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WOMEN OF COURAGE



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MIRRORS OF COURAGE: FINDING THE BRAVE WOMAN IN ME!

BY ANGEL MOORE

When I think about writing an essay on a woman of courage, so many names rush to my mind: Harriet Tubman leading freedom's pathway, Rosa Parks igniting change from the seat of a bus, and my own mother, who doctors said wouldn't live past 19 after being diagnosed with tuberculosis yet stands strong today at 93—the woman who taught me to rise up every single day. But just the other morning, catching a glimpse of myself in the mirror, I was startled not by my own reflection, but by a strong resemblance to my Nana, Fannie Moore, staring back at me. In that moment, I realized stories of courage are not just tales of distant heroes; they live on in us, shaping each step we take. My Nana's life, shaped by fearless ambition, family protection, and her unwavering strength in the face of injustice, shows me that real bravery is both ordinary and extraordinary.



Just as Fannie Moore defied the odds to open her own restaurant in a time when Black women were never seen as business owners, she taught our family the importance of ambition. Her dream was bigger than the limitations society put on her, and she worked day and night to make it real. My Nana's nuggets of wisdom were lavished on us each trip she made in the summers to Chicago, IL from Pittsburgh, Penn. Recovering them today just shows me that courage sometimes means daring to believe in what others say is impossible.

So much of this courage was molded to me in my Nana. She was a very outspoken Black woman who loved the Lord and refused to let challenges silence her spirit. To open a restaurant in the 1960s when doors were closed to Black women with big dreams, Nana faced rejections to bank loans and lines of credit. A pipe dream and legal protections were nonexistent, but each rejection tested her desires, her dreams. Even at home, she had to withstand the jealousy of her own husband, my grandfather, who told her repeatedly she couldn't make her dream a reality. But she pressed forward, pouring her heart, her prayers, and her determination into what would become Fannie's Family Restaurant, not just words on paper but money given to her from her father. For Nana, it was never just a place to eat. It was a sign outside declaring "this is mine," and inside it became a haven where the Black community gathered in safety and was served with dignity at a time when such simple kindness was often denied in White-owned restaurants.

My Nana's determination didn't just belong to the big, newsworthy moments; it was there in every meal she made for the community, every act of kindness or protest she led. Fannie's Place was where the heart and soul of the community could gather and connect over classic soulful dishes. The aroma of simmering greens and the warmed sliced sweetness of a fresh baked sweet potato pie, hot comforting bowl of mac and cheese, and her perfectly seasoned, crispy golden pieces of fried chicken weren't just food: they were a labor of love. Each ingredient was a testament of her dedication to "I, too, can do it!"

So, what does a woman of courage like Fannie Moore add to the world, add to me? She proves that the legacies of courage aren't just in history books but are reflected in the eyes of those who come after. Nana's voice still whispers to me, to be bold, to be daring, to keep on praying, to protect my dreams and my loved ones, and to persist for justice, even when no one's watching. In every strong woman I admire, living legends or reflected in my own mirror, Nana's courage lives on, challenging me to carry it forward.



STRENGTH IN EVERY STEP: THE COURAGE OF GRANDMA DEBBIE

BY ANTEIJAH GREER

Some acts of courage are loud, but others are lived quietly in the everyday choices of someone who refuses to give up. For more than fifteen

years, my Grandma Debbie battled kidney failure, yet she continued caring for her grandchildren and anyone in need around the community. Her home stayed warm, her kitchen stayed busy, and her spirit stayed strong. Despite her long struggle with illness, my Grandma Debbie showed extraordinary courage through her devoted care for her grandchildren and community and her determination to remain joyful even in hardship.

One of the clearest demonstrations of Grandma Debbie's courage was her devotion to caring for her grandchildren. Living with kidney failure meant her body was constantly tired, sore, and unpredictable, yet she woke up each day determined to be present for us. She cooked our meals, helped with schoolwork, and provided our needs to feel safe and loved. Many people facing serious illness often have to step back from daily responsibilities, but she pushed through her pain to make sure her grandchildren never felt alone. Her consistent love showed that courage is not always dramatic; it is often in the quiet determination to keep caring for others even when it is difficult.

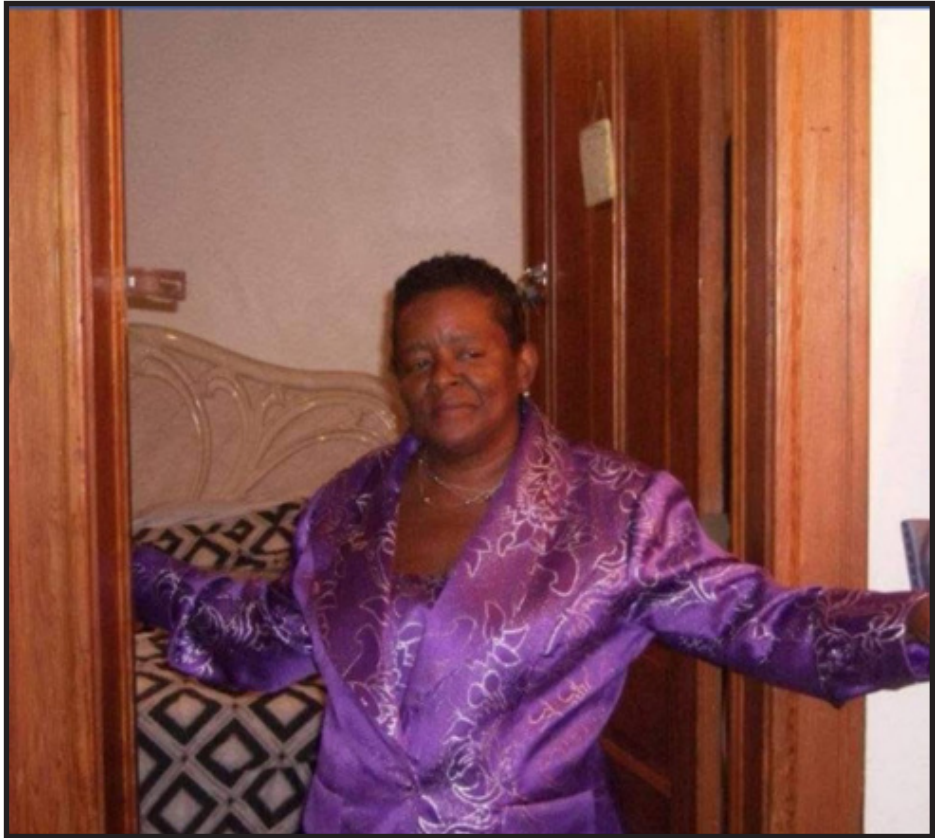
Grandma Debbie's courage also extended far beyond her own family. She opened her home to community kids who needed a meal, a safe place, or simply someone who cared about them. Even on days when her health was at its worst, she stood in the kitchen preparing food for anyone who walked through her door. Her home became a welcoming space where no child was ever turned away. Though she battled fatigue and discomfort daily, she continued to give what little energy she had to help others. The selfless service showed that true courage often lies in the willingness to give even when you have little to spare.

Perhaps the most inspiring part of Grandma Debbie's courage was her ability to stay joyful despite her struggles. Kidney failure brought her pain, limitations, and constant medical challenges, but she refused to let it steal her happiness. Her laughter and jokes filled our home, and she always found ways to celebrate even the smallest moments. Her joy was a deliberate form of strength and a way of choosing hope over despair. By staying positive in the face of hardship, she taught everyone around



her that courage is not just about enduring pain but about refusing to let that pain define you.

Grandma Debbie's life proves that courage does not always come from grand gestures or heroic acts. Sometimes, it grows quietly in the way a person continues to love, serve, and smile despite the challenges they face. Through her devotion to her grandchildren, her generosity for her community, and her joyful endurance of a long-term illness, she became a powerful example of everyday bravery. Her legacy continues to guide and inspire the people she cared for, reminding us that courage is lived one loving, resilient moment at a time.





A WOMAN OF COURAGE: MY GRANDMOTHER, LINDA FAE WASHINGTON BY BRITTANY HUGHES

Courage is not just surviving hardships—it is choosing love through them. For me, courage has always looked like my grandmother, Linda Fae Washington. She was my protector, my teacher, my comfort, and my biggest supporter. She held me together through the most difficult moments of my life and guided me into motherhood long before I understood what being a mother even meant. Her story of strength continues to shape the woman I am today, and she will always be my greatest example of courage. My grandmother had a life full of challenges that could have broken her, but she refused to let anything dim her spirit. She was the kind of woman who loved deeply, supported fiercely, and believed in the people she cared about — especially me. She always showed me what it looks like to rise above pain and still offer love to others.

Her courage carried us into the most defining years of my life. At sixteen years old, I found out I was pregnant. Many people judged me, doubted me, and refused to support me as a pregnant teen. But not my grandmother. She made every doctor's appointment with me, stood by me during labor, and helped me raise my daughter, Madison, with more love than I ever could have hoped for at such a young age. At a time when the world felt cruel and heavy, she reminded me that bringing a life into this world was a blessing, not a mistake. She believed in me when no one else did.

In 2012, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Even then, her strength never faded. She continued showing up to church every Sunday, dressed better than everyone in the room, with her spirit shining brighter than the pain she carried. When the doctors told her she was in remission, she stopped her treatments, only to later find out they had been wrong. By the time the truth came out, the cancer had spread too far. Watching her walk through that battle was heartbreaking, but she still loved, still laughed, and still made sure I never felt alone. When her medicine caused her hair to fall out, I shaved half of my head to show her she would never fight alone.

She passed away in 2014, and losing her left a hole in my heart that has never fully healed. I was only seventeen, a new mother grieving the one person who kept me strong. Some days, it still doesn't feel real that she's gone. I cook more often now because she is the one who taught me how — standing in the kitchen with her was always filled with laughter, storytelling, and love. Those meals allow me to feel close to her, even when the grief feels heavy.

My grandmother, Linda Fae Washington, taught me that courage is loving through pain, protecting others even while you're hurting, and having faith even when life feels unfair. She fought cancer with grace and stood beside me through every storm. She was the woman who saved my life—again and again. Even though her body is gone, her strength lives on in me and in my daughter. She is the reason I am who I am. She is my courage. She is my hero. And she will forever be the greatest woman I have ever known.





HER ROOTS, HER RISE

BY CQUEMIAH CLARK-RICHMOND

Just seven years old, standing three feet tall: how could this be? She was born in Milwaukee, WI, where the dark nights came from, fight or flight. They called it the zoo, where the houses were beaten down and where drugs were very local. Windows stayed boarded up, paint peeled off like old scabs, and the streetlights flickered as if they were too tired to stay on. You could hear arguments through thin walls, babies crying, and sometimes gunshots popping in the distance. My mom learned to fight before she learned to dream. With her mother battling addiction, she had no choice but to raise herself. Poverty; no beds: she slept on thin blankets laid across a cold floor, waking up to the sound of mice in the walls and her mother's footsteps stumbling in late at night. There was nothing happy for her to live for as a child: no safety net, no soft landing; just grit, courage, and a heart that refused to quit. She is living proof that the strongest warriors come from the toughest beginnings.

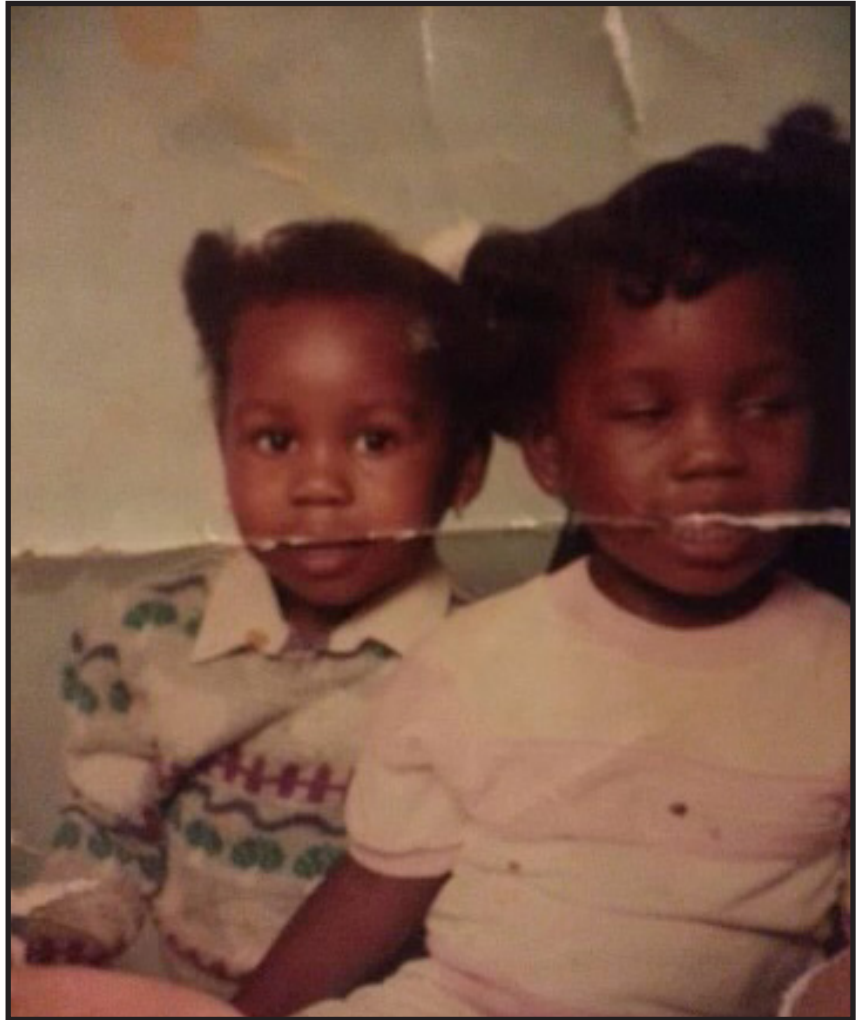
She hid the food stamp book, sometimes beneath loose floorboards, other times inside old cereal boxes. Her hands shook with fear that her mother would notice, but hunger scared her even more. So, she made sure she and her siblings could eat when her mother struggled with addiction. There wasn't much for her to do, which led her to experience being out of school since she was seven, which eventually led to her being placed in a juvenile facility from 12 to 17 years old. The cold cement walls of the juvenile facility became her classroom, and the sound of metal doors closing became her daily routine. She learned to sleep with one eye open, trust no one, and keep her voice strong even when her heart felt weak. Later on, my mom would catch some cases, which would lead her to be a felon for the rest of her life and be on probation for 20 years.

Because her mother struggled with addiction to drugs, my mother found many things as a kid, with crack pipes, needles, and drugs around. My mom had to find ways to make sure there was food in the house, even when money was tight. One of the main ways she did this was by hiding the food stamp book so that it wouldn't be sold or traded away for drugs. She knew that if the book disappeared, she and her siblings would go hungry. At a young age, she learned to think ahead and protect what little they had. She would tuck the food stamp book in different spots around the house, hoping no one would find it before she could use it to buy groceries. This wasn't something a child



should have had to worry about, but it became part of her everyday life. Her ability to plan, protect, and provide showed responsibility far beyond her years, proving that she was already acting as the caregiver in her home.

Being out of school since the age of seven had a major impact on my mom's life, eventually leading her into the juvenile system. Without school, she didn't have the structure, guidance, or support that many children rely on. Most kids her age were learning to read, write, and make friends, but she was trying to survive daily challenges on her own. With no adult supervision and no safe environment to learn in, she spent much of her time in the streets, where trouble was easier to find than help. Eventually, this lack of direction led to her being placed in juvenile detention. Instead of being seen as a young girl who needed support and care, she was treated like a problem that needed to be controlled. Even though the system didn't understand her situation, her experiences only made her tougher and more determined to rise above her circumstances later in life.



When my mom had me at just 20 years old, life quickly became difficult for her. She got caught up in the wrong crowd, caught a few cases, and ended up going in and out of jail through most of her 20s. During that time, she even went to prison, and her friends had to take care of me until I was a few years old. Despite all the mistakes and hardships that she faced, my mom never gave up on changing her life for the better. Although my mom faced many challenges after having me young and going in and out of jail, she refused to let her past define her. Through determination and growth, she overcame her struggles as a felon on probation for twenty years, earned stability, and built a meaningful career in the nursing field for more than fifteen years.

In the end, my mom's life shows what real strength looks like. She went from a childhood filled with addiction, poverty, and danger to a young adulthood shaped by the system and the streets. Yet she still found a way to rise. Even after becoming a young mother, facing prison time, and spending twenty years on probation, she kept pushing forward. Now, at 43 years old, with nearly two decades working in the nursing field, she has built a life filled with purpose, stability, and pride. Her journey proves that your past does not decide your future. Her courage, growth, and determination inspire me every day, reminding me that no matter how hard life begins, you can always choose a better ending.



FROM LOSSES TO BLESSINGS

BY DESTINY DRONE

Can you imagine losing a parent? Can you imagine failed missions, loss of dignity and hope with unexpected blessings that, if you spoke too soon on them, were ripped from you as quickly as a blink of an eye? Well, my friend experienced it all. She was a tough little girl unsure of what the future held, from split custody battles, scholarships, and dreams of becoming a star all trapped and in her brain. By channeling her grief into the sport she loves, overcoming the doubts, and replacing them with confidence and perseverance, my friend had both the good and bad life all in her childhood growing up.

Even as a child my friend faced tragedy because when she was just eight years old, her mom passed away from a seizure. Unsure of where she would be living, she was forced to house-hop from family to family. First, she lived with her dad for a few months until he gave up his parental rights. This left her aunt and grandma to gain custody of her at just 10 years old. Once enrolled in elementary school, she explored different sports (soccer and volleyball) until she realized those activities didn't give her the passion she wanted to pursue. So, she tried out for basketball and that's when she fell in love with Spalding (basketball).

Going into freshman year of high school, she made the varsity basketball team. Through her hard work and perseverance, she earned a full Division I scholarship in basketball. Throughout her time playing basketball, she was supported by her aunt and grandma; being pushed to do better and be better, she never gave up. Also, she found her passion for rap in her early junior year of high school. With her having most of her days filled with being alone, she had more time to dive into the music industry. She was able to juggle both basketball and rap. Unsure of what she wanted to be or what to do, she stayed dedicated to her dreams of being a star.



I met Aaliyah her freshman year in college when she attended Wabash Valley in Indiana — that's when I first heard her story. That year, she came home for winter break, and that's when she found herself in trouble with law enforcement. She went to jail for a week; the doubt from her community, family, friends, and coaches weighed down on her. Every dream she had came to an end. Every scholarship was taken in the blink of an eye. Losing hope for her success, she resorted to substance abuse to cope with the void of her losses. She had no hope for what God's plans were. She felt the devil was on her back, until she got a random call from a coach in New Mexico, offering her another chance at life. With limitations and requirements, she committed herself to everything needed to be back in the game. With little to no time to accept the offer, she chose to leave. Leaving



2025-26 WOMEN'S BASKETBALL ROSTER

Choose a Player:

Smith, Aaliyah



Go



2

**AALIYAH
SMITH**

Class: Junior

Hometown: Madison, Wis.

Highschool: La Follette HS

family and friends behind, she chose to grow with what God had always called her to be. Now she is back in Division II playing for the New Mexico women's basketball team. She is passionate about achieving everything she once lost. She took a break from her rap career to focus more on basketball. Her goal once the season is over is to play overseas and start a family of her own.

With all my friend has been through, she remained gifted and blessed, tackling every obstacle meant to destroy her. She has shown unconditional love to her family and peers, keeping a smile as big as the Joker's on her face that hides the internal scars she had fought from survival. Her fight for what's destined has made a huge impact on my life. Despite what goes on in life, anything is possible!



GOD'S UNIQUE CREATION OF LIFE

BY GEORGE SYDNOR

This is a unique story of a little adopted girl living on the westside of Chicago with one thing in common with the world: she was born different and unique.

She was born October 20, 1971, to Mary and Leo Givens, a truly different couple with two other

children. They already had a daughter, Benita, 10 years old, and a son Laron, eight years old. They were a team that didn't see another person coming, but they welcomed her to the fold with open arms. But there was one person who didn't see a new person coming in on her outside time. Her mother brought her home and wasn't ready to settle back into motherhood, so that's when turmoil began, not on the outside but on the inside of her. There was something brewing that this couldn't be her life starting all over. So, then our unique little girl started growing and making it known she was here and she wasn't going anywhere. Days and days went by, and Mary started to miss her new life outside with what the little girl saw as 'jiggyboo' friends because they were always moving their bodies, which my mother later found out was dancing.

My mother remembers, "I made myself always known to her and her friends. Boy, did I know she didn't like it, but I was me and had to be seen and in her presence. After all, I was a baby and she had to feed me and attend to me." After a while, her mother started being a little distant, taking her to her Aunt Doris's house. She found myself going over there every day when her siblings went who knows where? She wanted to come but was never with them long enough to make her move with them. My mother says, "So here I was, about six months old, and I knew I had a special gift because Aunt Doris used to speak so highly of me and how I looked. When we went outside, she was very attentive to me and I loved it. I wanted to go over to her house and looked forward to coming and going with her, but the mother who took me over wasn't nice. At night when it was time for me to come home, I didn't know there was evil in her; I just thought she was tired from 'jiggyboo' friends."

So, one day my grandma packed all my mom's belongings and took her to her Aunt Doris and dropped her. She stayed till the night, and she never came back for my mom. Her Aunt Doris was a gentle soul, and she looked at my mom and said, "You gonna stay with me, you're mine now!!!" She didn't quite learn the concept of what she was saying, but all she knew was that she was so happy and content with this lady that she didn't want to go back, but she did. She was the nicest and my mom didn't feel any funny feeling which was known as evil, but she knew Aunt Doris was special and just for her. She says, "So I became her daughter and we were inseparable. Where she went, I went, except when she left for work. I didn't know that but just knew I had to be without her until she came back."

Soon after she started leaving for work, she found a special place for children to go when the moms and dads were gone. It was Les Finch's Learning Tree, a daycare above all the rest. It was family oriented and state of the art with modeling classes and everything. My mom grew up with so much knowledge and inspiration to do anything in the world. She attended there throughout her grammar school life, going to William Penn and Roswell B. Mason Elementary, then attending the prestigious college prep school of Providence St. Mel, and later graduating from Josephinum High School to later graduating in 1990 and attending Jackson State University (Go Tigers!). Then it was onto owning her own cleaning service and party planning business.

Then she became the mother of George—me—in 1990, and we were inseparable to the world of love. She says, "This little guy brought so much to Doris and her husband, Ervin, taking the world on with a career and a little guy, with my mom and my dad loving us. We later went on to still take on the world together one day at a time. We brought along his siblings (Tatiana, Jaylon, and his Taira) and relocated to Madison Wisconsin."



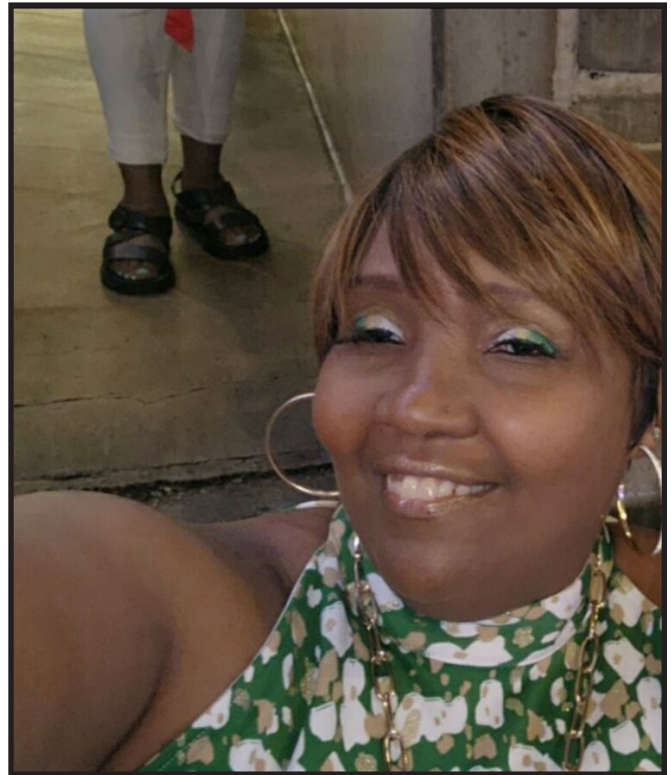


**MY FAITH IS WHAT GOT ME THROUGH:
THE COURAGE OF TRACY LYONS FUGATE
BY JACQUELINE HAWKINS**

Tracy Lyons Fugate is not just my high school friend; she is a remarkable, God-fearing woman whose courage has inspired me

for years. I chose Tracy as my Woman of Courage because of the incredible strength she showed while overcoming some of life's hardest challenges. Her journey reveals three powerful qualities: her unwavering positivity through serious health issues, her resilience through painful family struggles, and her constant willingness to help others even while she was suffering herself. These qualities make Tracy a true example of courage, faith, and grace.

Tracy's journey of strength began when she was only eighteen months old and was rushed to the hospital with a 110-degree fever caused by pneumonia. Doctors could not break the fever, so they placed her in a tub of ice, and even as a baby, she did not cry or make a sound. One doctor said, "She's a fighter," and he was absolutely right. Throughout her life, Tracy



faced serious health challenges. In 2011, she was diagnosed with MS. In 2013, she was diagnosed with Graves' disease and was told she would be wheelchair-bound for life, but Tracy refused to accept that. She declared, "The devil is a lie," and through faith and strength, she never needed a wheelchair. In 2014, she was diagnosed with Stage 2 breast cancer and underwent a lumpectomy. Instead of giving up, Tracy transformed her life, changing the way she ate, thought, and cared for herself. Her health battles showed her incredible courage and her deep trust in God.

Tracy's courage was not only tested physically but also emotionally. She was born into hardship as the eighth of ten children. Her mother struggled with alcoholism, and her father battled drug addiction. Growing up in that environment could have broken her, but it instead strengthened her faith. She believed



she was one of God's chosen ones because no matter what she faced, God always made a way. In 2018, tragedy struck again when Tracy's oldest son was killed the day before Mother's Day. His death left a permanent hole in her soul, yet she remained strong for her other four children, her husband, and her family. Even while grieving, she continued to smile and lift others up. Tracy's family struggles revealed her resilience, compassion, and unshakable faith.

Even while fighting for her own health and healing from heartbreak, Tracy always put others first. She cared for her mother during her battles with alcoholism, supported her siblings, and remained a loving wife, mother, grandmother, and friend. No matter what she was going through, she always thought of other people and carried herself with kindness. Over the years, she encouraged me through some of the hardest moments of my life, including my divorce. She reminded me that God allows us to go through challenges to strengthen us and prepare us for the blessings ahead. Tracy's commitment to helping others even during her darkest moments is one of the greatest reasons she is my Woman of Courage.

Tracy Lyons Fugate is a phenomenal woman whose courage continues to inspire everyone around her. She faced life-threatening health issues, painful family hardships, and deep personal loss, yet she remained positive, faithful, and generous throughout it all. I chose her as my Woman of Courage because her life shows what true strength and faith look like. Tracy's journey reminds me that no matter how heavy life becomes, God can carry us through. She is not only courageous, she is a blessing, a role model, and a true example of what it means to never lose faith.





HER LOVE AND DRIVE BY JOHNNELL BRITT

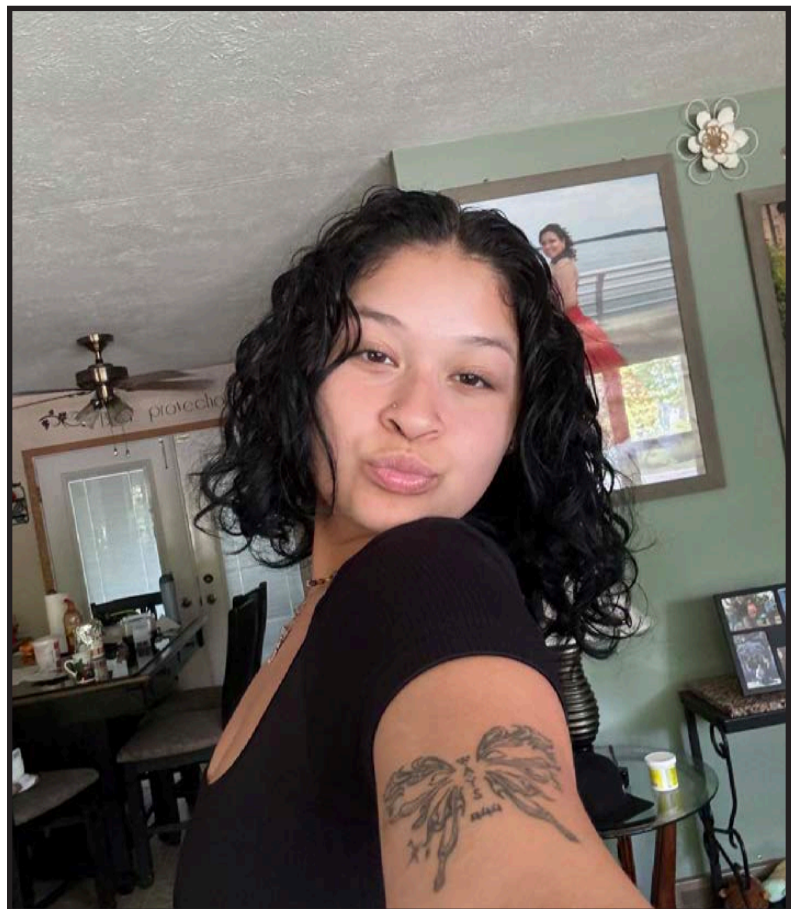
Isn't it crazy how some of the most loving and selfless people often have the toughest histories? Alondra grew up in a broken home, her parents were there physically but not mentally or emotionally, and she didn't have a choice but to mature at a young age. She has two older sisters and one younger brother, and she's always felt like the odd one out. She never felt seen or heard. I met her a month after she lost her father.

She grew up on the west side of Madison, the youngest out of the girls. The age gap made it harder for them to get along. Her sisters are only one year apart and basically grew up as twins; they would team up and leave her out of everything. They constantly made fun of her and would say she was adopted. She started to believe everything they would say, doubting her whole life especially because she looked nothing like them at that age. She was diagnosed with depression at the age of eight. She would go to them for advice and guidance, but they would constantly turn her down. She never felt like she could go to her mother for advice either because they had a rough relationship, constantly arguing. She was never really close with her mother; she had a better bond with her father.

Her little brother was born when she was in eighth grade. Because she wasn't allowed to go out as often as her older sisters, she got stuck babysitting and helping her mother out with everything. Her brother was diagnosed with Down syndrome, meaning multiple doctors' appointments every week. Her mother doesn't speak English, so she would go with her to every appointment. She became her personal translator. When she would get home from school, she would watch her little brother and help maintain the house while her sisters went out. Kids her age were outside playing tag, riding bikes, and doing things they would do at that age while she was stuck at home, changing diapers and making bottles.

On October 18th is when her whole world changed. She lost someone that meant the world to her, the person that gave her her name, someone she looked up to. She lost her father, the person she would go to for advice and guidance.

With our age gap it's pushed me to provide and guide her. She's pushed me to do better for myself. There are days where I don't want to go to work or do my homework. She's pushed me to not give up, despite everything. It was all worth it and I appreciate her drive and love. With all that being said, Alondra is my woman of courage





A WOMAN WHO REFUSED TO GIVE UP: ETHEL J. BOWENS

BY JOSEPH THIGPEN JR.

Some people's presence can be felt even long after they're gone. My grandma Ethel J. Bowens was one of those people. When she was 18 years old, she was shot in the head—a moment that could have ended her life. She was cautious enough to use snow to stop the bleeding and fought to stay alive. From that day, life was not the same for her. My grandma's courage showed through in three ways: in her survival, her storytelling, and the lessons she left behind about strength and resilience.

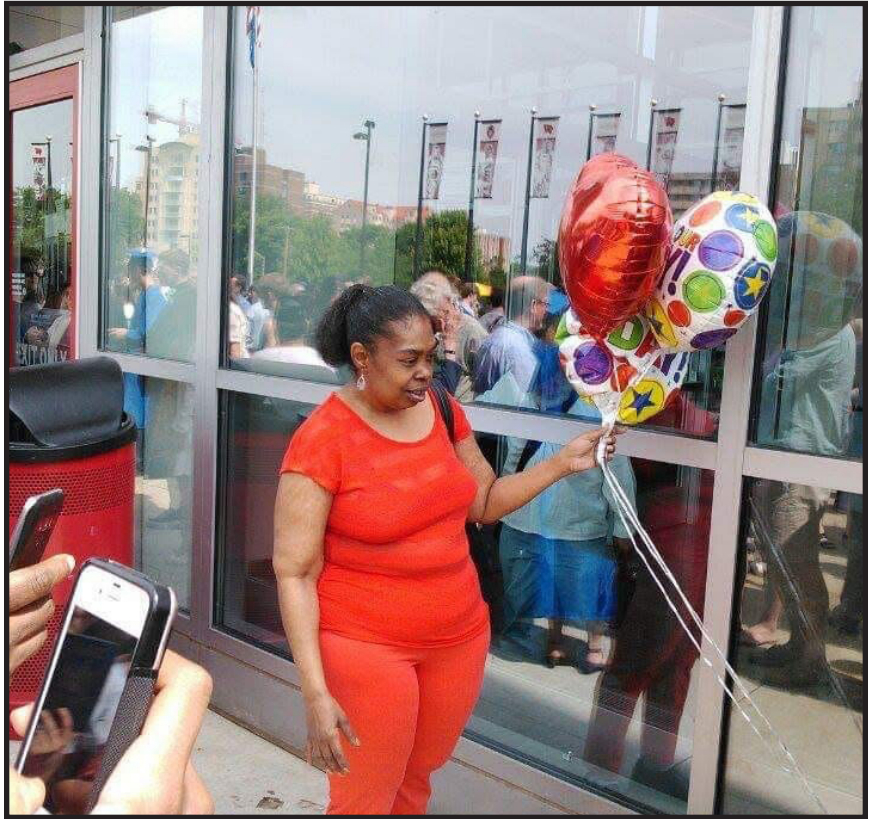
Being shot in the head should have been the end, but you refused to give up, lying in that cold alley waiting for help to come. Alone, scared, and bleeding, you still had the strength to press snow against your wound to slow the bleeding. The doctors said that quick thinking is what kept you alive for generations to come. After recovering, you went on to attend nursing school, but due to severe seizures, trauma, medication side effects, and intense hot flashes, these became barriers that made completing your education difficult. Granny, you did the impossible: you helped raise your sisters' kids, cared for your mother, who was diagnosed with poliomyelitis, and raised your own child as a single mother all while carrying a bullet in your head that couldn't be removed or it could raise the chance of you not living.

My grandma never let fear stand in her way. She raised her “only child,” my mother, with the same strength she carried through life, teaching her to stay strong no matter what came her way. Even during the hardest times, my grandma had a gift for making people laugh and being that shoulder to lean on during a hard day. Watching her taught me that courage isn't only about facing big challenges; it's about how you choose to move past the situation and take it one day at a time. Playing cards was her favorite pastime; she could turn an ordinary afternoon into a competitive event that brought our whole family together. And when her old school jams came on, it didn't matter who the artist was or how long ago the song came out: she knew every word. Music was her peace, her joy, her passion. Most of my favorite memories with my grandma were spent playing spades while listening to “dusties,” as she called them.

It's a blessing my grandma lived long enough to see her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The fact that she lived through something so devastating and still made it to that point says so much about her strength. Her story is one that I carry with me always. It reminds me to never take life for granted and to push through adversity even when things seem impossible. Her courage became a part of our family's



story, something that continues to guide and inspire us all. We lost my grandma on August 5, 2023, due to a brain bleed. Getting a phone call at 2 a.m. is never a good sign, and when my sister's voice broke as she said, "It's Grandma... hurry to the hospital, we don't know how much time we have with her," my heart shattered into a million pieces. Hearing those words left me devastated. A brave soul was gone far too soon. Writing this brought oceans of tears to my eyes because I never truly had the chance to grieve because I was too focused on staying strong for my mother. Writing this helped me mourn and proudly acknowledge my grandma. She had a heart full of gold, always willing to uplift anyone who needed it. I would say that kind of love is what true courage looks like.



Losing my grandmother was painful, but her courage still lives on in the lessons she taught me. Granny, you showed me that real strength comes from the will to keep going, even when the odds are against you. Your story is a reminder that no matter how hard life gets, I will always find the strength to rise again. I hope to live my life with the same determination and heart you had. Your courage will forever remind me that survival, love, and faith can carry us through anything. Although you didn't get through nursing school, you paved the way for me, my mother, and two sisters that are on their way to being nurses. Lastly, I miss you more than words can explain, and I know you are proud of me and the things I accomplished.



HER PATH, HER POWER

BY JUJU STALLWORTH

Fearless in heart, unstoppable in spirit: this is my story about an extraordinary woman of courage through the eyes of an admiring sister. Rahsheta Brown's life story is a testament to resilience, strength, and the power of determination. From a young age my sister faced challenges that would have been overwhelming for many, yet she emerged stronger with each trial she encountered. The oldest of four siblings raised by two parents that battled addiction, she beat all the odds that were stacked against her. Rahsheta is a courageous woman because she overcame a violent accident, she battled addiction and won, and she bore children after being told she couldn't.

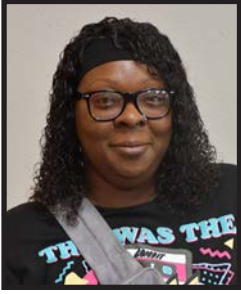
At just ten years old, Rahsheta was run over by a semi-truck. The severity of her injuries led doctors to predict that she would never walk again. However, Rahsheta refused to let this diagnosis define her future. Exceeding medical expectations with determination, enduring extensive rehabilitation and countless challenges to regain her mobility, today she walks confidently. My sister is the true definition of hope and perseverance.

Her journey didn't stop there because as she grew older, she battled alcoholism. This struggle tested her strength in new ways, but her courage never wavered. Through immersive personal effort, support from loved ones, and a relentless desire to reclaim her life, she conquered her addiction. Her journey to sobriety not only transformed her own life but also inspired those around her to believe in the possibility of change and recovery.

To add even worse odds against her, she was told she would never have children due to the extent of her injuries and medical complications. Yet defying the odds once again, she became a loving mother to four beautiful children, one of her happiest achievements as she was told she would never experience being pregnant at all. My sister embraces motherhood with the same fierce determination and love that she applied to every other challenge in her life. Her children are the living testaments to faith and God having the last say.

Rahsheta's life is a beacon of hope and courage. Her story teaches us that no matter the obstacles we face, with determination, faith, and perseverance, we can overcome. She is not only my sister but also a true inspiration. She is the essence of what it means to be courageous in the face of adversity. I have the highest level of admiration and love for her. This essay is from a little sister who looks up to and admires her big sister, her power and her path. I inherited my sister's willpower to overcome any obstacle that I face head on and always prevail!





A PILLAR OF RESILIENCE AND LOVE

BY KHARMEN THOMAS

Have you ever wondered what true strength looks like? For me, it isn't about physical power or loud words; it's about resilience, courage, and the ability to face life's toughest challenges with grace. One day, while helping my nana organize her belongings, I discovered a letter from my grandfather. As we laughed together over its confusing contents, I realized just how much wisdom and humor she carries with her through life. Among the remarkable women who have shaped me, Sara Thomas stands out the most. She was sweet and kind yet fiercely determined—a woman who beat cancer with a smile and held her family together as the eldest of eight.

My nana's life is a testament to true strength, illustrated by three defining chapters: caring for her siblings as a young girl, raising her children as a single mother while facing workplace challenges, and remaining a loving pillar of the family even during her own battle with cancer. Since my early years, Nana has always been the backbone of our family. As the eldest of eight children, she frequently assumed parental responsibilities. Given the age gap between her and her siblings, she often took them to appointments and communicated with teachers, a norm during the era in which she grew up. This experience played a pivotal role in shaping who she became as a young woman.

Nana did what many deemed the "right things." She was married before having children, but Gramps (Jimmy) was another story. He was a loving man, but he enjoyed expressing his affection with other women while she balanced being a homemaker alongside working outside the home. Eventually, this led to their separation, leaving her as a single mother. She faced challenges akin to those encountered by single-parent households today. Yet, despite these obstacles, she carried herself with kindness and grace. She often fed neighborhood children while making ends meet and worked her way up to an inspector at Honeywell. Her hard work, however, was met with discontent from some coworkers. One in particular, Kathy, even resorted to a racial slur against my grandmother.



Nana boldly responded, telling her boss, “You better get her before I do, and I’m still going to have my job when I’m done whooping her ass.” Because she had always been cordial and respectful, her boss quickly stepped in to address the situation, and later, they all shared a laugh over lunch. Remarkably, she still made time for her grandchildren, helping us to see the rainbow after every storm.

In 2020, she was diagnosed with breast cancer due to the BRCA mutation. Despite our panic, she remained level-headed and in good spirits, sharing humorous stories, like the time she found my mother tanning in the yard with her friends and jokingly pointed out that she was already black. This revelation shocked my mother, whose friends believed she was unaware! Throughout her



treatment, Nana kept us focused on cherished memories and taught me the invaluable lesson to never give up. I discovered that we often find what sustains us in our darkest moments; love can be the lifeline we cling to when we struggle to show up for ourselves.

True strength isn’t measured by physical might or loud declarations; it is revealed through quiet resilience and unwavering love. From caring for her siblings as a young girl to raising her own children alone while facing adversity at work, Nana has consistently demonstrated grace and determination. Her remarkable ability to overcome challenges, maintain kindness, and inspire those around her—even while battling cancer—has taught me that real power lies in perseverance and compassion. Because of her, I now understand that strength is not about avoiding hardship but confronting it head-on with courage and hope.



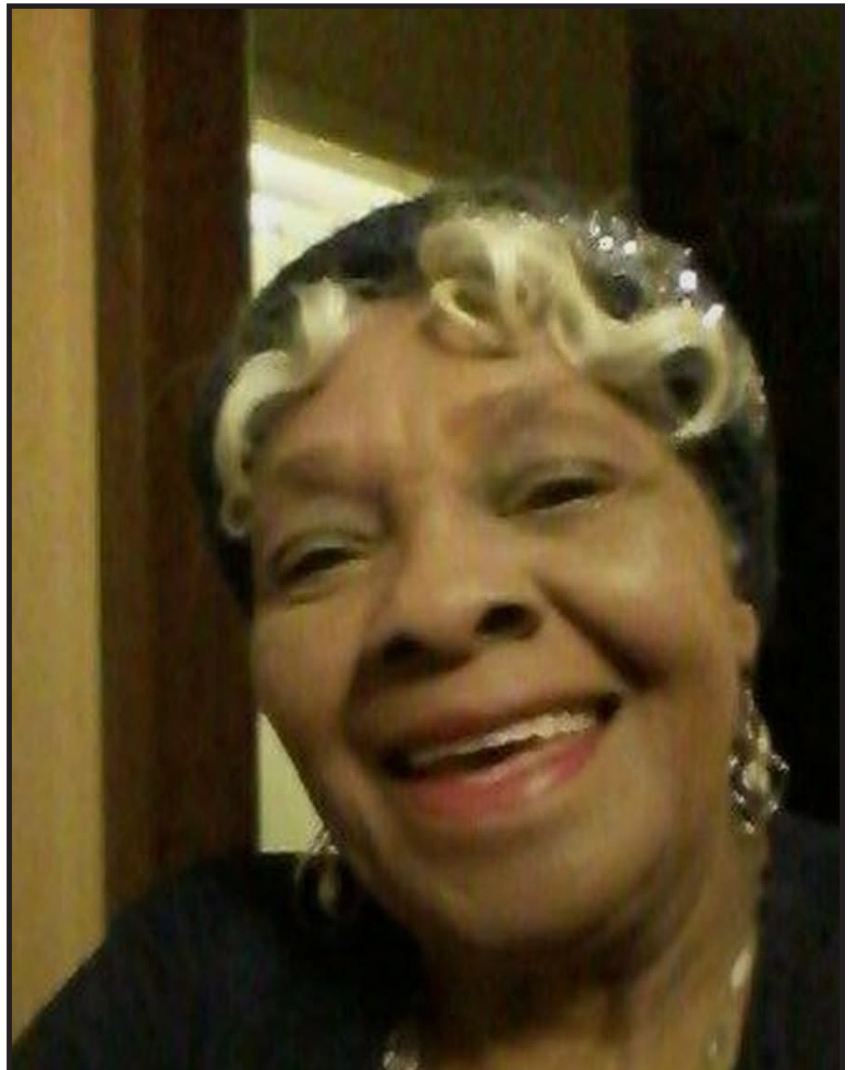
REFUSING TO GIVE UP

BY KIANA GALLOWAY

My Great Grandma Louise Galloway is my woman of courage because I admire her strength and resilience. My grandma was able to find the light after many dark times in her life. She went through a lot of hardships, but she eventually managed to make an amazing life for herself and her children and never gave up. Living with her when I was a child was such a peaceful, safe time in my life. She helped shape the person I am today! My great grandma spent most of her life fighting battles a lot of people did not know about, and she won every single one by refusing to give up!

My great grandma was born January 10th, 1939, in Thomaston, Georgia. She described where she lived as the “backwoods.” Her parents were Brady and Ethel Mae Raines. She was the youngest of her siblings. Her older brother, Robert Raines, got into some trouble because he stole peaches from a neighbor. The community was going to hang him for this, so he fled to Wisconsin. He heard that Wisconsin was a safe place for colored people during that time. When my grandma was a teenager, she visited Robert and ended up taking a liking to Wisconsin. She returned to Georgia and met a man who was in the Air Force named William M. Galloway. They got married and had four children. Time went on, and William ended up getting sick and passing away. Not long after her late husband’s passing, she met another man. His name was Alford T. He was a bad man who had an alcohol problem. He was very abusive and almost killed my Grandma Louise. One of my grandma’s brothers was there at the time and intervened. He ended up killing Alford with a shotgun. Alford’s family was not going to let this go. They were threatening to kill my grandma and her children. One night she woke up her children, and with just the clothes on their backs they fled to Wisconsin, to her brother Robert’s house. She started her journey to a new life and to becoming a new person.

I remember when I had to live with my Grandma Louise for a year while my mom could not be there. I was five years old. She gave me structure, love, and a safe home. She made sure I had perfect attendance at school, and she was always involved in school functions! There was an open house night at school and there was a pie contest. My grandma was an incredible



cook. She made an apple pie that won first place in the contest! That night she also participated in an auction and won me a beautiful hand-painted chair with ducks all over it. I still have the chair; I gave it to my daughter. She would make homemade ice cream, hot water corn bread, greens, and so much more. She noticed when I was down about my mom, and she took me to Noah's Ark Pet Store to pick out a kitten! We named her TT. She was all gray with one caramel colored spot on the top of her head. She taught me how to fish and how to garden. Her garden was huge, and she had the blessing of a green thumb. I can never thank her enough for everything she did for me.



She worked hard to make a good life for herself and her kids and turn things around. She started out by working long hours at a dry cleaner. She then got a job at UW Madison as a cook. She ended up buying a home in the Willy Street neighborhood in her mid-twenties as a single mother. After 27 years working for UW Madison, she obtained an early retirement with good benefits that gave her the ability to pay off her house. She got her GED at 40 years old and also became a Jehovah's Witness. I believe this is when she was truly happy. She found a community, and it meant so much to her.

In conclusion, her story is an inspiring one. She was so strong and so levelheaded. Though she endured a lot of traumas, she never let that get in her way. I'm glad she was able to find the light at the end of the tunnel. She passed away on October 3rd, 2018. She lived a full life. She saw many places and many things, and in the end she was happy. She was truly happy with how things turned out.



WONDER WOMAN

BY LARRY GRANT

Ms. Flora Lee Jones was a woman of courage who worked tirelessly to provide for her family. Growing up in Mississippi, she and her siblings grew up picking cotton at the Robinson's deadening plantation. But that did not stop her dedication and working. As she grew older, she had four kids of her own, with most of her family moving to Chicago, Illinois, and moving into the Chicago public housing, also known as the projects. She started to settle into the new city with her four children (Jennel, Dana, Mark, and Liz). She lived in the projects raising her children in poverty, living on a low income. None of that held her back.

My mom, Liz, was the oldest, which makes Ms. Jones my grandma. But my morn Liz was too young and had no experience in raising my older brother, Marcus. She went on and had my next brother, Raphael, then me (Larry), but my mother couldn't handle the responsibility of raising us. So my beautiful black queen grandmother took us in. She was loving, caring, and strong, and she had a lot of patience with raising us. It took courage, integrity, honesty, being hardworking, and having bravery, especially with me being the problem child.

I was the kid that was diagnosed with ADHD, so she always got a call from the school about my behavior. She would have to leave work early, crying, trying to understand how to deal with me. She tried to get a hold of my behavior by taking me to see a psychiatrist, who diagnosed me with ADHD and prescribed me Adderall. I had to take a 10 mg and a 50 mg. When I skipped Adderall, my misbehavior at school would increase. I tried everything from spitting it back out, hiding it, and acting out at school. If there was a phone call home, at that point my grandma Florida Jones knew that I wasn't taking an Adderall and had to figure out a way to make sure that I took the dosage in the morning. It got so bad when I did not take Adderall that she would have to leave work and come home almost every day of the week.





She was such a strong woman, and she had so much patience for me. She cried and prayed, and she could not figure out why my behavior was so bad. She was a strong woman. She had patience. She loved me. She cared for me, and she was willing to do anything to keep my behavior at a minimum so I could graduate and become something in life. She did that on top of taking care of my two oldest brothers and kids of her own. This is the courageous woman I grew up with, watching her be the father and the mother. I grew up watching her clean house, use hammers and various tools to keep our house intact. I watched her change lightbulbs. I watched her landscape. I watched her use a hammer to put nails in the wall and put up pictures. She was a strong, independent woman who never had a man around; there was no man around. It was always women from growing up, living in the projects, escaping the gang life while in the projects and the street life of Chicago. We moved to the suburbs and other various parts of Chicago to keep me and my siblings away from the street life. It wasn't always easy raising us because there was no man around, but her strong, independent courage got

us through that. As I got older, she understood that it can only get worse, but before it got worse when I turned 18, she decided to make a decision to send me back to my mom, who resides here in Madison, Wisconsin.

Thank you for my grandma, Lee Jones, better known as Mama: you raised me to be all I can be. You raised me. It's not being in the system. You raised me to be no fool. Although times were hard, you still stayed by my side, making sure I went to every appointment. You made sure I ate, made sure I had food on the table, clothes on my back, shoes on my feet, Christmas and birthdays. You were a courageous woman who never gave up, who understood what I needed in life, and were there for me every step of the way. Still to this day I love you and thank you, Mama.



A SURVIVOR'S RESILIENCE

BY LAURA BASS

They say God gives his toughest battles to his strongest soldiers. My faith-driven mother knows the saying all too well. As she lives and breathes, she has a testimony to tell. My mother, Lachiana Dillard, has been through hell and back, time and time again, but refuses to surrender. I'd have to write a thousand-paged book to really show the depths of situations my mother has survived. But let's just say she is a survivor and a hero. I will give only the short version. My mother has survived intense domestic abuse and poverty, health issues, and close deaths, yet she refuses to change her heart. Her battles are engraved in her soul, yet she continues to wear her heart on her sleeve.

Just two weeks after giving birth to her firstborn, she met a man and fell in love. She thought she'd live happily ever after, like in a fairy tale. Quickly it became a nightmare. She was hit by a car, hit in the head with a gun, and kicked and beaten inches from death. She knew she had to get away, as she had birthed three more children and wanted safety and a life of love for them. But even after leaving, happiness could not find her, and she found herself in a scarier situation. Beaten in front of her children, with wooden planks and a hot iron planted right in her skin, burning her flesh, she felt trapped in a nightmare. She skipped states to ensure her children's safety, starting over and building a new life. What she didn't know was that she'd have to skip states again and come back before she was able to stop living in fear. Even then, she fought her way to freedom. Many times, my mother found herself and her children without. She lived in abandoned buildings, places with no running water or electricity, and with friends and family. She knew she couldn't keep enduring this. She found a way to make money. It was not ethical, not what she had hoped for herself or at all what she wanted to do, but she looked to her children, and that was all the ammunition she needed. She began selling drugs, scamming, and working a job. Quickly she saw an overflow. She poured into her life and children until one day while moving from an old apartment, the police kicked down the door. My mother was pregnant and had three children, guns were pointed at them, and they completely trashed the home looking for evidence of the fast life she lived. That scared her; the thought of being taken away from her children woke her up from her wrongdoings. Immediately she left that life and pursued 9-5s, trying to be an exemplary role model.



For the past 10 years my mother has dealt with a health crisis after diagnosis, over and over again. She has been through things that would break even the strongest of men. She's had two run-ins with cancer, one resulting in a hysterectomy. She's had run-ins with heart attacks and TIAs. She's currently dealing with heart failure, muscular dystrophy, psoriasis, and an autoimmune disease. She also struggles with her mental health, and yet none of this has dimmed her light. She still wakes up every day bright and early and goes to work, takes the day on, and offers love and support to those around her. Even while dealing with chemo, she still showed up to work! She'd go right after she was done with her sessions. The strength she showed during all of this was admirable.

Eighteen years ago, she met a man who swept her off her feet. He loved her and her eight children as his own. They got married, and she finally felt at peace. They spent 15 beautiful years together. Three years ago, he met an untimely death. It was a traumatic event for the family, just four months after he was released from a three-year sentence in prison. She changed drastically—her light dimmed, her demeanor changed, her laughter became unnoticeable, and her heartbreak was so physically noticeable. The mother I had known was unrecognizable. The grief hung over her like darkness in the North Sea. A few years after that, her mother passed, while she had not even scratched the surface of healing from the loss of her husband. It completely broke the person that was left after the previous death stripped her down. Sadness swallowed her every day. Yet she refused to quit. Physically and mentally in pain, she gets up and works sun up to sun down, Monday to Friday. She meets her children and grandchildren's problems and heartaches with a smile and helping hand. She helps others financially, emotionally, and mentally, even adopts families at Christmas—all while dealing with her own silent battle. Her aura and light still shine so bright, even after being dimmed. The kind of heart my mother has, she would give the shirt off her back! She's the type of person that always stops and gives money to the homeless on the streets. My mother has the heart of gold you only see on television. She is a godsend.



As many times as my mother has been beaten by the world, fallen to rock bottom, and dealt the worst possible hand, she has not accepted defeat. She embodies the strength, heart, and soul of a woman. She



is the epitome of courage and strength. I will never surrender because of her. She is a mosaic of her life battles, and I of her. I know that I can move mountains and part seas because of her! Whenever I want to give up, I look to my phenomenal woman. Today she has nine children and nine grandchildren, with one on the way. She never ceases to amaze me how she still spoils and pours into each of us. She has been and always will be my super hero. She has the type of heart I would envision for the people of our future. There are really no words to express just how much I love and admire my mom. She is everything to me. She is the most beautiful and perfect person I have ever known (besides my kids). There isn't a thing anybody can tell me when it comes to her! She is the light in my darkest times. I really feel like my soul is connected to hers, and it will search for hers in every lifetime. For every bad thing she has done, there are 10 amazing things she has done in its place.

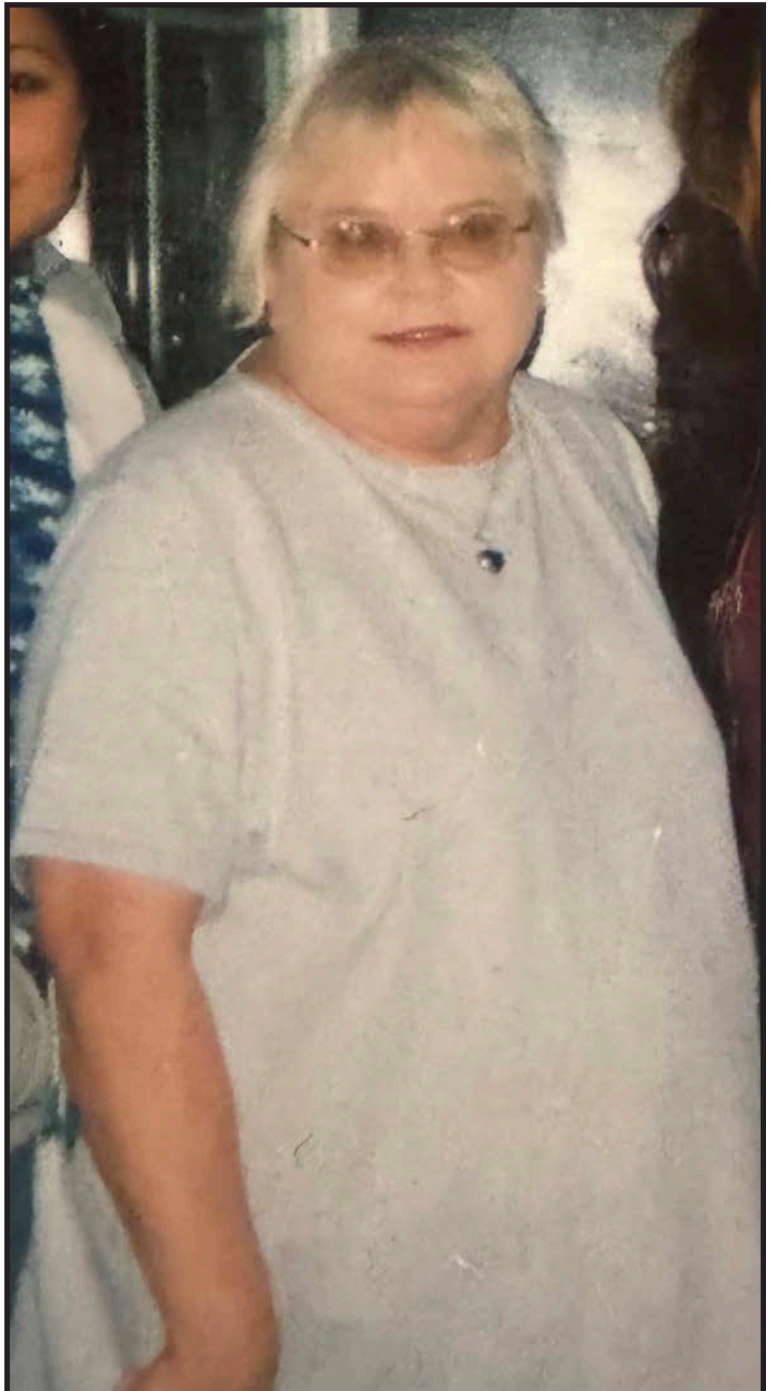


BEHIND THE COURAGE BY LILIBETH SOBREVILLA

Behind every wrinkle, sadness existed. Behind every frown, a betrayal she abhorred. Behind every scar, a story of abuse. A woman so courageous, she drew strength from her pain, who learned she could love, trust, and rebuild her life again. She was a woman whose journey through betrayal, abuse, and abandonment of her daughter led her to rise above and find a stronger version of herself. She was my neighbor, who became the grandmother I always needed. Her name was Debbie, a woman of courage!

What was known to be the bride and groom's happiest moment in life had become a nightmare to remember. My grandmother was 18 years old when she got married and had a daughter, but she didn't take her honeymoon until a couple years later. On her honeymoon, when Debbie and her daughter fell sick with food poisoning, her husband and mother Jean went to the bar. As she woke up to go to the bathroom, she heard her husband's voice coming from the adjoining room. She walked over and opened the door quietly, realizing her mother and husband were committing the ultimate betrayal. Mortified, my grandmother shut the door, went back to bed, and cried herself to sleep. The next morning, she confronted her mother and husband, who said it was not a big deal just a "drunken ordeal" and "tough stuff, get over it." My grandmother's trust had been broken by the two people she trusted most. However, my grandmother did not let this break her, and she stayed strong for her daughter. She decided to cut ties with her mother and put this behind her. I commend what my grandmother did because not many would have the willpower to stay strong after such a betrayal.

Although her husband had betrayed her, my grandmother decided to stay with him, not because she loved him but for her daughter. She knew what it was like to grow up without a father and didn't want that for her daughter. My grandmother's husband became abusive when they returned from their honeymoon. He was angry that my



grandmother no longer wanted her mother around simply because of a “mistake.” He would beat my grandmother and lock their daughter in her room. My grandmother said it became a daily part of his routine. One day he had burned my grandmother repeatedly with his cigarettes and beat her unconscious. That was the day my grandmother had enough. When she woke up in the middle of the night, still lying on the floor, she mustered all her strength and went to get her shotgun. She went upstairs, woke him out of his sleep, and told him, “Get the hell out!” That was the last day he stepped inside her house. My grandmother always told me this story proudly. Looking back as adult, I realize how courageous she had been.

After my grandmother’s divorce, she thought her life would finally get better. She was in for a shock when her ex-husband and her mother announced their relationship while picking up her daughter Leah and her belongings. Leah told my

grandmother she no longer wanted to live with her and wanted a more luxurious life with her father and Jean. My grandmother pleaded with Leah to stay, but Leah refused and left. Willing to sacrifice her own happiness for Leah’s happiness, she relented, hoping Leah wouldn’t resent her. I believe that my grandmother’s selfless act showed her true strength. She always said her decision was a mother’s sacrifice, not a tragedy. Despite being confident about her decision, I know her heart carried a heavy burden of sorrow and pain.



Fate has a way of bringing people together. Over the years, my grandmother’s sadness over the betrayal made her emotionless and cold. However, my family moved next door to her, and that’s when her life began to change. I spent many hours keeping her company and helping her back to health after a stroke. We became inseparable. My family was now her family. Debbiee became one of the few women I looked up to. As I got older, her story became life lessons. I truly admire her resilience and bravery even though it’s painful to know the reasons behind it. I loved her for who she was and always let her know she deserved happiness. Life had taken so much from her and yet she still found a way to trust and rebuild a family with us. I believe we were destined to become family, and I would have it no other way.



FOUR YEARS WAS SIMPLY NOT ENOUGH

BY LISA BROWN

Courage is the bravery and willingness to keep pushing forward despite the odds. When I think of courage, my grandmother comes to

mind. So many vivid memories replay. I can smell cinnamon in the air as coffee bread is baking in the oven. I see “The Wizard of Oz” playing on her television and hear Louis Armstrong’s “What a Wonderful World” playing on the radio, all her favorite things held in such a sacred light. I can also smell the scent of her hidden cigarette wafting through the air. She would always tell me to “stand up straight,” to maintain good posture that would benefit me down the road. This advice came from her time as a model. I can smell the lingering scent of her cigarette sitting at the ledge of her kitchen window. In my young eyes, she was perfect, holding beauty, grace, and a sense of peace. She was a woman who could do no wrong. Now as I’ve grown into adulthood, I understand the depth and layers she carried, from the good, bad, to everything in between. I learned of the harsh adversities she faced throughout her journey in life, from the loss of her husband and soulmate, to battling loss of faith with alcoholism, to navigating through a terminal disease later in life.



Her name was Sally Lavonne Zieher, also known as “Vonnie” to those close with her. For me she was known as “Grams.” At the age of eighteen my grandmother became pregnant with my uncle. It was not the best of unions for both her and my young uncle at the time. Attempting to do right by societal standards, she married briefly, only to be divorced and left to raise their son alone. Luckily, a couple years later, she found true love and happiness with her second husband, my grandfather, Norman Zieher. Together they built a beautiful life and grew their family, consisting of two daughters and another son on the way. They had it all, or so it seemed. My mother was nine years old when tragedy struck. My grandfather passed away unexpectedly during a medical procedure, sadly leaving behind four children and the love of his life. Grams had to now navigate the world as a single mother of three, awaiting the birth of her fourth. From stay-at-home mother and wife to single parent and sole provider, this sudden loss didn’t leave much room to navigate grief as she hid behind a façade. Forced to find work as her family depended on her, she faced many changes, both big and small, that were happening all at once. Their family home, Grandpa’s company car, and financial stability were all now gone. Her grief would soon find comfort in the form of a bottle.

Agnostic was the mindset my grandmother gravitated towards after Grandpa's passing. She had lost faith in a higher power, while falling into the grips of alcoholism. The pressure of life's struggles and no longer having her husband affected her belief that God was not real. "How could there be a God when he takes away such a great, loving, and wonderful man?" The years that followed were heavy and dark. She worked diligently as the Butler Middle School secretary in Waukesha, highly respected and loved for her hard work. She was able to keep a roof over her family's head and food on the table. It wasn't until night, after the work was done, that the bottle came out. Brandy Old Fashioned was her drink of choice. I remember my mother telling me it was during these years that their relationship was strained. Grams depended on my mother to help care for her baby brother, while she worked at the middle school and other odd end jobs. Grams resented how much my mother embodied her father. It was a sore reminder of the love she once knew. There was no physical abuse, but emotional and mental criticism was on the surface.



ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis) entered the picture when my Grams was 67 years old. My mother shared that my grandmother was walking home from the grocery store when her legs came out from beneath her. From what I was told, this was the first indication something was wrong. I vividly remember the progression of her disease, starting from the legs up. She went from walking on her own to a cane, walker, wheelchair, and eventually being bedridden. When the disease started to affect her speech and ability to perform small, daily activities, it was then when final wishes were shared. One of her wishes was to not have medical intervention to prolong her life if it meant living as a vegetable. She wanted to die with her dignity above all else. My grandmother lost her battle on October 9th, 1999, just nineteen days after her 70th birthday. This disease is a thief. I have always felt I never got to say my goodbyes. Unfortunately, there is no cure for ALS.

As the years passed, my grandmother's hard exterior softened. I'd like to say it started with me. I was adopted at the age of four when we first met. It would continue to be another four amazing years loving and growing with her. The very first meeting I sat right on her lap and said, "I love you, Grandma!" There was no doubt about it: I was her granddaughter! My mother later shared it was that moment her past prejudice melted away. She was cherished in the highest honor amongst all who knew her. I embody the same grit, grace, resilient spirit, and work ethic, while holding family traditions near and dear. I have mastered her stern look: If looks could kill... the look when you're doing something you know you shouldn't be doing. We both had to be courageous when life was uncertain, presenting difficult and scary moments. Although



our time was limited, she changed my life for the better. All the values she instilled in me as a child transcended into my adulthood. I will never take for granted the Sunday trips to Waukesha, helping with errands or just enjoying her company. Four years was simply not enough. Despite the pain, loss, and hardships, she was able to reckon with her past, re-step into her purpose, and love again. She was living proof you can let go of the hurt and allow healing and feeling and simply live again. I have peace of mind, knowing she found peace before her time on earth came to an end. She lives on forever, eternally in my heart.



BATTLING A DIMMING LIGHT

BY PAOLA DAMIANI

My cousin is always smiling, always so warm, always showing up for others in their times of need. Behind a smile hides a painful story of a struggle with her own mental illness and her decision to care for a loved one with their own mental health struggles. It wasn't all darkness, as she rose above her struggles, got the help she needed, and entered her new career. She is someone who chose life and never gave up even when her light was dim.

The importance of mental health is something that isn't really talked about in the Hispanic community. Maybe this is why my cousin was always quiet about her severe battle with depression. I hadn't heard from her in a couple of days, and she is one of my favorite people. I decided to give her a call, and we talked on the phone for hours. Later on, I would find out that my call interrupted her as she had been driving around looking for a place to end her suffering. It was just like her to be in her darkest moment but still answer the phone.

Though she was going through her own personal battles, she took on caring for someone else that she was very close to. Along with my cousin, this person was facing mental health issues. The stress of having to take care of someone who is going through their own problems mentally on top of her own day-to-day problems caused my cousin's mental health to decline pretty quickly. She got to a point where she did act on her suicidal thoughts. This was rock bottom, and thankfully she was able to get the professional help she needed.

Despite everything that she had just endured, my cousin got a job at the hospital and worked nights for a while. When an opportunity for a CNA training came up, she wasn't too sure about it, but I encouraged her. She decided that she was going to go for it. She went to school during the day and worked during the night, all while she was a single mom of two beautiful boys. She passed her test and is now employed at the hospital as a CNA.

Looking back, it makes me sad that she felt like she had to deal with all of this on her own, especially when she shows up for me even when she doesn't want to show up for herself. I respect her courage and motivation to keep going. When things get rough for me, she keeps me on my toes and I love that. I want to thank her for being the best her and for not letting life depression determine how she is moving forward. I love her so much, and I thank God that she is here with me today.





AT ODDS BUT NEVER BEAT!

BY RICHARD BUTLER

Some people are born into unfair situations from the start! My mother Shawntell, being one of the strongest women in my life, is one of those people. She is a sweetheart and very giving! She would give you her last without a doubt. My mother overcame being homeless as a single mother, was forced to drop out only to later graduate and get her GED, and also overcame depression.

My mother was born and raised in Chicago, IL with her two sisters and brother. My grandmother was also a single mother without many resources. Basically, my mother was raised poor. Her relationship with her mom was not good, so she was put out at an early age. She ended up pregnant at 14 with my older sister and had me a year later. It became a cycle because she had nowhere to go, and anywhere she stayed was where she got pregnant. The men never stayed, leaving her with eight kids to raise alone.



We were in and out of many shelters and state to state. She was trying to find us a home and also was running away from her last abusive relationship. I remember police waking me and my siblings up to put us out with our mom from Grandma's house. She wanted my mom gone; I don't know why. My mother took us to another shelter, enrolled us in school, got a job, and didn't give up. Weeks passed, and one day the police pulled me and all my siblings from school, then took us back to the shelter where we had to watch them arrest her because my grandmother reported us as kidnapped by her. This was not true. Things got sorted out, but the trauma remained.

My mother was no saint, but she was and is a great mother. She never let us be taken away or separated, which I know was very hard back then. She kept us safe and always fought hard for us! No matter what,

she never gave up on taking care of us and finding us a home. It took many years but finally she had done just that. She found us a big house, and I even had my own room. After that, things didn't get too bad anymore. Although life still was hard sometimes, she had finally put us in a space where we could still be comfortable.



I believe it takes a true woman of courage to get through as much as my mother did. Her being alone and having no support but never giving up on herself or her kids tells exactly this! She was...at odds but never beat!



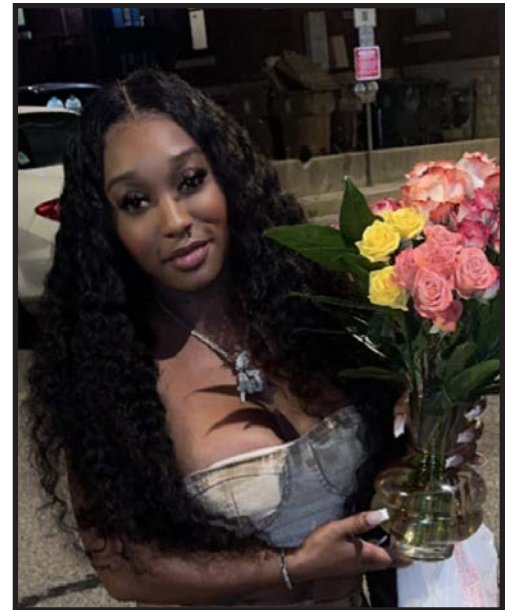
COURAGE WEARS HER NAME

BY ROCHÉ PALMER

"If there is no struggle, there is no progress," wrote Frederick Douglass. We as humans cannot expect success without expecting struggles to come before it. My cousin Neshia reminds me of just that. She is a courageous

woman who has prospered through hardships to become the woman she is destined to be. My cousin lost her son in a stillbirth, moved across the country, and currently is going to school to reinstate her esthetician licenses in her present state.

My cousin and I grew up pretty close. We were roommates at the time that I was pregnant with my son and up until he was about six months. She helped me with a lot of the challenges that I faced being a first-time mom! So, I couldn't wait to share the same reassuring and beautiful experiences with her. I was devastated when I got the call from her, shakily explaining to me that my baby cousin did not make it. I couldn't believe what she was telling me. They say not to question God, but this was something I just couldn't stomach being reality. She was planning the perfect life for her and her son. She went back to school to become an esthetician, worked from home full time, and moved to prepare a comfortable living space for them both.



She would always maximize life's potential, and that's what I admired most about her. She would set a goal and wouldn't stop at anything to achieve it. With the loss of her son and the desire to start a new life for herself, Neshia expressed moving to me on numerous aspects. She wanted a fresh start. So that's what she sought. She continued working from home and picked up a serving job to make ends meet. She researched and traveled to different cities to see what was her greater fit. While doing so, she fell in love with Florida! Even with overthinking, the sadness of leaving family, and even being scared of the inevitable, she proceeded with strength and determination to make her transition a reality.

Lastly, with relocating to a new city, Neshia shortly learned that in order for her to pursue her career in her new location, she'd have to restart schooling all over. At this time, it had now been about two years since she graduated from school back home. Those credentials that she had would no longer be valid in the state of Florida. She was feeling discouraged and was questioning if that was something she really wanted to do all over again. My cousin knew what she desired to be, though--an esthetician. She pulled her big girl panties up and accepted that in order to progress she had to get through the struggle of another year of esthetician school.



All in all, my cousin is the blueprint of courage. She has been through so much and has not let that define or limit who she will become. Neshia is a catalyst for change. She inspires others without even trying. Just by being the woman she is, she reminds me to embrace my past, present, and future triumphs, for they are only temporary and the greatest has yet to come.



GENERATIONAL COURAGE BY RONCAL RILEY

Now that I am grown and raising my own children, the word courage feels different. It feels heavier, more real, because I now understand the quiet storms my mother and grandmother survived while still showing up for everyone else. My childhood memories are stitched with my grandmother's strength and filled with my mother's resilience. These moments shaped my understanding of what courage truly looks like. And as I walk through my own battles, I finally see the raw, unpolished courage they carried with them every day.

I will never forget the day I caught my grandmother while she was using. The rumors had always floated around me like shadows, but in that moment the truth stood right in front of me. I didn't judge her. I didn't



shame her. I just wrapped my arms around her. She turned her head away, and her eyes were filled with a sadness I didn't yet understand. That was the first time I realized courage isn't always clean or pretty—sometimes it's surviving your own mistakes, fighting demons no one sees, and still showing up for your family. And my grandmother did that. Even in her darkest moments, she cooked, she loved, she cared, and she carried a family bigger than herself.

My mother's battles looked different, but they were no less heavy. I remember the night I caught her fighting with a man who wanted to break her spirit. I grabbed protection, thinking I could save her, thinking I needed to be her hero. But she saved herself. She walked away from that man with a strength that taught me something I didn't appreciate until adulthood. Courage is choosing yourself, even when it hurts. My mother may struggle with gambling, she may stumble, but she has always worked, always provided, and always placed God at the center of her healing—even when she was still in the middle of the storm.



Sometimes it feels like the generational curses are coming for me harder than anyone else. But I keep showing up. I keep having this unbreakable strength, keep choosing growth, keep choosing faith, because courage runs through my blood. It lives in the women who came before me. Thanks to them, I know I will beat the odds. I know I will rise. I know I will rewrite the legacy for my children. So, thank you, Mom, and thank you, Grandma, for my courage and for having the courage to still give more. I love y'all.



These two women carried holidays, birthdays, funerals, emergencies—everything. They filled every room with warmth even when their own hearts were tired. They held the family together with the thinnest threads of faith and determination. And while the world saw their flaws, I saw their humanity, their resilience, and their willingness to keep going no matter how heavy life felt. Their courage wasn't something loud or glamorous—it was quiet, steady, and unforgettable. As I walk through my own battles, their influence has given me the tools to fight.



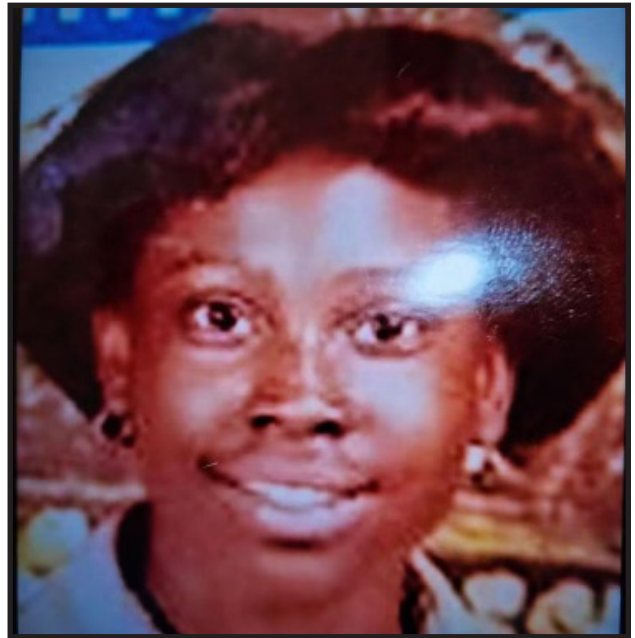


THE FORCE THAT HOLDS US TOGETHER

BY SERENE BOYD

They say, “Grandmothers are the glue to the family.” For my grandmother, that has always been the case. Since I can remember, my grandmother has always been caring, tenacious, and resilient. She consistently put our family first, no matter the cost. For this reason, she is a huge role model for me.

Growing up in the projects of Brooklyn, New York City, with three younger siblings, she found life wasn’t always great. As my grandmother was the oldest, she saw many things. One was her mother struggling with addiction. This caused her and her siblings to turn to the streets looking for ways to survive. My grandmother was a go-getter; she was always looking for fast cash. She was a teen mom, so she needed money to support her child.



However, she quickly learned that all money isn’t good money. Her ways of getting fast cash led her to addiction. But fortunately, it didn’t last long because she had to raise her children and her sister’s children. Her sister unfortunately was battling addiction and at risk of losing her children, so my grandmother took them in. My grandmother made the choice not to repeat the cycle of generational addiction. Her determination to overcome her circumstances inspires me every day.

My grandmother raised her sister’s children for five years. She gave her sister time to gain sobriety and stability. She even assisted her with getting her first apartment so that she could regain custody of her children. That was a big weight lifted off her shoulders, but her jobs as “Big sister, Mom, and Provider” were far from over.

Eventually, my grandmother settled in Madison, Wisconsin, with her teen daughter. To her surprise, her daughter found out she was pregnant with me. Because my mother was just a child herself, my grandmother had to step in and raise me until I was five years old. While my grandmother was raising me, she consistently checked on her family in New York. From my grandmother I learned the importance of putting your loved ones first.

Despite the trials and tribulations my grandmother faced, she continuously made the best of things. She made countless sacrifices to be sure her family was taken care of. To this day, my grandmother is the first person I call when I need help. I think of her as someone who is full of love, wisdom, and strength. One day, I hope to be as powerful of a role model to my child as I view my grandmother to be.





CANDICE: COURAGE IN EVERY BREATH BY SHAKILA WOODS

Some people show courage quietly, in the way they love, fight, and keep smiling through pain. My

sister Candice was one of those people. Diagnosed with breast cancer, she never let the disease define her. Even on her hardest days, she found reasons to laugh, encourage others, and keep pushing forward. Candice's courage showed through her strength in the face of pain, her faith that never wavered, and her love for her family—especially her son, Antonio—until her final breath.

From the day she was diagnosed, Candice refused to let cancer steal her spirit. The treatments were brutal—chemotherapy, surgeries, and endless hospital visits—but she faced each one with determination. I remember her saying, “I might have cancer, but cancer doesn’t have me.” Even when she was weak, she tried to make



others comfortable, cracking jokes and lifting everyone's spirits. Her strength reminded us that courage isn't about pretending things are easy—it's about showing up even when they aren't.

Through all her pain, Candice's faith was unshakable. She prayed daily, listened to gospel music, and often said that God was giving her strength for a reason. Even when the doctors gave hard news, she never lost hope. Her faith gave her peace, and it gave our family comfort too. Watching her trust in God reminded me that courage often comes from believing in something greater than yourself.

Candice's greatest motivation was her son, Antonio. She loved him more than anything in the world, and he gave her the strength to keep fighting when her body was tired. She wanted to make sure he would always know how loved he was and how strong his mother had been. Even on days when she could barely stand, she would smile at him and say, "Mommy's not giving up." Her love for Antonio was her heartbeat—it pushed her to keep going, and it will forever live on through him. She also continued to show love to her family and friends, making sure her presence filled every room with warmth and laughter. Even as her body grew weaker, her love grew stronger.

Losing Candice on April 25 was one of the hardest moments of my life, but her courage continues to live in me—and in Antonio. She taught us to never give up, to lean on faith, and to face fear with love. When I think of courage, I don't think of soldiers or superheroes—I think of my sister. Candice may be gone, but her strength, her faith, and her love as a mother will forever remind me that true courage means standing tall even when the world feels heavy.





WHERE PAIN BECOMES PURPOSE: A WOMAN WHO ROSE TO THE OCCASION BY SHANEECE TAYLOR

When thinking about what it means to be courageous, I think of Denise Hanson—a woman who took the pain of her own childhood and turned it into a mission to uplift others. She grew up carrying responsibilities no child should shoulder, yet she emerged with a deep commitment to ensuring young people feel seen, supported, and valued. The Root 2 Rise CEO has used her story as fuel instead of a crutch.



Growing up as the third of five children, Denise learned responsibility long before most kids her age. With a father struggling with alcoholism and parents who were doing their best just to hold things together, she often found herself parenting not only her younger siblings but also, in many ways, herself. She stepped in wherever she could by putting her siblings into sports, activities, and community programs to create a sense of normalcy and joy for them (despite the instability at home). At the same time, Denise was quietly battling her own depression, carrying emotional burdens that no child should have to face. Denise explained that she never felt liked as a student. She was never the “teacher’s pet,” constantly felt outcast, and rarely felt chosen or valued in the classroom. Even as a child, it took courage for her to keep showing up, caring for others, and holding herself together while feeling unsupported. Those early experiences shaped how she viewed the world, but more importantly, how she viewed children. When she later became a teacher and behavioral coach, Denise made a promise to herself that no young person in her care would ever feel the isolation she once did. It took tremendous bravery to turn her painful experiences into purpose. Denise worked intentionally to make every student feel important, valued, and genuinely seen. She believed as an educator that “if you’re good at it, you find the beauty in the person instead of finding the negative in them.” Living by that truth daily, she made sure every child felt like her favorite. Because school had been such a difficult place for her, she committed to creating classrooms and programs where every child could experience love, belonging, and safety. To Denise, all kids deserved that.

Driven by her own childhood experiences and her passion for uplifting young people, Denise used her courage to create Root 2 Rise, a tutor-mentor program designed for high school students who had lost motivation in learning or doubted their ability to succeed. She wanted students to not only improve academically but also to recognize their value, understand their power, and see themselves as capable of making a positive impact on their communities. Through the program, she modeled and encouraged leadership that helped teens step into roles that strengthened their confidence and influenced their future career paths. Denise believed that opportunity should never be limited by economic barriers, so she showed courage by intentionally creating a space where all students, regardless of background, could access support, guidance, and encouragement. As a member of the first cohort, that perspective influenced how she saw me. When I was a student who didn’t want to go to class, she found the courage to look beyond behavior and ask deeper questions such as how she could help students like me feel

engaged, feel valued in the classroom, and feel connected to their community. Her belief in me changed the trajectory of my life. Being part of Root 2 Rise made me feel truly seen especially because I struggled with belonging in the classroom. That sense of being understood and supported played a major role in shaping my career path in youth work, a field I entered in 2017 and continue to pursue passionately today. Denise's courage to create Root 2 Rise didn't just impact students in the moment— it planted seeds that continue to grow in our futures.



Keeping Root 2 Rise alive has required extraordinary resilience from Denise. Throughout the life of the program, she faced major personal and professional obstacles that could have easily led her to give up on a dream she described as “God sent.” As a single parent, she had to balance raising her children with constant job transitions and the pressures of retaining stability for her family. Many of these changes were often sparked by the backlash she received for intentionally centering equitable educational opportunities for black and brown youth. Her willingness to advocate boldly for marginalized students, even when it put her own stability at risk, demonstrates a profound form of fearlessness. Her commitment to students who were traditionally overlooked did not always sit comfortably with institutions or individuals around her, and she often paid the price for advocating too loudly or too boldly. These challenges were compounded by inconsistent or limited funding, which forced her to rebuild, re-strategize, and keep pushing even when financial support disappeared. Denise openly shared that she is “nervous about funding” and has “never worked this hard in my life” to keep the program standing, yet she refuses to give up. Her resilience during these moments of continuing the work despite fear, uncertainty, and pressure is a clear reflection of her courage in action. Despite these ongoing struggles, Root 2 Rise has grown into a powerful community resource that has served 418 young people and continues to remove barriers by paying for students' continuing education courses at MATC. The impact is real, measurable, and deeply felt. Denise's vision for the future of Root 2 Rise imagines the program not just as a tutoring and mentorship program but also as a pipeline toward long-term success. Boosting students' economic freedom, increasing homeownership opportunities, and connecting alumni with community resources that support their adult lives are some of her future hopes for the program. Her dream is to build a program that follows youth far beyond high school, guiding them toward stability, empowerment, and a life they once doubted they could reach. Even in the face of adversity, Denise continues to fight for that future, showing that courage is not just a moment but a lifelong commitment.

When asked what she wants people who are struggling to find courage to know, Denise's message is simple but powerful: stay grounded in the present moment. She believes that courage begins with being fully with the person or challenge right in front of you. She reminds others that “time heals,” and even the most painful experiences will soften and shift with time. Denise encourages people to remain open to change because, as she puts it, “you never know what miracle is around the corner.” She shared that it took her years to tell her own story without crying, but what once broke her has now become a stepping stone and a source of motivation. She teaches that there is light ahead if you stay open to receiving it—and her own life is evidence of that truth. Through every hardship, Denise stayed resilient and kept going. Her strength, her compassion, and her unwavering belief in young people make her far more than just a mentor or educator. To me, she truly represents what it means to be a woman of courage.



UNBROKEN: WHEN COURAGE WEARS AN APRON

BY SHATAYA HALL

Courage is easy to romanticize, harder to recognize, and hardest still to embody. Yet a mother fighting cancer alone—shouldering every fear, every appointment, every sleepless night full of pain without a hand to hold—opening her home to children when others retreat, and fighting for breath through the suffocating grip of COPD shows us what courage looks like when it stops being a story and becomes a life.

It first started with the dreaded lump. “I felt it, and instantly—I knew,” she said. Days later, at the Dollar Tree, her phone rang, and next came the darkest eight words to one’s ear. “Mrs. Hill, you have stage 3 breast cancer.” “My knees hit the floor.” “My girls,” she whispered, clutching at the thought of us, the thought of leaving us, wishing to shield us from the fear and pain she could not escape. “The hardest part wasn’t hearing the words; it was knowing I had to survive what would come next. Not knowing was very scary, not knowing what the outcome would be—will I die? Will I beat this?” These questions surely scorched the back of her mind, unanswered and unrelenting.

Fighting—alone. Fighting through fatigue and fear, forced to work as a waitress in agonizing pain, and facing each chemo treatment alone, every drip a reminder of the war waging within. My mother was still cooking, still cleaning, still mothering, still loving – each act a quiet defiance. Even though every breath hurt and every step was a trial, she kept her apron tied tight, refusing to let pain steal her purpose. Bent over the sink, doing dishes with legs that could barely hold her up, stirring dinner with the arms trembling under their own weight, she fought through waves of pain that never seemed to end. “Cleaning, cooking, trying to make it down to the basement for laundry—just pain, and that sick, heavy feeling. It was terrible.” She would tell me, “Trying to take care of myself, making sure I ate when I could hardly walk,” and all I could hear was I, I, I. Though not being the only presence in her home, her husband and teen daughter gave little to no help, and her other four daughters were living hours and hours away and were able to give little help. It still breaks my heart to this day, knowing she faced so much alone during the very moments when family should have been her refuge – a time when I wish I had been braver, closer, more present.

My mother’s battle was long. It was painful. It was exhausting. Worst of all, it was lonely. But she made it through all alone, miles and miles away from her children, grandchildren, sisters, brothers, and best friends – she faced the monster that tried to claim her, and she destroyed it. I remember going up from Tennessee to Alton, Illinois, to visit her. We sat at the kitchen table, talking. sisters, brothers, and best friends – she faced the monster that tried to claim her and she destroyed



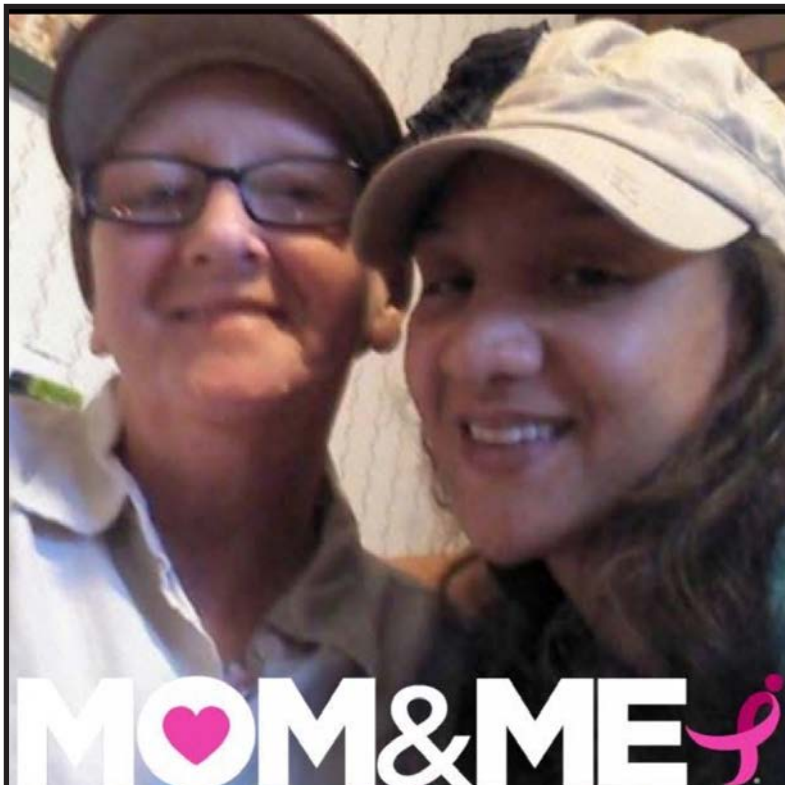
it. I remember going up to Alton, Illinois, from Tennessee to visit her. We sat at the kitchen table, talking over a hot cup of coffee, and we went to the Riverboat Casino on the Mississippi. In that moment my mother saw love and happiness, and I saw courage wearing a tired smile. I could see the pain and sickness in her eyes, see it run through her body, yet she still found strength to be – Mom! Cancer may have come for her, but it never broke her. When life threw her an unimaginable challenge, she did not falter, break, or give up, but she fought.

Fast forward to today – she is still wearing that apron. After her granddaughter went to prison in 2023, she opened her home – and her heart – to her three great-grandchildren. Her granddaughter was released in the summer of 2024 but returned to prison in January 2025. Despite the daily pain, fatigue, and battles she is fighting with COPD, she once again became their anchor, their safe harbor in a world that had suddenly grown uncertain and frightening. She cooks their meals, helps with homework, wipes away tears, and holds them close at night, showing them that family is not just born – it is chosen and fiercely protected. Even amidst her own financial and health struggles, she



became a sanctuary of love, stability, and support – proving that courage is not just surviving for yourself but lifting others even when your arms are weary.

Her courage shows in the quiet moments: each morning, noon, and night when she ties her apron, she's choosing to provide love and normalcy. Even when pain pulses through her bones and her lungs burn as if the air itself has become too heavy, she greets each day with unbroken resolve. It is the resilience to fight for her own health while nurturing the lives of others, the unwavering devotion that guides her through challenges many would find overwhelming. Her story is a testament to the extraordinary power of a courageous spirit, the boundless capacity of a mother's heart—and a reminder that courage is also wearing an apron.





INCARCERATED BUT NOT SUBJUGATED BY SHELTON MURPHY

When thinking about a woman of courage, only one person comes to mind, and that's my mother, Paula. I've seen her endure so much no matter what position or situation she was put in. For example, Paula spent seven and a half years in prison after her

bosses set her up. Through all of that, she still found a way to move forward and be successful. She didn't let it change her kind, loving, and caring nature, which happens to a lot of people after being released from incarceration.

My mother was raised in Milwaukee, WI, on the east side in the middle of the 'hood. She was the oldest out of three girls and always had to be the head of the household because my grandma was always working as a single mother. Whenever the stress got too much for my grandmother to handle, my mother would step up, doing the cooking and cleaning for her siblings. She still managed to do this even at the tender age of 14 when, on May 19, 1985, I would be born. I came with a list of problems myself, like being three months premature and having a hole in my heart. But even through all of that, nothing ever seemed to slow her down. She would have another child at 16, my first little sister, and still manage to graduate from high school a year early. Receiving an academic award from the president of the United States, my mother graduated top of her class.



Even though my mom was young, she was always very ambitious and had already moved into her own house. Later she moved my two aunts in as well as showing them how to be adults. Back in those days, everyone really dreamed of moving on up like the iconic T.V. show "The Jeffersons." One day it seemed like that opportunity presented itself when she met two rich men from Val Pack Marketing. Their names were Dennis and Scott, the two main bosses of the office. They showed her their mansions and farms and made it seem like she would be able to attain the same thing working with them. They made her siphon money from corporate accounts to their personal accounts. When they refused to up her pay, she started siphoning a little of that money into her own account. The higher ups would find out about it, and Scott and Dennis would only throw her completely under the bus.

She would eventually have to face trial and get sentenced to serve seven and a half years in prison. This would be very depressing for her initially, since she would miss two of her three kids' graduations. And the judge also put in an order saying she could never touch a computer again because she was a hacker. With computers being her whole life, she really didn't know what to do. One day the prison needed her for a computer job and said if she passed, she could have the job as long as she didn't hack the systems. So, she got the job in prison and worked there for about four years until she got out. When she was released, she bought herself a convertible, and within four years she had bought a house.

My mother is living proof that you can do anything if you put your mind to it. Her story further proves that no matter what obstacle is put in front of you, there is a way through or around it. She told me even though she had to go to prison, it was to ensure that we had a better life than hers. She succeeded in just that, but she also showed me as a parent sometimes you must make sacrifices for your children. To be able to even make a sacrifice means that you have to be a woman of courage. My mother has shown me that if you stay focused, nothing can stop you from achieving your goals. Nothing has ever stopped my mom from completing a task....and I mean nothing.



ADMIRABLY RESILIENT BY STACY CASTILLO

Most days, upon looking at my reflection in the mirror, I see a woman who is admirably resilient—my mother. She grew up as one of five children living in poverty. She had a father who was not only an alcoholic but also physically abusive towards her, her siblings, and her mother. She survived by becoming a shell of sheer protection; but through pain and challenges, she became an outstanding role model of a mother and wife.

My mother was born on July 20, 1977. She grew up in a very tight household with four other siblings. Her mother mainly remained home housekeeping and raising the children, while her father would work late hours, which often led to him ending his night at the bar. Coming home, he would line up his children one by one, and each worse than the other would receive a painful whooping. For unknown reasons, my grandfather targeted my mother the most. I believe it was an angry reaction to seeing how much she still loved him regardless of how obvious he'd singled her out.

My grandmother accepted this abuse for many years due to the guarantee of her children having a roof and food, not knowingly aware that this would lead to my mother's one-day longing for escape. My mother eventually met my father at the shoe shop he worked at. Although young, she grew the courage to get married and leave the country with him. It was not by any means easy: they both struggled in a country that hates immigrants, faced a language barrier, and had to make a complete start from zero.

Almost 30 years later, they have never gone back to their home country. Both my parents managed to make a living with each other's support. Losing her youth to parenting and working long days, my mother herself had five children. Although she did not have the strongest connection with any of my siblings, she never once made us feel unloved or singled out. She devoted her life to becoming the best wife and mother. For that I see the resilience that hides beneath her wrinkly face.

We are all given second chances in life, and my mother did not once question what she would do differently compared to her childhood. My son not only has a strong mother but an influential grandmother who continues to give love, even while her inner child longs for it. I look in the mirror and see the reflection of my mother's youth through my features; I am the woman that I am today because of her. But boy, do I wish I could hug the little girl she once was and reassure her she is seen and loved.





MY SISTER, COURAGEOUSLY LIVING WITH DOWN SYNDROME BY TIDA DRAMMEH

Do you know how many people in Wisconsin live with Down syndrome? According to the Down Syndrome Association of Wisconsin, there are over eight

thousand people living with Down syndrome, and my sister is one of them. My sister is a tomboy who loves basketball, soccer, and outdoor sports. She loves to help around the house, whether she is just standing there watching me cook or trying to take care of my daughter and sister, even though they don't see themselves as kids anymore. Hawa is courageous because she has struggled to communicate, she loves school even though it's difficult, and she sees the outside social world differently.

Understanding my sister can be a challenge, but we try extremely hard to figure out what she is trying to say. For example, we tell her to point out what she



wants or tell her to take us there, which can be frustrating for her to keep repeating herself if she is misunderstood. She doesn't like listening to me often; maybe that's because she is a teenager now or maybe it is because we are the same height now, and she is slightly bigger than me. Yelling helps sometimes, but other times she just doesn't care. So, I would have to threaten her with our brother or dad to deal with her before she starts listening to me again and doing as she's told. We may have differences in communicating, but we love to spend time with one another. She loves watching me cook and clean. Sometimes she helps me fold some clothes or she tries to babysit my daughter and sister, and sometimes she just lies down in my room and watches her show on her electronics. Although it is hard for both of us at times, we are both courageous for still trying to better communicate with one another.

My sister very much loves school; she doesn't like being out of school on the weekends or holidays. She is a tomboy who loves playing basketball, soccer, and so on. She loves being around her teachers and friends because it means she gets to socialize, play around, and work with others. With that, though, comes challenges, like listening to her teachers and finishing her work. I think she doesn't like listening because she is away from home and can do whatever she likes, and the adults won't be yelling at her like I do at home. When she says she is done working, that's it for her, unless you threaten her with taking away something she really loves, like gym time or recess before she starts listening again. She also runs out of the school to test her teachers, and they must run after her and bring her back inside the school. It's all fun and games, and she doesn't see the danger in doing it, considering all the cars coming and going. After school we usually go after the assignments, but after school she isn't interested in doing anything related to school. All she cares about is the iPad. She does work at the Goodman Center a few times a week during school, and maybe she is too tired to do any schoolwork or maybe she just doesn't care. School may be difficult for her at times, but I think it is courageous of her to try to go to normal school and make friends with others.



I really dread taking her out with me anywhere it may be. She likes to run off, which means I must chase after her, and that's also fun for her even though she never seems to notice the danger around her. She runs to people to give them hugs and kisses, but they don't know her intentions or that she has Down syndrome, so that scares me a lot. It is apology after apology. She also loves kids and babies, and she likes picking them up or just holding them, which also scares me, not knowing what the kids' parents are thinking. She makes loud noises, which gets us a lot of attention and stares. She does

a lot in public, which angers me because she knows she can get away with it because it's public. Whenever it's time to go home, that's another difficulty because she uses her force against me, and she knows she is stronger than me. I can't do it, so what do I do? I do what I do best: I use bribery against her like going to her favorite fast-food restaurant or going to Sky Zone to get her in the car to get her home. She may not see the danger around her, but it is courageous of her to try and live her life as normally as possible.

In conclusion, it is very important for me to try as much as possible to be patient with my sister because she is not like the rest of the family. She teaches me to not just be patient with her but to everyone around me as well. She also teaches me how to communicate with others with disabilities as well, and I am grateful



for that. It gives me a different perspective on others with disabilities, to not judge them upon first sign. I really do worry about my sister, being her main caregiver. What will happen to her when I am not here or who will step in? The way she runs around outside with no care in the world and not knowing the danger that surrounds her really does worry me, but it also shows me how brave she is. My sister is a very courageous girl despite the Down syndrome that she must live with.



GROWING IN GRIEF

BY TIKOYA GILMER

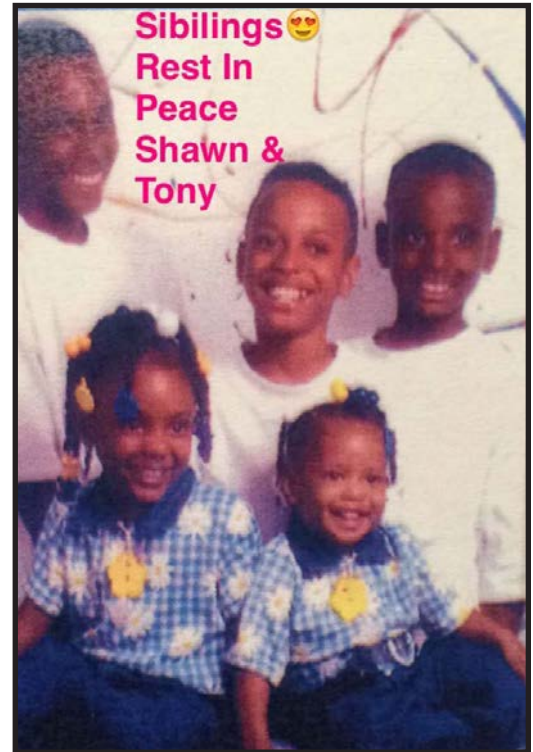
The quote “God gives his toughest battles to his strongest soldiers” (Romans 12:1) best describes my mother and her journey. My mother, whose name is Veronica

or also known as ‘Auntie Ronnie’ to most family and friends, is one of the strongest, humblest, most God-fearing and helpful/caring persons that I know. There are so many words that could be used to describe this amazing woman. My mother moved from Joliet, IL to Madison, WI. In 2005 she had one of the worst nightmares a parent could imagine. She had to grieve the loss of her third oldest child who was still very young. Veronica was learning to grieve and still show up for her other four children. Then in 2016 she faced another tragedy of losing one more of her oldest children. Grief that time was different, but she never let her pain, hurt, or loss determine her life moving forward. She pushed through grief, learned to grow with it and use it as a power to help others, accomplish more goals for herself, but also create a deeper bond with her last three children.



In 1998 when I was just shy of four years old, my stepfather got a job promotion with a phonebook company to move from Joliet, IL to Madison, WI. My mother and stepfather wanted to provide a better life and opportunity for their five children (three boys, two girls), so they took a chance and moved. Most of my mother’s life she lived in Joliet with her family. Picking up and moving almost three hours away, with no family, no friends, was something new and scary for her. As the years passed, she grew her own community and friends within Madison. Granted she missed home and family, but she was dedicated to making this a new start for the family she created. It became just that: the dream white house and fence, nice neighborhood, big backyard; the home where many memories will be made.

On January 24, 2005, one of the worst nightmares for a parent's life happened. Veronica lost her 14-year-old son, her third oldest child. This was one of the hardest times in her life. She no longer knew who she was. She did a lot of self-blaming and second guessing. The hurt, pain, and grief consumed her. For months/years she fought through depression, but she still had a husband and four more children to take care of. She managed to pull herself through many rough days. I admired her for being able to still function through and show up for her other children knowing the pain of missing one. This built her to become one of God's strongest soldiers. My mother started attending church more often, which helped her heal. She connected with/reached out to other mothers who have gone through the same thing and became an advocate for grieving mothers. Even though you never stop grieving, she was able to do so with some closure.



After years of learning to regulate her emotions and the grieving process, my mother got another gut-wrenching phone call on May 1, 2016 that she had lost another one of her oldest sons. Just when she thought nothing could possibly hurt worse, she lost another child. It set her back mentally. She was not prepared for this, but who is prepared for something like this? "A mother is never supposed to bury her children": and this would make two for my mother. Circumstances were also very different this time. She had to plan and do a lot of things on her own. For my other brother, we had a lot of help with planning, donations, community and other family coming together. This time around was traumatizing for my mother. Through so much that was going wrong and again the hurt, pain, disbelief, and shock, she held her head up high. Her heart was strong even though it was weak. She made those funeral plans and sent my brother off in peace. Could you even imagine having to bury two of your five children?

Despite all the pain and grief my mother had been through, she continued to push through. You wouldn't even guess that she has been through so much. She is not letting any of the trauma dictate or keep her from flourishing and trying to improve her life. She also never let it make her not show up to be a mother to the rest of her living children. My mother is now living in Texas helping my oldest brother and sister-in-law with their new baby. She is managing two assisted living facilities. She has continued to reach out and support other parents in their grieving process of losing children, helping mentor them through the feelings. She has



educated herself further in her nursing career and other areas such as minister (preaching) certificates, certified notary, phlebotomy, real estate, and more. She continues to move with the grace and love of God. My mother shows up for her children and grandchildren and family in whichever way needed. She makes sure to show and tell how much she loves us each day. We literally talk on the phone every day, sometimes multiple times a day. My mother has been one of the biggest impacts in my life. She has shown me what it is to be a STRONG woman, to move with grace not hurt and anger. She knows me that no matter what life throws at you, you must still push through for the better, and you will get through pain. No matter what life throws at you, you must show up for your children. She installed the best wisdom into me in so many life areas, but the best is she showed me in so many ways how to be a great mother to my son. "Grief is not a disorder to be fixed, but a process that changes you, reveals you, and can lead to greater capacity of joy."



SHE BECAME WHAT SHE NEVER HAD BY VALENCIA COLLINS

Courage is not just bravery in moments of danger — it is the quiet, everyday decision to keep going when life feels heavy, lonely, and uncertain. When I think of courage, I don't picture a superhero or a famous leader. I picture my mother. Her life has been shaped by struggle, heartbreak, and responsibility she never asked for, yet she turned her pain into purpose. From growing up in foster care, to becoming a single mother because my father was incarcerated during most of our childhood, to becoming a life coach and intuitive teacher to me and my sister, my mother is the living definition of strength.

As a young girl, my mother did not have the security most kids take for granted. She spent her youth in jail, foster care, and moving around, never knowing what it felt like to fully belong. She had to learn survival before she learned childhood. Instead of receiving protection, she had to become her own protector. Instead of being guided, she had to create her own path. Those early years could have hardened her heart, but instead, they planted a desire in her to become the type of woman she once needed for herself.

When she became a mother, life presented yet another challenge. With my father incarcerated for most of our childhood, my mother had to take on both roles — nurturing (being smothered with pounds of hugs and kisses and being told how special and beautiful we are) and disciplining (getting whoppings for mistreating my sister or having to write sentences for being a smart ass). I got comforting by sleeping in the bed with her and her having to sleep in the middle so Jadon and I could share her. She provided sometimes by having to go to the food pantry and having BBQs because they would give us those big bags of chicken quarters. Praying and pushing forward, she carried the weight of two parents while fighting battles none of us could see. There were nights she cried after we fell asleep, mornings she woke up determined even when she was exhausted, and days she smiled so we never felt the fear she sometimes lived with. She built stability from instability and love from loneliness.

Even with the trauma of her past and the responsibility of raising children alone, my mother refused to let her story end with survival — she chose purpose. Instead of allowing her broken childhood to repeat itself, she became a personal life-coach to me and my Jadon. She taught us emotional intelligence, confidence, faith, resilience, boundaries, and self-worth. She corrected us with love, guided us with wisdom, and held us accountable not to be perfect but to be strong and authentic. She raised daughters who understood their value because she knew what it felt like to grow up without anyone reminding her of hers.

My mother is a true woman of courage because she turned every obstacle into motivation and every wound into wisdom. She showed me that a hard beginning does not mean a hopeless future and that strength is built, not handed down. She is more than a survivor — she is a healer, a protector, a leader, and the foundation beneath our success. I am proud to call her my mother. Because of her courage, I know that I, too, can rise from anything.





“IMBOKODO” (MY ROCK)

BY VIWE MPURWANA

There is an old South African saying that goes, “Wathint’ abafazi, wathint’ imbokodo,” which means when you strike a woman, you strike a rock. As you know, rocks are formed over millennia under immense pressure, which makes for their strength. Just like a rock, Margaret Swentu Mankahla has faced many pressures in life, but what makes her special is the way she has faced those obstacles and how she has come out in the end, stronger than before. This story is about my “imbokodo”: my aunt and the matriarch of my family. From infancy she defied all odds and is the second of three girls to become a teacher at a time when society did not expect much of her due to her race and gender, to showing strength and courage during a time of immense grief and sorrow. Courage is not the absence of fear but the willingness to face any adversity for a greater purpose, and for her that was family.

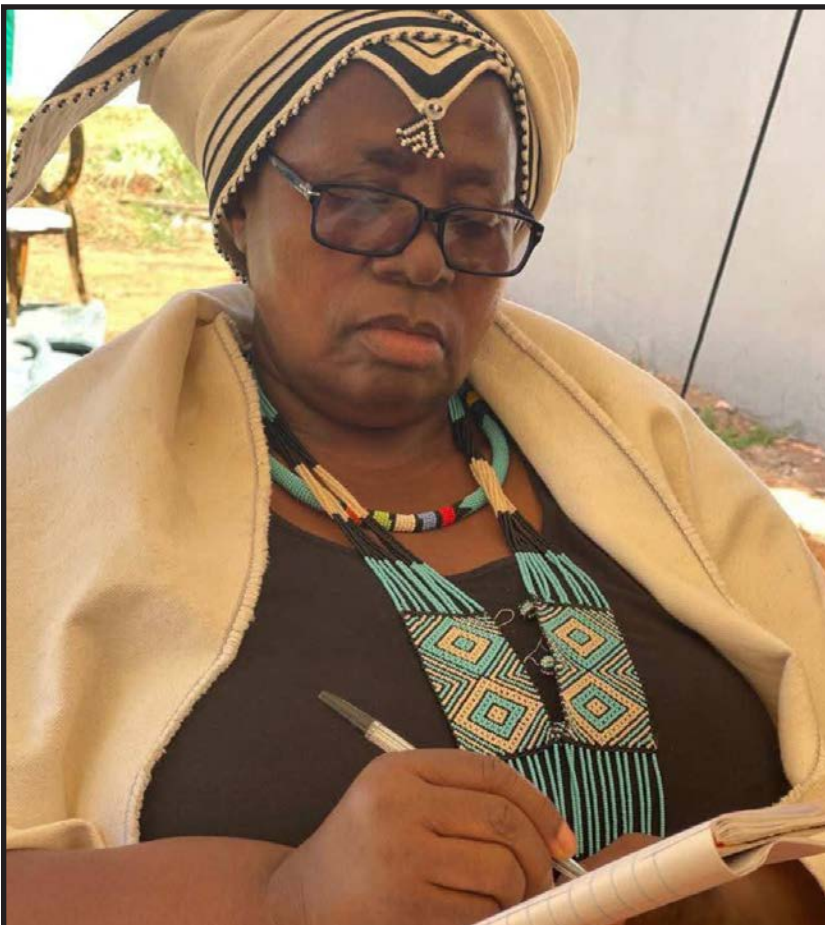
My aunt was a fighter from when she was born. My grandmother had many miscarriages and lost babies during infancy. However, three girls survived, of which Margaret was the second. Considering the times and where they lived, the rural heart of the Eastern Cape, the odds of survival were against her, yet she pulled through. Limited access to healthcare and draconian apartheid policies resulted in higher infant mortality rates in majority African areas.

Coupled with the fact that my grandmother had lost several babies already, the expectation was that she too would not make it. Not only did she pull through but she thrived, and this was to be the prequel to her life. Whenever the odds were against her, she found ways to overcome those odds and prosper.

When society told her how far she could go, she went further. My aunt spent most of her early life under the Apartheid government; this meant that as an African she had very limited career perspectives. Being a black female at the time meant that she had even fewer options than black males. She followed in her older sister’s footsteps and became a teacher. The flames of freedom were sparked in the classrooms, and so teachers were instrumental in the liberation of the African masses. The Apartheid government understood the power of the classroom and sought to control it, but it was the student uprisings that led to a democratic South Africa. My imbokodo played her part, and I am proud, even though she may minimize her contributions; they remain consequential nonetheless, and the very fact that she was able to have a profession took courage and resilience.



The time from 1994 and onwards brought about democracy and a renewed hope in the future of South Africa. Under these conditions, she flourished and was successful in all her business endeavors until tragedy struck. Her sister, her confidante, and best friend got diagnosed with terminal cancer and had very little time left to live. Just like the warrior woman she has always been, she refused to give up, and I can remember her taking her to every appointment and trying to get second and third opinions because she refused to give up hope. I witnessed my dying aunt draw strength from her sister; even though she was suffering too, she refused to show that to my dying aunt. I remember seeing her cry in the backyard, turning around, wiping her tears, and walking into the house as if she were not broken. She knew she had to be strong for her sister, and strong she was till the very end.

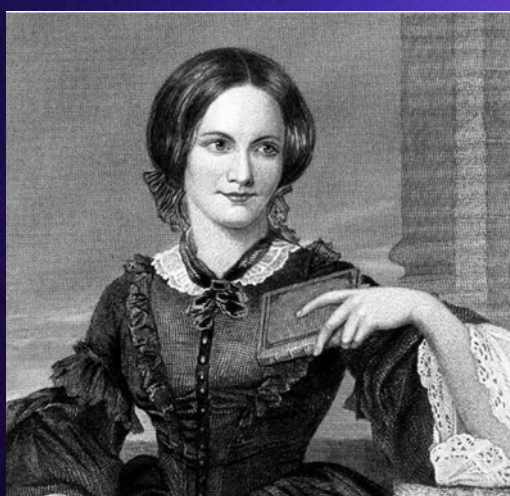


The passing of her sister was the most traumatic time for me, the family, and especially her. She could've chosen to retreat in her pain and grief, but instead she mobilized the family together and ensured that her sister had a dignified send-off and most importantly her legacy would not be forgotten. She also knew she had a daunting task ahead, the responsibility of raising me and my four siblings. I was just 13 at the time, and I know I drew my strength from her during that time; I cannot imagine what we could've done without her. She took on her new responsibilities with poise and a kind of dignity which is hard to find today. My family could've never survived the death of my aunt without the courage and strength of our imbokodo.

FAMOUS WOMEN WITH THE COURAGE TO WRITE



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



"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

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



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



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



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



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

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



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



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



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



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



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