was rising; she thought back to her mammogram just one month prior, which had given her a clean bill of health. After watching her grandmother pass from breast cancer and knowing the long family history of this disease, her panic would not subside. Thoughts were rushing through my

mother's head. "This can't be true," she prayed; this could not be her fate. The biopsy confirmed my mother's worst fears: Stage 3C breast cancer. The surgeries came and went quickly; doctors removed both of breasts, and chemotherapy and radiation began shortly after. Her oncologist didn't give her a promising outcome, but she knew she wasn't going to let it defeat her.

She prevailed and has been in remission now for almost 10 years. I have endless admiration for my mom's strength and determination after her constant trials and tribulations. She never sat around feeling sorry for herself, though I know at times it would have been easier to do, or just to give up. Her grandmother shaped her into the woman she's become, and it speaks volumes to her character and dedication. Moving across the country and creating a new life would be a culture shock to anyone else, but she embraced that kind of change. Turning over new leaves allowed her to become the strong individual she is today. My mom believes that everything happens for a reason, and if she never had to conquer breast cancer, she couldn't live the life she does today. She was able to retire and watch her grandchildren full time, and she said that is the most beautiful thing that came from such an obstacle. "When life hands you lemons, you make lemonade." In my eyes, I don't just see my mother: I see the most courageous woman and the most beautiful soul.



My Mother: Regina Young

By Joe Young



If you were to ask me, I'd say that any woman who had the strength to push out more than two children was also gifted with a tremendous amount of courage, maturity, patience, and love to share. Regina Young, being one of those courageous women, was a mother to four unique children. She gave her entire life to making sure that they all lived lives better than the one that she endured in a city where life was not always promised tomorrow. I'm proud to be a creation of a woman so strong.

For as long as I can remember, my mother, Regina, never once showed any signs of vulnerability or displayed any moments of weakness. During a time when gangs were running wild and violence was rising, Regina always kept a "third eye" out on all of her children. She questioned their every decision about where they wanted to go, who they would be going with, and what they would be doing. She knew, in Chicago, there are plentiful temptations, distractions, and dangers lurking in those unforgiving streets they all called home. The "projects," where Regina resided for a little over half of her lifetime, could turn any weak-minded individual into a cold-hearted human being. So she knew keeping her security blanket around her children would ensure her of their safety.

Chicago was not a place Regina saw herself living out the rest of her life. Not too long before I was born, she moved out of Chicago, looking to start a new life here in Madison. I believe she saw herself having more opportunity to provide for her children, and the opportunity for her children to live lives they aren't forced into. She began working extremely hard to make sure she could maintain a healthy lifestyle

for her children. She would be either up or out of the house before sunrise, or coming home after dinnertime, and was still able to provide all of us with a hot meal before putting us to bed. "Us" was my sister and I because around this time, my two older brothers were old enough to do things for themselves and not live at home. She held numerous job positions ranging from health care, as a CNA at Oakwood Village and other nursing homes, to educational positions, like being a teacher's aide. She also cooked and was an employee at the daycare where my nephew was enrolled. She always tried to be the one to help and could also recognize the good and bad in anyone she encountered.

It wasn't until the accidental death of my sister Jasmine Gant through a medical error during the birth of my sister's first and only child that my mother endured God's first trial of pain, sorrow, and loss. This very tragic and untimely event was the biggest hurdle I have ever seen my mother encounter. By the grace of God, we were able to save my sister's child before any other complications sprang up. The loss of her only daughter brought the biggest wave of sadness and emptiness over her and our family. My mother was approaching 50, and these are the years one looks forward to retire. She never thought she would be raising another child after she had me, her youngest. But she took on this task as if my sister herself transferred her youthful energy over to our mother's mind, body, and soul. This still couldn't fill the huge hole that was created from the loss of her daughter. In my eyes, drinking alcohol was a way for her to find some happiness within her mind or forget about what was taken from her. Gradually, she began to drink more and more, thus creating many health problems for her. Being the stubborn woman she was, it was hard to get her to not want to drink or smoke cigarettes. Since I was so young, and the only one of her original children who was constantly around her, there wasn't much I could do to help this problem of hers. I feel as if I may have made the problem worse by taking her to get alcohol or buying it for her once I was of age. But I wasn't going to be the one to blame or shame her. I knew and witnessed the trials and tribulations she had endured and overcome. Maybe being numb from it all is what helped her.

On May 5, 2014, Regina passed away in Meriter Hospital. Her time spent in the hospital was the first time I honestly felt like my mom showed weakness. The effects of the alcohol were beginning to take over her body, and she no longer had the strength or energy to fight back. Eventually her spirit left her lifeless body here with us and rose up to be with God and my sister in heaven. Regina had spent her entire life raising her children to be stories of success and not patterns of failure. Most of the other women in my family, to this day, have yet to show as much strength as my mother displayed while going through her life journey. She defeated many odds, maintained a roof over her children's heads, kept food on the stove/kitchen table, and clothes on her children's backs. I couldn't have prayed for a better mother, role model, and angel to watch over me. I second-guess myself with everything I do. What would Regina do? She would be brave, honest and persistent. These are just a few key things that have helped me make progress in life and within myself. The courage my mother displayed is continually showing through me.



CREATIVE CORNER

Facing the Things That Go “Bump” in Life

By Lisa Partee

You know that moment early in the morning—that moment when you first start to wake up and you don’t “know” anything? And then after a second or so, memories and awarenesses start to trickle back in—slowly at first and then one by one, they all come back: fears about money, heart-ache over relationships in various stages of dying and decomposition, feeling unloved and even worse-unlovable, wondering, “Does anyone truly love me or even see me...? insecurities, failures, fears, the past, dread of the future, problems with children, problems that don’t have any easy or right answers, feeling inadequate less-than never-a-part-of disconnected invisible ignored...!? I really HATE that moment.

Suddenly, in the dark, I’m fully awake and am keenly aware of all the monsters waiting for me right outside my bedroom door. Oh boy, I really hate that. Then, the next moment is what (usually) lifts me out of bed and gently pushes me out of my room. Usually, that’s the moment when I remember God is in control and mindful of all the little things that go “bump” and scare me in life.

But this morning...oh this morning was so hard. I decided to turn back over and leave those monsters out there scratching at my door. I hate that I did that. Now they think that they just may have a chance to get into my room and into my head and trickle down my spine and freeze my heart and my will to the point of immobilization. And they’re right...if I don’t don’t get up and moving here soon, I am going to be stuck all day; held hostage by the shadowy figures that only I can see. And then tomorrow will only be worse....! (shudder!)

Okay, feet on the floor now. The shower is about 15 feet away and if I just get... must .get. up. now dammit!...maybe I can run really fast past the monsters and hurry up and dressed so I can get out that front door....one....two...three.....go.



What Was I To Do?**By Jelissa Williams**

I wish I had you back then when things felt so impossible
 Back then when every obstacles was too much for me to climb
 Had you been there, I have no doubt I would have made it
 Trials and tribulations that caused me to buckle swiftly to my knees,
 softly praying for an ounce of you.
 What was I to do?
 When the world seemed so cold, and I had no idea where you were,
 what was I to do?
 Berated at every turn, downcast by those who PROMISED to protect me
 I was so afraid to press on.
 Staring at my reflection in the mirror,
 trapped by the walls of life.
 Seeing but not seeing,
 in a sense hiding me from me.
 I yearn for your presence.
 Tears wiped away from my cheeks
 as I struggle
 to stand on wobbly legs.
 I must learn to fight,
 I must endure this pain.
 No more excuses
 No more feeling useless
 No more hiding
 Finally, I feel as if you abide in me
 One by one,
 I meet each challenge head on.
 Refuse to submit!
 But then I realize that deep within me
 Is where you always have been.
 My heart is your fortress,
 a place where all things
 Unbecoming are purged.
 I've gained my ability and wiliness
 to confront the agony, pain, danger,
 uncertainty, and intimidation.
 I found it at last . . . COURAGE!

**The Courage to Write****By Lucia Chikowero**

It takes courage to write when you have never written before.
 It takes courage to write when you have always thought
 you do not have anything to say.
 It takes courage to write.

Venturing into those uncharted waters within you takes courage.
 Drawing every ounce of strength within and without
 to overcome fear of rejection takes courage.
 It takes courage to write.

Putting together word after word to mean something
 so dear to you takes courage.
 Writing and expressing yourself
 so the next person can understand you takes courage.
 It takes courage to write.

Writing again when you have been told
 that you suck at it takes courage.
 Dusting yourself up and picking up
 that mighty pen and paper takes courage.
 It takes courage to write.

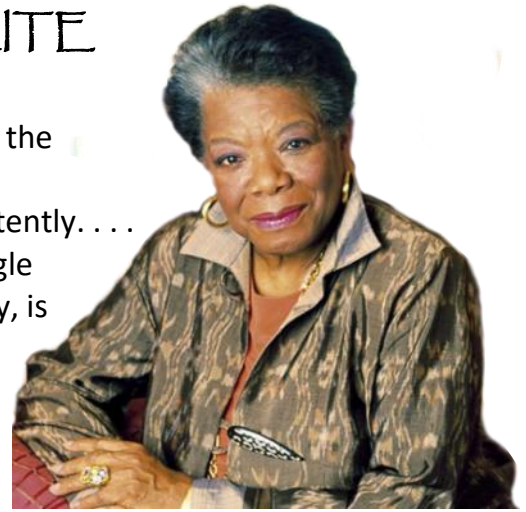
Writing again when you have been knocked out flat
 by naysayers on countless occasions takes courage.
 Writing again when you have been told
 you do not make any sense takes courage.
 It takes courage to write.



FAMOUS WOMEN WITH THE COURAGE TO WRITE



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



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



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

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



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



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





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

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



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

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



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

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



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