AGAINST ALL ODDS

REFLECTIONS 2020

STUDENT LITERARY MAGAZINE OF THE WAYNE COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT
MISSION STATEMENT
Wayne County Community College District’s mission is to empower individuals, businesses, and communities to achieve their higher education and career advancement goals through excellent, accessible, culturally diverse, and globally competitive programs and services.

VISION STATEMENT
Wayne County Community College District will be known as a premier community college and innovator in the areas of high quality academic and career education, talent development in support of regional economic growth, diversity and inclusion, and technological advancement.

VALUES STATEMENT
- Excellence in teaching and learning
- Diverse, international and intercultural education
- Student and community service
- Integrity

ACCREDITATION
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Message from WCCCD

We are extremely pleased to bring you the third annual Wayne County Community College District’s (WCCCD) Reflections student literary magazine. Our theme for this year, “Against All Odds,” brought on an entirely new meaning with the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic and the protests held across the United States for criminal justice reform. However, despite the many challenges, we continue to be amazed and proud of our students’ continued resiliency and courage.

We hope that you will enjoy reading this publication. Our student contributors have worked tirelessly, while balancing their academic studies during this pandemic, to share their heartfelt poems, essays, artwork and photography with you. Our students’ passion and creativity are the driving forces of this showcase.

It is truly an honor to work with these students and our dedicated Reflections team who, under the leadership of our Chancellor, Dr. Curtis L. Ivery, take pride in highlighting students in this award-winning magazine.

Best wishes,

Unbreen Amir
Assistant to the Chancellor for Administrative Communication, WCCCD
Wayne County Community College District

Message from the Editors

When we ventured into publishing Reflections, never did I think 2020 would pose so many challenges. We were just a few weeks into the project, and everything abruptly stopped. Schools, including WCCCD, closed doors for in-person education. We had to produce this publication online and were not able to enter into the annual contest.

It’s fitting that this year’s theme is Against All Odds. We were facing all kinds of odds with the COVID-19 pandemic and we gave our student writers an opportunity to share their thoughts on this crisis. They also share essays, creative non-fiction pieces, poetry, images and art work reflective of this year’s theme.

We all face challenges, some more extreme than others. The degree of the challenges stack the odds on whether or not we overcome them. We share those stories in this publication.

Half way through the year, my vision is still foggy. As we face a pandemic, collapsed dam, police brutality and violent protests breaking out across America, I am thinking that the odds of seeing clearly in 2020 are slim.

My colleagues, the writers and I navigate through these uncertain times. Thanks to Unbreen Amir, Dennis Niemiec, Chelsea Harbison and of course, our Chancellor, Dr. Curtis Ivery who always seems to have the vision of what needs to be done no matter the obstacles blocking our view.

With gratitude,

Vanessa Denha Garmo
Reflections Editor
The writing creativity of WCCCD students is on full display in the District’s third annual Reflections literary magazine.

There are works of creative nonfiction, essays, short stories and poems as well as artwork and photography with the theme of “Against All Odds.” Students also personalized the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on their lives.

All contributors must be commended for their passion for the art of writing and their willingness to venture outside their comfort zones to share their talents with us.

Writing can be a gut-wrenching exercise in expression. There are no shortcuts. As the Greek philosopher Epictetus succinctly put it: “If you wish to be a writer, write.” Our participants have done that and we, the readers, are better for it.

On behalf of the students and everyone associated with Reflections, we thank Chancellor Dr. Curtis L. Ivery, a prolific author himself, for his vision in establishing this award-winning magazine.

Write on!

Dennis Niemiec
Reflections Editor

My name is Chelsea Harbison and I’m from Royal Oak, MI. I’ve worked for WCCCD for three years, as a Quality Assurance Specialist, and working on Reflections is one of the most fulfilling parts of my job. As an artist and writer myself, nothing quite beats experiencing the brilliance that is our student’s works.

Chelsea Harbison
Reflections Contributing Editor
Imara Hyman

Minnie (Imara) Hyman was born and raised in Detroit. She spent almost 20 years in Houston, Texas. She now spends every opportunity she gets in Washington, D.C. where her children, grandchildren and great grandchild live. She began taking classes to learn about the Alzheimer’s disease and how to prevent it. She accomplishes this by taking whatever classes that interest her while engaging with the quick, hardworking, intelligent young people all around her. She participated in the Reflections Magazine because, “it’s an opportunity to share my thoughts, observations and concerns with a larger audience.”

Keegan Kelley

Keegan Kelley is from Allen Park. She is currently studying Dental Hygiene at the Northwest Campus of WCCCD. As far as her short-term goals go, she intends to finish her current semester and do well on her finals. She hopes to obtain as many extra hours at her job as a dental assistant over the summer, in an attempt to aid in paying back student loans. She made the decision to write in Reflections because she quickly became very drawn to the level of self-expression that was emphasized in the magazine. Her long-term goals include finishing her Dental Hygiene program next year, passing all of her required state board licensing exams, and acquiring a positional career in a dental office with the title of RDH (Registered Dental Hygienist). “Personally, I believe that I am an immense appreciator of art and all of the vast forms art exists in,” she said.

Winston Lightfoot

Winston Lightfoot is a third-time contributor to the Reflections Magazine. He says that photography is his life. He started to take photos at the age of eight and is now majoring in photography. His goal is to be self-employed. “As a photographer, I see the beauty in everything. Every day has a photo, waiting to be captured.”

Antoine Marshall

Antoine R. Marshall is participating in the General Studies program at WCCCD. His goal is to become a journalist. “I participated in Reflections because it is something good to add to my resume,” he said.
Judy Ostroski

Judy Ostroski lives in Detroit. She is a student at WCCCD and aims to be an American Sign Language interpreter. She was originally compelled to join the Reflections Magazine project as part of her English class and ended up really enjoying participating. She really liked the assignment and found it was easier than she thought to write. She hopes her story helps someone else along their own journey.

David Palmer

David Palmer, MPA is a multi-disciplinary strategist, facilitator, and consultant. Palmer has spoken at more than 100 conferences in the last six years for several organizations. He has a Master’s Degree in Public Administration from Eastern Michigan University. He is studying journalism at Wayne County Community College District. His long-term goals include systems change, including erasing the digital divide and making quality education a right. When asked why he chose to participate in Reflections, he stated, “I would like this submission to demonstrate the wealth of opportunity our state could develop if but for reasonable investment in public education.”

Valerie Pullom

Valerie Pullom is studying photography at WCCCD as a way to reignite her passion for photography. She participated in this Reflections project because she has gone up against the odds her entire life. She grew up a shy person, worried about what could happen next but was also determined to change the path she was on. When she started college, she had no idea what she wanted to study at first. As a young teenager, she loved photography but didn’t know it at the time, and discovered later in life she could major in it. “From the knowledge I’ve attained and using the skills I’ve acquired, I am pretty proud of the photographs I have taken thus far,” she said.

Rogena Rhoden

Rogena Rhoden is from River Rouge and is studying nursing at WCCCD. She aims to graduate from WCCCD with a Nursing Degree and become a Registered Nurse by Spring 2023. Her submission in the Reflections magazine focuses on the financial struggles of students. “What I thought was a personal weakness turned out to be a great strength, but I know that God is working through me. I’m proud of who I am, even though I never thought that I’d be, but I did it because they said I couldn’t.”
Asmaa Sabir
Asmaa Sabir is from Yemen and is studying Dental Assisting at Wayne County Community College District. Asmaa’s goals are to fulfill her dreams, overcome all obstacles and excel in the future. Asmaa wants a place in society and to help others in need. Asmaa is writing in this magazine to communicate to people an idea that, “No matter how hard life gets, don’t give up, trying and working hard. You will reach your goals. Be patient.”

CaTerra Selley
CaTerra Selley is from Detroit. She is studying Computer Information Systems at Wayne County Community College District and her long-term goal is to be a photo journalist and writer. She has a great passion for art and writing. She aims to be the best she can be.

Paulasia Sims
Paulasia Sims is a Detroit native, born and raised on the Eastside. She is in her junior year at Grand Valley State University (GVSU). She took a year off from GVSU and attended WCCCD for a few semesters. She said she uses her education to beat the odds in her life, having grown up with what she said were “economic challenges and dysfunction.” She lost her brother to murder before she graduated from high school. Despite her tragedies, she continued to pursue her dream of going to college. “After attending the Reflections kick-off session with Charlie LeDuff, I knew I wanted to share a small part of how I am against all odds,” she said.

Timothy Smith
Timothy Smith is from Detroit. He is studying Criminal Justice Corrections at WCCCD and his goal is to work with the mental health population returning to society. He welcomed the invitation by his professor to participate in the Reflections Magazine project.
Eve Cynthia Sohou

Eve Cynthia Sohou is from the Ivory Coast, which is a French speaking country located in West Africa. She moved to the United States to pursue her studies in finance and become an investment banker or financial analyst. She is currently a student at WCCCD where she is studying Business Administration. She also attended the International Institute of the Metropolitan Detroit to improve her English skills. She plans to transfer to the University of Michigan. Her goal is to work on Wall Street. “I wanted to write in Reflections because as an international student, English is a second language and represents a barrier when it comes to writing. So, in order to improve my writing skills, I thought that this program will be very helpful because the more I write, the more I improve.”

Kimberly Marsh Taylor (Jones)

Kimberly Marsh Taylor (Jones) is from Detroit. She is working on her Associates of Arts and Sciences degree. She plans to work on her Master’s Degree in English Literature and become an author and inspirational speaker. She wanted to write in Reflections to experience what it is like to have her writings published and to learn the intricate details of writing professionally. “I look forward to finding my purpose and enjoying my work.”

Crystal Trotter

Crystal Trotter is from Detroit and is studying Fashion Design and Business Administration at Wayne County Community College District. Her long-term goal is to create an international fashion empire that can help and encourage everyone to love themselves. She usually doesn’t show her artwork to anyone, so she decided to push herself and share her art in the Reflections Magazine.

Deborah Trotter

Deborah Trotter is from Detroit. She recently earned her Associates of Arts in Business Administration from WCCCD. She plans to complete her Bachelors of Arts in Public Relations at Wayne State University. Her long-term goals include starting her event planning/PR business. She currently has an online cookie business, Especially Specials. She decided to write for the Reflections Magazine because it is an outlet to contribute creative writing. She wrote often as a child, but slowed down as she grew older. “I would like to continue to use my services to give back to various other non-profit organizations. I am currently in the early stages of planning a conference (for next year) for young girls that teaches them to practice self-care (mentally and physically), good money skills and goal setting,” she noted.
Gabrielle Young

Gabrielle Young is from Detroit and is studying dental hygiene at WCCCD. Her long-term goals are to become a successful hygienist and further her education beyond hygiene school. She wanted to write in the Reflections Magazine because after attending her first meeting and seeing how excited and driven everyone was about the magazine, and hearing stories, it made her want to be a part of it. "I knew the moment that I walked in the meeting that I wanted to be involved," she noted.

OTHER CONTRIBUTORS INCLUDE:

Fuzul Ahmed
Mohammed Alimara
Taylor Banks
Nicole Boykins
Olivia Coleman
Jay’aee Howell
Phillip Johnson
Abeer Omer
Bazlur Rafi
Karibah Rahimee
Gamal Saeed
Charles A. Taylor, Jr.
Sofia Zamora
Missing the Message

by Kimberly Marsh Taylor (Jones)

I woke up again, at first feeling it was a new day full of activity and promise. Eventually the harsh reality of Covid-19 set in as it has done for the past month. Locked down and relegated to what feels like endless days of disinfecting, Netflix, too many naps and numerous trips to the refrigerator that contains the same items it did 20 minutes ago. Stressed and semi-claustrophobic I look for projects that will help retain my sanity. Reorganize the closet, dust the tables, wash the walls or any other thing that lets me forget that the freedom I and many others have taken for granted has been stripped by a deadly and easily transmitted virus, Covid-19.

Week one was like a dream sequence, I didn’t have to get up early. I didn’t have various homework assignments and the rest and relaxation I had yearned for most of my adult life was in large supply. Naps and snacks, snacks and naps filled the initial weeks like a pillow in a pillowcase. However, it is not my nature to rest on my laurels, so the blissful rest turned into annoyance and restlessness. Like most of the world I was watching the news in order to remain informed, looking for the grand announcement that would again make me free. Soon depression filtered in, between leadership that is clearly missing the “leader” part and death tolls reaching the thousands reported every minute of the day. Under normal circumstances, I would just elect not to watch, but this is no time to be one of the uninformed.

Traipsing through Facebook posts and listening to government reports, one thing became obvious — we were completely missing the message. People were complaining about not getting their hair done, not being able to go to the nail salon, being stuck at home watching 55-inch flat screen TVs, playing Xbox on their Apple phones, eating all manner of unhealthy junk food. They were with their families or spouses whom they undoubtedly had not spent that much time with prior to the outbreak, strangers in reality.

But there is a message in all of this. What kind of world do we live in? What kind of people have we become that we can entertain such frivolous concerns in the face of death? The people who have not yet been touched by this deadly virus are still stewing in the pot of materialism and narcissistic values. From politicians to nail technicians, everyone is only concerned about selfish individual needs. Parents are complaining because they have to home school their children, actually making jokes about the poor behavior of their children. Isn’t this the same child who repeatedly received bad progress reports? The same child the teacher constantly has to reprimand for disrupting the class. The same child you insist is being picked on by the teacher, even though your child is grades behind in reading or math levels.

People keep talking about returning to normal, isn’t normal what got us in this situation? The normality of failing to be sanitary has made us all sick. The normality of choosing television media over dinner with our families has us uncomfortable and unable to communicate in these enclosed spaces. The normality of
missing the message

continued

broken, non-communicating marriages held together by paper mache convenience. The normality of relationships dependent on alcohol, promiscuity, social media likes and drugs has some refusing to adhere to the stay-at-home rules. The normality of vain inconsideration has people not wearing masks in public places. The normality of placing more value on some lives, and less on others, like homeless, veterans and the prison populations. The normality of not supporting and empowering our own communities and businesses, but supporting the Chinese businesses, when China saw fit to ostracize every African/black person in their country during this pandemic. The normality of mass media has us desensitized to death yet promotes hypersexuality. The normality of not seeking education to educate and be educated. The normality of the government that places economy above life, governors like the one in Florida who knowingly and willingly spread the virus by opening beaches for spring break during a pandemic. The normality of a president who possesses every sort of discriminatory bias and has no shame in showing or infecting others with it. The normality of women who don’t believe in or see their own beauty unless 27 inches of weave is sewn to their head. No selfies this month! The normality of plundering and pillaging nature and wildlife which has left many species extinct or close to it. The normality of African Americans who have such poor diets and the worst possible health, which makes them the predominant race afflicted by this deadly virus.

In almost every religion, you can find passages that speak to being still or at peace. Now is the time for all of us to be still. To listen, to observe, to understand, so that we as humanity don’t miss the message! What we deemed to be normal must change! What we deemed to be normal is exactly what was killing us. It started way before Covid-19 arrived.
On April 5, 2020, I celebrated my 71st birthday and it has been a challenge for me during this Coronavirus outbreak. While people were wishing me a happy birthday, I was sitting at home afraid for my life. I’m what is deemed an essential worker. I work in the healthcare field. I turned 71 years old, and I have an underlying pre-existing condition which puts me at high risk for contracting the Coronavirus. I go to work every day concerned about what I may bring home to my family or catch myself. Being the manager of a group home is a challenge by itself, even more with Coronavirus. The Governor has enacted a stay at home order that doesn’t apply to me or my client.

The home I work in is considered a behavior home. On a good day, my client acts out, being shut in with them being out of school with no outlet makes it even more difficult. What they get from school is a lot different than what they get at home. They are used to a certain routine, so it’s hard to get them to do something different at home. Trying to incorporate schoolwork at home so far has been a no-starter. They don’t understand why schoolwork is being done at home.

For the home is not the place for schoolwork, home is an escape from school. Here I’m trying to get them to do schoolwork at home.

All essential tasks still must be done regardless of the Coronavirus; the client still must eat which requires me to shop for food, along with supplies to clean the home. I must admit, I’m afraid to go into stores even with protective gear on. I never know what I will bring back to my client or take home to my wife. Just getting to and from work has become challenging, not to mention getting into my work site. For example, upon arriving at work, I’m met at the door by the outgoing staff to have my temperature taken. I’m then asked a series of questions about fever, cough, what crowds I’ve been around, and how I feel in general. If the answers to these questions are positive, then and only then am I allowed inside the home. Upon entering the home, I must discard my mask, gloves and put on new ones, I must then put shoe protectors over my shoes, leave my coat at the door. At this point, I can work.

To add insult to injury, because the company contracts with a mental health agency that is closed, billing has not been done. As a result, when the company doesn’t get paid we don’t get paid. During this time, I’m working with no pay. People are concerned about not getting paid while being off work. What about having to work, and still not getting paid? In the meantime, my clients must be taken care of. It’s not only my job, it’s my calling. I know it’s a trying time now, but this too shall past.
Since the announcement of the expansion and severity of Coronavirus in the United States, my lifestyle has had a radical change. Although I am not someone who likes to be outside all times, I must admit that the spread of this pandemic has influenced my life in many ways.

Speaking about my social life, this pandemic first affected my studies. The courses I used to take on campus have been transferred online. For someone who was not used to taking any online courses, I saw myself with a new challenge which is to understand how online courses are done and how to better understand them. So, I saw my learning style and my study style change.

Another way that Covid-19 impacted my lifestyle is concerning my work and my interaction with my co-workers. Indeed, after the closure of my university on March 14, with fear, I decided to stop working a week later in order to avoid any risk of contamination of the virus. But my last week at work was very difficult because there was a new habit around working with co-workers and clients. I was working in the first shift at McDonald's, from 6 a.m. to 2 p.m. With my co-workers, I used to have a debate with them on some subject when we were not busy at the restaurant. Because English is a second language for me, I did not miss any opportunity to speak with native speakers in order to improve on my learning path. This habit has changed because of social distancing and the need to avoid being in direct contact with others. Some of my colleagues found that I would exaggerate because I would no longer hug or shake hands.

Now because of this virus, I see myself with the obligation to wear a mask and gloves all the time, first for my own well-being and to avoid putting the people I live with in danger.

So, I decided to stop working a week later because even respecting the sanitary measures imposed, I was afraid for my uncle. Scientific studies say that Covid-19 has an adverse affect on adults more than on young people. So, I stopped working, same for my uncle and my auntie and we adopted a new lifestyle. We started our self-quarantine on March 20 and each time we do our grocery shopping, we leave everything outside in the sun for at least two hours before lavishly washing them with hot water before using them.

I must say that this pandemic is a disaster because as of this magazine being published in August of 2020, more than 100,000 people in the USA and more than 365,000 around the world have died. I have a deep thought for all the people who lost a loved one during this pandemic. I firmly believe that the Coronavirus will end soon, and we will become a better world.
Healing in the Time of Corona

by Imara Hyman

He’d come so far. Now my brother Charles is on the “contaminated” floor. From leaving the threshold of death’s door, he is back on her block and we don’t know if he will end up back at her door.

My year started great. I spent part of December and the beginning days of January in Washington, D.C. with my daughter, who left for Ghana on December 26; my grandchildren, both home on break from university, and my great grandchild. This was the first time seeing everyone together in a while and I was elated at being with them before everyone dispersed in the new year. The family visit concluded with my granddaughter and I both leaving D.C. on January 6, 2020.

MICHIGAN STATISTICS JANUARY 10, 2020
= 0 CASES  0 DEATHS

On the morning of January 10, I thought nothing of the number that kept coming up on my phone. It wasn’t a familiar number and each time I checked there was no message. Later that morning, I got a call from my cousin saying Harper Hospital was trying to reach me because my brother Charles was in ICU there, and in dire condition. So from a family high to a family low.

I had not seen or heard from my brother in six months. Though I often called his number, there was never an answer. The last time I called him – with no response – was on New Year’s Day. The last time I saw him was on my mother’s birthday when I gave him a small urn with some of her ashes, a program from her homegoing service and an altar cloth. He had acquired an apartment through a rapid rehousing program for the homeless and had set up housekeeping. We could not find him during her illness and at the time of her death.

This was not his first disappearance from the family. He had disappeared from the home he shared with his wife of 33 years after her death caused a seismic disruption in his life. He returned to drugs and alcohol after more than 30 years clean and sober. During those 30 years, he took care of his family, providing care and medical assistance to a son on dialysis since the age of seven; was a deacon in his church, and well thought of in his neighborhood. All that fell apart when he lost his wife. What remnants left of that life blew...
Healing in the Time of Corona

continued

away with the death of one son and the disappearance of another into the streets of Detroit.

Hanging up from the call, I got ready for the hospital with dread in my heart. I worked hard to keep my mind from sad, negative, or fearful thoughts and focused on getting to the hospital.

Once there, it was no longer my thoughts I needed to control. I had no control over reality and asked, “Lord, you reunited me with my brother to only say goodbye???” Because the reality was my brother laying there in an induced coma with a swollen brain, fluid-filled lungs assisted by a ventilator, a severely damaged liver, and kidneys hooked up to a CRRT (continuous renal replacement therapy) machine to remove the toxins and poisons from his body and hopefully relieve the swelling in his brain. All this, in addition to cellulitis on his legs and feet, which left such deep fissures in his feet that you could almost see the bone. Doctors traipsed in. One in a white coat. One in a $2,000 suit. Their garb may have differed, their effect, as well. One oozed sympathy and concern, while the other was abrupt and dismissive. Both shared the same grim message: there is little to no hope for recovery. Your brother’s body has suffered too heavy an insult. So a new conversation. “GOD, only you know what is to happen with my brother. If your will is to reunite him with his loved ones, then help me do and say what he needs so that he leaves this realm knowing that he was loved. If your will is for him to survive, again, help me to do and say what he needs to know he is not alone, he is loved, and he can heal. Just give me the heart and strength to do what’s right.” Each day I sat by his side, talking to him, reminding him who he is and Whose he is.

Who he is, is the son of Barbara Jean Small Bentley Guy. The woman who raised two children sometimes on her own, sometimes with a partner. The woman who overcame abuse, suicidal impulses, and alcoholism to become a partner in an economically stable household, providing a secure two parent home for us by our teen years. Who he is, is the grandson of Charles Small Sr., who with his brother Sam, walked from Marks, Mississippi to Detroit, replacing the worn leather soles of their shoes with cardboard and newspaper. Whose he is, is a child of God, inheritor of all God’s promises.

So I sat by his side daily, before or after class. I told him I knew he was in conversation with Mom and God and that I would be alright with whatever decision he made. I also reminded

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Born 3 pounds 2 ounces, 1/4 the weight of a 036 Stihl Chainsaw. Who could have imagined I was to become a Lady Lumberjack? Wait, did I just make it seem as though I was born and started cutting down trees? Miles from it. Before I ever knew a chainsaw, destiny made me strong. Torn down, shredded documents, marked for your eyes only.

“She was the tiniest baby ever. Dad could hold her in the palm of his hand.” That’s the story I hear every birthday. “Her appetite rivalled even Pacman so she grew strong quickly.” From infant to a child confused about divorce. Ping ponged between parents-children aren’t the only ones stained by lost love. They live dyed in its unflattering color for a lifetime.

I was bullied for lack of fashionable clothes, unkept hair, just being different. My pronounced widow’s peak earned the nickname, “Eddie Munster,” a werewolf-like TV character who had a huge widow’s peak! I could never write words fitting enough to describe the pain felt because I’m a girl and girls are supposed to be pretty. Unnerved by fear, each day I swallowed the volcano, keeping silent in order to conceal the searing lava of ostracization.

Every word seemed true; I was an ugly monster just like him! Twice as horrifying, I was teased for smelling of urine. As a result of a constant anxiety, I wet the bed for many years, beyond that of any normal child. I had decided not to include this still embarrassing fact but in order to convey the totality of the effects bullying and lack of a loving foundation had on my life, I must be bare. The next years of
school were more of the same. While everyone else was graduating to the next grade level, I was graduating to the next trauma level. Nightmares and tears were my bedtime stories, worried that displacement would come yet again. Wondering if I could outrun the bullies tomorrow. Some days I didn’t. Losing my little brother’s hand as we ran from what sounded like hyenas on the hunt. I was kicked, spit on, punched, scratched, and had my hair pulled. I took it so he could run. We never told anyone!

High school was different, there was no running from the torment. Kicked out for fighting, tired of being bullied. The rest is a self-inflicted blur, mentally I wore dirty glasses. Four high schools later, no diploma with family issues that ended in homelessness. Every trail leaves a film on your emotional state. Over time it builds up, it’s either protective or corrosive. Here I was on the streets of East Detroit – homeless. Life up to now had been sheltered. I did the natural thing, follow the masses. I lived in several places, where a common theme of hopelessness dwelled.

Sheep don’t speak when wolves are about, so I watched and learned. There’s knowledge in everyone even if it teaches you what not to do. The environment was stagnant with its grayish dilapidated houses, reminding me of mop water sitting far too long. Too often someone was shot, robbed or just died. Most residents were older people who had not cared to live anywhere else. Easy pickings. I was out of place, forced to prove myself often. It was a sad existence where the highlight of the day was sharing the cost of 40-ounce beers that sucked the life right out of them face first. Waiting on the first of the month for food stamps and checks, which were gone in as little time as it takes a match to burn. Passionless husk, I knew I didn’t want this.

I started a fight within, bullied myself. I dare you not to complete school. Dared myself not to fall to drinking or drugs. Dared not to let men use me. I was determined not to be like those who hurt me or ended up this way. Determination was a key ingredient for the makings of a lady lumberjack. G.E.D. in hand, I applied for a recreation position with the city of Detroit. One year later I received an offer for the position of recreation aide at a pay rate of $4.01 an hour. That same day, I left the neighborhood I barely survived for two years. When asked where I was going, “I don’t belong here!” I said. They actually tried to bully me into staying. “I eat bullies for breakfast,” I thought and left.

I had a steady job now. I stayed with my dad and stepmother until I saved enough to get an apartment. No more rats running across my legs at night. No sleeping with one eye open and a pocketknife because drunk men take, they don’t ask. Recreation provided me so many memories of kids playing and looking at me with respect. I was not accustomed to this.
“Okay, what will we name it if it’s a boy?” As we sat in the living room, we began to put names out there to consider. After four years of marriage, our second child was on the way. It was time to agree on a name.

“Zeke,” my husband said. My face contorted the way it would at Christmas time when someone is enjoying some variety of walnuts, cashews and filberts, and suddenly gets the taste of a rotten nut.

With eyes squinting, nose curling, mouth agape, I responded: “What? That’s not a name!” I stood motionless. It was one of those moments in marriage that prompted another author to write that book, *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus.*

A look of fearful astonishment and disbelief was still on my face as he answered with a little grin: “It was the name of Bart Starr’s back-up quarterback, Zeke Bratkowski. It’s a cool name!”

It seems funny now. It wasn’t funny then.

“No,” I said, and in my mind, that was that. We were able to agree on another name.

Two years later, our third child was on the way. It was time to consider names again and I had long forgotten our first exchange about boy’s names. To my horror and disbelief, he brought up that name again. What didn’t he understand?

My answer again was, “No!”

“Okay, okay,” he said, yielding to my strong protest. We came up with a good name for that boy, too.

Our fourth child was a girl, our second daughter. Our fifth was another boy. I don’t remember the name Zeke ever coming up. But a time or two through the years, my husband would bring up the subject and interject some comment about what a good name that was. And life went on. It was six years before we became pregnant again with our sixth child. By God’s grace, two very imperfect people had managed 17 years of marriage.
This time my husband asserted himself. “If it’s a boy, we’re naming him Zeke.”

Oh my gosh, there was that name again! I was surprised that it came up again, but instead of fighting, I quieted myself, contemplating this weird desire within my husband.

“Zeke, Zeke, Zeke.” The name turned around in my mind. Zeke sounded a lot like Ezekiel, the name of a prophet in the Bible. Ezekiel. It was a really good name, a strong name. I could see him being called Ezekiel as a man. It was unusual, but it was also very dignified. For the first time, I seriously considered the name, and it wasn’t bad. Actually, it suddenly grew on me.

“Ezekiel,” I said.

“Zeke,” was the reply.

“Ezekiel,” I countered.

“We’ll call him Zeke,” said my husband.

“I’m going to call him Ezekiel,” I said.

“Well, yeah, that will be his name,” he replied. So, if this sixth child of ours was a boy, his name would be Zeke. My husband was satisfied and so was I.

I was 10 weeks pregnant. I disdained some of the ways the medical profession treated pregnancy. For beginners, they always wanted to do testing. I always said no. “I’m having my baby whether it has three legs or six toes, so your testing isn’t necessary.” But somehow they managed to get me to agree to one of their more invasive forms of testing. The test results showed with 100-percent certainty that this baby had Down syndrome. That’s when the battle for his life began. That day was the first day they offered a way out of this pregnancy. “No. Not necessary,” I said. A few weeks later while I was in for another checkup, they had someone to talk to me.

“I always said no. “I’m having my baby whether it has three legs or six toes, so your testing isn’t necessary.”

A woman, professionally dressed, walked in. She wanted me to seriously consider ending my child’s life. But I was here to have a baby, not get rid of it. They were supposed to help me have a safe delivery. I was done with them threatening my unborn child and, to help her see perfectly clearly what she was saying, I changed the words and offered it back to her, “Look, you can kill all your children if you want. Go ahead. Kill ’em all. But we don’t kill ours.”

She didn’t leave the room with any remorse, but she did leave the room. That was the day I realized there were forces against me having this child. Again, a few days or weeks later – I don’t recall how long – one last attempt was made by the well-meaning professionals. I saw Dr. Somebody. His name’s not important. What mattered more was that these professionals would volunteer for the job. They would isolate you and give you their best opinion. Not once did anyone ever come in and tell me about all the wonderful things that children with Down syndrome bring into the world.

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A Path Outside the Projects

Growing up in the projects of west Seven Mile in Detroit is a tough feat for most. The projects are not a place anyone dreams of growing up, but it is survival of the fittest and most people don’t make it out. Most people get stuck in the cycle of the neighborhood. Some people get caught up in drugs and others get caught up in a life of crime, or gang affiliation, which usually ends up with them spending time in jail or even worse, dead. This is the life that I grew up and experienced for 16 long years.

I can proudly say that I am one of the few who decided to take a different path. I chose to make a future for myself that did not include the projects or becoming a statistic. It was not easy by far to walk my own straight and narrow, without any guidance. Growing up as a black boy in a neighborhood, there isn’t much that is given to you, but plenty of things are taken away including resources that could improve living conditions and even the school district which has less programs and sports programs.

I dealt with the adversity of being profiled as a person that I was not, being put down by my own people from family, to older adults that I should have been able to look up to, violence and even was sexually assaulted. All these things occurred in a place where kids should feel as safe as any kid in any suburban neighborhood. The older I became, I realized to make it out, I would have to grow up fast – acting older than my age.

When I was around 9-years-old, I learned that life on Seven Mile in Detroit was not a life I wanted for myself. One evening, on my way home from the store, I was walking my usual route on seven mile then through the alley and straight to my house. Once I made it to the alley, I was approached by a stranger, and what happened to me that day changed me in ways that I couldn’t imagine.
A Path Outside the Projects

continued

When I looked up from tying my shoe, there was a gun in my face and all I could do was freeze and I could hear his voice telling me repeatedly to give him my money. I had no money. I spent food stamps for the groceries and I pleaded for my life and him not to shoot.

That’s when he decided money wasn’t the only thing he could take and that’s when I was sexually assaulted. The feeling of being alone, lost and numb instantly hit me. I couldn’t believe what happened to me in my own neighborhood so close to home. Once he let me go, I ran as fast as I could all the way home. I got home and told my mother and I was in trouble for something I couldn’t control.

I was devastated and it hurt me, I understood that in the neighborhood calling the police was frowned upon. She did eventually call the police and they didn’t make it to the house until the next day. From that day on, I was not the same kid anymore. I was becoming a statistic and didn’t know it; I became closed up and not so kind to others. My face never had a smile anymore, but usually a frown. I had become a product of my environment. It wasn’t until my 16th birthday, when another life changing event happened to me again. I saw one of my closest friends get shot and killed. This made me want to close up more and be more of a product of the neighborhood, but this changed me and made me want to overcome all of the violence, crime and life of the neighborhood. That following week, I saw a school counselor and started getting much-needed counseling. I needed to change my mindset. I needed to stop thinking I would be a statistic. I needed to get out of my neighborhood.

With her help, I graduated from Cass Tech and went on to find work and moved out of that neighborhood. I never looked back. Throughout all odds I don’t look down or am not upset about any of the things I saw or went through. I appreciate it all, because it really did make me proud to be the man I am today and proud to have grown up in the projects of west Seven Mile.

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The thought of heading to the United States was both exciting and scary. Exciting because I would be able to fulfill my dream of studying at a big American University like Harvard, Stanford or the University of Michigan and work at Wall-Street after my graduation. But fear also set in. As a native French speaker, I was petrified about not being able to speak the language.

I thought about America being this amazing place where I would immediately achieve all my goals. I would learn to speak and become fluent in a language many people in my country (the Ivory Coast also known as Cote d’Ivoire) have desired to speak since they were children: English.

At first, everyone knows that being able to speak more than one language is a good skill to have in any field you pursue. English is the most spoken language in the world, so I was excited by the fact I was going to speak it daily and everywhere. But upon arriving in the United States, I was a bit overwhelmed because I suddenly found myself in a situation where I could hardly hold a conversation with other people. It was somewhat frustrating.

From my perspective, everyone spoke English perfectly, and still, so differently that it made it difficult to pay attention, not to mention the speed at which they spoke. I began taking classes which improved my basic understanding and reading level.

However, I now believe that it is best learned by being immersed in conversation with native speakers. Due to my family and school lifestyle, it was often difficult to socialize with the Native speakers. This lack of daily communications kept me from learning language at a faster pace. So, in order to increase my learning ability, I applied for a part-
Determined to Learn the Native Language

continued

In addition to learning English while working, I also took part in the English as a Second Language program (ESL). This program offered a lot of opportunity to improve speech, writing, reading and listening skills. The class involved activities such as reading a book and describing what the book was talking about or listening to an audio and answering questions related to those items. We were also divided in groups. We made presentations and did “role plays”. Another assignment was the one requiring each student in the class to make a 10-minute presentation about his or her country.

We were asked to make the presentation in front of many people in order to improve our speech and speaking skills. I am often complimented on how well I have picked up the language. At school in my ESL class, I even helped the professor instruct the class and assisted classmates.

As a fan of music and romance drama, I was also able to improve my speech and English level just by listening or watching drama subtitles in English. By doing that, I progressively improved my understanding and listening skills. This also helped me with learning new words. I was also able to spell out the words I heard because I was used to listening and reading the subtitles.

From my perspective, everyone spoke English perfectly, and still, so differently that it made it difficult to pay attention, not to mention the speed at which they spoke.

In my way of accomplishing my path, I realized that these opportunities were very helpful in getting me to speak about learning the language and getting used to my new life.

I am focused on learning and mastering English so I can achieve my dream.
Sanjuanita Alvarez is 43-years-old and the person who taught me something very important about life: Follow your dreams even though there can be obstacles and people who will push us down. Her life’s story is the reason she is the person I admire the most.

Sanjuanita was born in Monterrey, Mexico and she is the only child of Esau and Sanjuana Alvarez. Growing up, her dream as a child was to be a singer. As she got older, she realized what she wanted to do and who she wanted to be. She realized her dream was to be a teacher or a child psychologist, but she had to cut her dream.

At the age of 18, she had to drop her dreams because she got married and moved to the United States of America. Moving to a foreign country she had to leave everything behind like her friends and family. She has two children, one son and one daughter and they survived domestic violence from her first husband. After 10 years, she had the courage to get divorced even though she had nothing and didn’t know English. She was so worried about what she would do because she had two kids. She had to start her new life. At first, she started to value herself and bring her self-esteem up and then had the courage to start to learn English. She worked as a food service assistant at Maybury Elementary School and the principal of the school she worked at noticed the potential in her. The principal knew that she could do more than be a food service assistant, so she recommended her to go and get her certificate to be a teacher’s assistant. After she got her certificate to be a teacher assistant, she wanted to do more to achieve her long-time dream. So, she started to attend Wayne County Community College District without even knowing that much English and struggled a lot because of it.

She met her now longtime friend Darius Casey, a Detroit Public School teacher coordinator, while working at Amelia Earhart Elementary Middle School. As time went by, Darius saw the potential in her and decided to help her and be her mentor. He helped her get into college, helped her with her English, and was there for her as a friend.
Never Too Old to Follow Your Dreams

continued

Thanks to his help she was able to graduate with honors and get her Associate of Arts degree, then a bachelor’s degree at Wayne State University. Right now, she is working at Escuela Avancemos Academy with her certification. She worked as a long-term substitute, office administrative assistant, office coordinator, and now she works in different classrooms to get her certification as well as being in charge of testing the students.

She is still studying and wants to get a degree in Elementary Education with a major in Early Childhood Education. She wants to enjoy her career and enjoy the rest of her life, as she struggled a lot to get to where she’s at. Even though she is achieving her dreams later on in her life, she wants people to know that you are never too old to get what you want and who you want to be. She inspires me when I am facing obstacles and think I can’t do it or it’s too hard. I think of her and am reminded, she had to learn everything in a different language and in a different country. She did it on her own but also with help. She inspires me to be the best that I can be and follow my dreams and achieve them with great honors, and to not be ashamed to ask for help when I need it.
On September 21, 2014, every dream of the Yemenis to establish a modern democratic civil state fell into an armed group that would control the state. It was only days until the world cut diplomatic ties, embassies exited and were closed off from Yemen.

Then the war started, eating the green and dry land. Every day was punctuated with the sound of explosions and airplanes in the sky of the capital, Sana’a. Kidnappings and deaths were daily occurrences. Horror was a camp in the hearts of Yemenis. Life was crippled; airports, land and seaports were closed to Yemenis. There was only one port we could use to flee the devastation.

I decided to travel with friends from the port of Mokha, heading to Djibouti, a country that was accepting Yemenis. We rented a car from Sana’a en route to Mokha. We were excited about this trip, but we did not realize who and what would face us on this dangerous journey. The road from Sana’a to Mokha was paved with militants. It took us 10 hours to reach Mokha.

It was surprising that the city of this port does not have any elements of life in it. There are no hotels or restaurants but a place where they can provide light meals. We did not find a place to stay, so we went to the mosque, which was open during the day until night. After seven o’clock at night, the mosque official asked us to leave. We were allowed to sleep in the courtyard of the mosque until the mosque official opened it for prayer at 5 a.m. We entered to pray and stayed there.

When the warm sun rose, we went to find food and the tour operator that was responsible for the death trips that carry life. The price of a ride on that ship was about $200, much more than the cost of a flight. But the flight time wasn’t until five o’clock in the evening.

To our surprise, the ship carried cows and we had to sit near the cows. The sight was unbelievable and the smell unbearable. They put stationary covers on the floor so we could
The Journey of Death That Carries Life

continued

sit there. We sat onboard for more than two hours waiting for the ship to move. I was put in charge of the ship passenger list and checked to make sure all 400 passengers had passports.

After we finished the check in, the ship started sailing at nearly 10 p.m. As soon as we walked for two hours, we scratched all over our bodies because of the lice that the cows had attracted. There was no food but a little bread and beans. The cargo was large, so the ship was moving horribly right and north until the ship’s official asked that we move passengers around until there was a balance in the ship.

The sun shone the next day while we were in the middle of the sea. We could not sleep that night because of the smell and the itching. At about ten o’clock in the morning, two warships intercepted us. Everyone was scared and I heard some crying. The warships sent a small boat carrying soldiers to search the ship for a quarter of an hour before they allowed us to pass. You could see the relief on people’s faces.

An hour later, we began to see the port of Djibouti. Everyone was smiling and happy and some started taking pictures of the ship, as they were happy to leave it. But we did not know that we were only beginning our sad journey. We arrived in the port of Djibouti at one o’clock in the afternoon. The scorching weather was so unforgettable that it chills me to mention it. I couldn’t speak because of the thirst and hunger. We waited an hour until we found water that I cannot forget. Its temperature was very high and they gave us a plate of food on a dish for 10 people. Each of us could reach for food only once.

For the first time, I felt the earth revolving around me, exhausted after 17 hours on the ship. Surprisingly, we did not find any humanitarian organizations to help us. What brought us to tears was the news we could not enter Djibouti until someone came to authorize entry.

I wished I had not taken this tortuous trip. The American and European citizens had it much easier. Their embassies received them, prepared food and drink for them and provided

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I couldn’t speak because of the thirst and hunger.

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hotels without any issues. Meanwhile, we sat until seven o’clock at night and could not enter. Finally, a person of Yemeni origin named Abu Omar, a resident of Djibouti, took our passports from us and some other people and then entered the port authority to give us the entry visas. After one o’clock in the morning, we got the visas.

We took a bus to its last stop and got off. The place was very lonely and there were stray dogs scattered everywhere. We waited a quarter of an hour until a man arrived and took us in his car to search for a hotel. But all the hotels were filled. The city was very small and the hotels there were so few that we floated around the city for an hour. After a lot of research, we found a room which I think was used for storage.

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In 1979, Saddam Hussein rose to power in Iraq. In the beginning, everything in the country was running smoothly until Hussein decided to start wars with all of the neighboring countries. My father was still young and was drafted into the army, then later sent to a camp in the middle of a desert. Eventually, he was sent to America as a refugee with no family. Against all the odds, my father overcame all the obstacles and agonizing mental trauma and still built a successful family.

My father, Arshad Alimara was born in 1964 in Hila, Iraq. My father was raised with eight sisters and three brothers and worked at a young age to support his family. As he grew older, he acquired the skills to become a blacksmith. As a young aspiring blacksmith, my father was ready to get married, but at the time Saddam had just gotten into power. A couple years into his ruling, wars broke out with all his neighboring countries. My father was drafted into the army and had to delay his marriage.

He served for the Iraqi army for almost 10 years, and in the duration of him serving, my father lost his mother and lost his eldest brother, which made him abandon the thought of marriage. The circumstances in Iraq were getting worse with a seemingly endless war and the Iraqi people had enough. In 1990, there was a revolution to overthrow the government in which my dad and most of the Iraqi population participated in. The revolution came with many casualties and prisoners, my father and 34,000 others were neither. They were actually all kicked out of the country and forced out of Iraq through the Saudi Arabia border.

Rafha is a city in Saudi Arabia where all the Iraqis ended up. Rafha was nothing more than a hot desert with snakes and scorpions. Some Iraqis died on their way there; some were killed upon arrival, and some went back to Iraq and were sent to prison. The Saudi government did not know what to do with them, so they built big camps and put
everyone in them. Families were all in subdivisions. My father's family was uninformed about him being in the camps of Rafha and had thought he was killed during the revolution. Unable to contact any of his family members, my father continued his life as a stranger. Between all of the people he made plenty of new friends that he still knows to this day. He struggled through the heat and the sandstorms in the desert for six years. Not to say any of this was good but he did however learn a lot in the camps of Rafha. My father was never taught how to pray or about proper manners. But most of all, Rafha taught him how to be independent, something he needed for the years to come.

In 1996, my father received news from the United Nations that he was going to be sent to the United States as a relief from the camps. He was first sent to Texas and luckily he had his friends from his home town who were already there and were able to receive him. My father finally was able to reach out to his family and when they heard the news, everyone cried tears of pure joy. After a year of living in Texas, my father moved to Boston, MA and worked at a gas station and saved up money to get married again and start a new life. In 1998, he married my mother and moved to Michigan where my mother's family lives. In the year 2000, he bought his first house and had his second child with my mother. The years passed and now my father has a successful trucking company, children, and is still married to the love of his life.

"Rafha was nothing more than a hot desert with snakes and scorpions. Some Iraqis died on their way there..."

My father's story is an “Against All Odds” story. He overcame the difficulties of war and the loss of loved ones but still managed to thrive in a foreign country where he did not even speak the native language. My father has shown me that no matter how many obstacles get thrown your way, you can overcome them. These were my dad’s challenges and life lessons for me; ones I will never forget.
Saying Goodbye to My Sister

Grieving the loss of a sibling who upheld and advised me throughout my life was difficult.

Having a big sister was a blessing. She took the place of my mother after my mother died.

No matter where life takes you, a sister is by your side. Whatever the circumstances, she is there. After she passed away, life changed for me. Everything my sister and I planned together, to make the impossible, possible for each of us - to achieve our goals - kind of died with her.

During the first year she got married, her life was filled with happiness because she found the right man for her; she loved him and her life.

However, that was not always the case. She was in her fourth year of college when she quit. It was before she married. I was curious why she stopped studying. I worked up the courage to ask her why she stopped so close to reaching her goal. She replied, with a great conviction, “sometimes life forces you to leave things you never imagined you would have to leave.”

She continued saying, “I want to share with you some things that I have benefitted from over my four years in college that I think will help you.”

She went on to tell me to always be myself and make wise friends, know what you want to be and how you want it to be. She told me to never stop reaching my goals no matter what challenges I face.

Listening to her rules on life strengthened me and my weaknesses.

After our mother died, I was sitting in my mom’s room with so much darkness and I was crying alone. My sister opened the door and stared at me and her eyes were full of tears. She came close to me, near our mom’s chair, the one I was sitting in, and said to me, “Don’t cry. I’m here for you my little sister; your tears are precious to me.”

She gave me that big hug and I felt that my mom didn’t pass away. A year later, my sister
shared good news, she was pregnant. I was excited because a new gift would be coming to our family.

Entering her eighth month of pregnancy, my sister was in a good health and her birth was getting closer. However, she started getting childbirth pain too early. At the hospital, a gynecologist examined her trying to figure out why she was having the pain sooner than expected.

The doctor told us that the condition of the mother and the baby was very critical and she needed surgery as soon as possible.

After three hours in surgery, the doctor came to us and said “unfortunately we tried our best to save them both but...We lost the mom.” That was the second shock after mom’s death. The doctor said it was because of some medical issues – heavy bleeding and defect in the placenta.

My sister, my life-long companion, best friend, was gone.

I shared so much with this beautiful sister of mine: laughter, tears, playtime, and even quarrels. However, minutes after those arguments, all was forgotten and we were back to being true sisters.

I go through life drawing on those memories with my sister. She has passed now, with the Lord, and I am here yearning for the same friendship that may never happen.
Many people say they have been through a lot. You face obstacles in everyday life. Just being alone is one, depression creeps up on you, also anxiety. So, you try to take steady steps in life to achieve a goal you’ve been working towards. You plan out your entire life, and what you want to do with it.

My auntie is a great person and someone to look up to; she always told me to stay in school and get my life together. I saw her go to school and earn multiple degrees from Wayne State. While she was still in school, she was there every step of the way for the family. When my brother passed away, I felt like I didn’t have any guidance in my life. She told me to keep my head up and visualize that he is still here telling me right from wrong. She’s a strong and caring woman. I watched her take care of my grandmother and my other aunt at the same time. She said “anything is possible; you just have to take the negativity out of the situation and stay positive.”

After my grandmother died, she was still standing strong and was still there to help the family through the struggles. The last time I saw my grandmother alive was when she was laying on her bed at her house barely saying anything but hearing what we were saying. She helped me get the tools I needed for my job; she always helped me financially. My aunt is the best person for me to have on this planet because without her most of my family would be living on the streets and not trying to get anything out of life. Just learning from her lets me see the world differently and makes me want to work harder to get my degree and to pursue my music career. I am blessed to have her in my life. She’s one of a kind and no one could ever replace her from this earth. She’s inspiring, knowledgeable and a remarkable person.
Aisha Begum, 45 would be described as a woman who has lived a life of hardship. She is a single mother of four. She has struggled her whole life raising her children.

My mom worked even harder than she needed just to give us more than the basic necessities.

Over the years, I’ve watched her struggle to put food on the table and clothes on our backs. Despite everything she was faced with, still she managed to provide us with all our needs.

I remember back in Bangladesh, when I was 12 years old, my mom bought new clothes for me and for my two younger brothers to wear on Eid, but she couldn’t afford to buy new clothes for herself and for my sister.

I remember my mom was cooking in the kitchen and my sister was asking my mom, “Mom you gave them new clothes, where is mine? What am I going to wear on Eid?”

Eid al-Fitr, also called the “Festival of Breaking the Fast” is a religious holiday celebrated by Muslims worldwide that marks the end of the month-long dawn-to-sunset fasting of Ramadan.

My mom said with tears in both her eyes, “I’m sorry that we can’t wear new clothes this Eid. I just don’t have the money for it. I gave them new clothes because their clothes were cheap, but I’ll make it up to you though.”

My sister was angry and disappointed. My sister said to my mom, “I just couldn’t understand why we weren’t having a normal Eid.” She then went back to her room.

My sister directed all her anger to my mom because at the time it was the only thing that seemed right. That night, I saw my mom crying in the living room. I’ve never ever seen my mom so hurt and disappointed. I ran to her and hugged her so tight.

I could tell she was crying. Her eyes were red, the tears that rolled down half her face dried up and left stains. Her voice was full of cracks.

I remember on my 18th birthday, I invited all of my friends and relatives to come to my birthday party. I was full of joy, excitement and ready to open the presents my mom bought me.

The day everyone was coming over, I woke up early. I ran downstairs to the living room where I met all of my friends, relatives, and my siblings. They were all wishing me happy birthday, shaking my hand, and hugging me.

My mom wasn’t there to wish me a happy birthday. I checked the kitchen to see if my mom was there but she wasn’t. Then I ran to my mom’s room to see if she was sleeping but she wasn’t there either.

“Where is mom at?” I asked my sister. My sister was quiet and she didn’t even say a word.
I said, “Wherever mom’s at, she got me a present because it ain’t in her room. I already checked everywhere else.”

Then I started to search the whole house hoping to find either my mom or the present because I didn’t want to believe that there would be no present on my birthday.

I checked everywhere and couldn’t find my mom or the present. I went back to my room and started crying. Few hours later, my sister knocked on my door. I opened the door. She said “Look out the window, mom is outside.”

I looked out the window and I saw my mom sitting outside crying hysterically. I turned around and began to cry as well. I heard the front door open and shut. I ran downstairs. When I reached the bottom of the stairs, I saw my mom in the kitchen. I could tell she was crying. Her eyes were red, the tears that rolled down half her face dried up and left stains. Her voice was full of cracks. She began to speak, “I’m really sorry that I don’t have money to buy you a birthday present.”

In the years to follow, I started to realize that it’s not the material things that she can or can’t provide us with that matter. Those things are actually meaningless. My mom did all the hard work all these years all on her own. She managed to provide us with all our needs and even our wants. Even when she couldn’t afford to buy for herself, she made sure we had food, clothes, and an education.

There are so many things I’ve learned by watching my mother. I’ve learned over the years how to become a better and stronger person. I’ve learned what it feels like to be at the bottom and that gives me the natural ambition and desire to strive for much more in life.

I’ve experienced many struggles and hardships that I’ve overcome and it has formed the young man you see today. I’m so grateful to God for all the strength he has given to me and the lessons he made me realize. The only thing that matters in life is love, appreciation, and hard work.
Still Standing

Being a mother is one of the hardest and greatest jobs a woman can have. There’s no instruction manual for motherhood; you learn as you go. As a mother, you do what you must to ensure that your children have what they need to succeed. My mother has made many sacrifices for my siblings and me, for which I’m very grateful. As children, we don’t understand the struggles our parents are facing until we’re older. My mother had to juggle a lot of things by herself and still raise us.

My mother dealt with single motherhood, financial struggles, depression, and anxiety while maintaining the household. Having anxiety and depression can make anyone want to give up on themselves and their responsibilities because it’s too hard and they can’t cope. Some people don’t get proper help, which can lead to serious problems later. Depression can make a person feel as though they have nothing to live for. It takes the joy out of your life. Many people with depression find it hard to function because it lowers your ability to perform everyday tasks. Anxiety can make a person feel an extreme amount of panic and nervousness. People with anxiety often have panic attacks which can make the body feel as if it is dying.

They get short of breath, dizzy, feel tightness in the chest, and often need medical attention to stop the attack. In the middle of fighting depression and anxiety, my mother still got up, cooked, cleaned, helped us with our homework and maintained the house. But sometimes it was a little hard to stay positive and get through her everyday tasks and still give us 100 percent. But, with prayer and help from her medication, she was able to get through on most days. There were also financial hurdles my mother had to overcome going from two incomes to one.

Things could get expensive with all the bills, groceries, clothes, and housing for seven people. My mother had to budget a lot and find alternatives so we could stay afloat and she could care for us. I remember we had to go to local food pantries and churches to get a little extra food if the budget was tight that month. I never saw a hungry day because my mother was not too proud to get help. She was willing to do what was needed to be done to feed and clothe us. Every day wasn’t always rough. We received a lot of help from other family members and even strangers who just wanted to lend a hand. I had a good childhood and many happy memories. I don’t think I would have such happy memories without my mother’s sacrifices. My mother isn’t perfect, but I was loved, and she raised me the best way she knew how.

“There’s no instruction manual for motherhood; you learn as you go.”

by Nicole Boykins
When Seizures Get a Hold of Your Brain but Not Your Life

by Taylor Banks

Overcoming an obstacle can be very rewarding. Being against all odds includes when the doctor can’t calculate what’s wrong with you and that was the case with my little brother. Since he was 7-years-old, he has been battling with peculiar outbursts that he never before experienced. He has been to numerous doctors including neurologists, and pediatricians throughout the city of Detroit. My brother was having episodes of blackouts where he couldn’t remember what happened. Each blackout would last about 15 seconds to a minute. When he first started having these traumatic episodes, we thought he was horsing around. As he got older, the episodes became more violent and uncontrollable. These episodes are called Grand Mal Seizures.

Grand Mal Seizures are usually caused by epilepsy, but may have other triggers, such as very low blood sugar, high fever, or a stroke. In my brother’s case, he didn’t have any of those. We could not figure out where these bizarre occurrences were stemming from.

A sleep study was performed at Children’s Hospital when the episodes became more frequent. During the sleep study, he had a spasm and the test had shown that his body does this when he is under pressure, excited, or confused, according to physicians.

The brain is sending signals to his body and the brain waves are basically shocking him. He always told me afterwards that his head hurt. I realized then that my brother was in pain every time this was happening to him. The medicine that the doctors had gave him was not effective. The seizures became violent. He has broken several phones, TVs and would have destroyed his game system if I wasn’t there to grab it.

My brother knows his condition and makes light of it by joking about it because he thought that he was going to live with this forever. When he turned 15, we realized that the blackouts were starting to slow down. The fewer he had, the happier our family was. However, we never handicapped my brother because of his condition.

The situation has gotten better now that he is a young adult. In September of 2020, he will be turning 21. He has been seizure-free since sixteen. I can honestly say my brother is against all odds. Despite what he has been through, he never let that stop him from enjoying life and pursuing his goals.
I always loved the English language, but considered learning it impossible and limited to a specific group of people.

In high school, when I traveled to the United States, I decided to learn the English language.

I reached a point where I was convinced I would not be able to proceed in building my future without learning to speak English; it is part of all aspects of life and how people work around me. It is the primary language in the United States, so I started trying and reading books and writing words so I wouldn’t forget them.

Despite the fact the English language is still difficult for me, I strive hard to learn it no matter the challenges. I suffered from forgetfulness, despite my enthusiasm, finding it difficult to memorize and retrieve words when I needed them. I often felt frustrated for a long while until I tried again and began to see a great improvement. When I saw the results, I became more excited and began to memorize quantities of English words and also translate more and more words. Every new word I saw, whether on a street advertisement or written on a wall or somewhere else, I looked up the meaning and was determined to learn it.
Unfortunately, I did not get enough encouragement from the people around me. I ignored them because I was determined to expand my knowledge, not just with the language but also the culture and religions in the United States.

It was difficult to assimilate because some people look at us strangely because of what we wear. It is customary for women to wear a veil called a niqab or the hijab. We do not typically wear it at home. It is only an outer garment we wear when leaving the house; it depends on our civilization and culture, so what we wear is what all people wear but not in public places. The niqab, which covers the face, is not required to be worn abroad, but we are used to wearing it in our country. It is part of our culture although not obligatory.

All countries have different customs and cultures. This does not frustrate me because these traditions distinguish me from others; it shows my culture. I will not consider that a hindrance to continue living or teaching in this country, whatever the people’s views and thinking about us and our civilization.

Everyone follows what she or he was brought up with including their culture and religion. I am proud of who I am. And I hope people will understand that too and stop looking at us like we are from outer space. Our clothing is a choice, yet we are often misunderstood because of our garments.

I had an embarrassing and funny situation while studying English. As we all know, it is not easy to pronounce words well if the language is different from ours. While entering high school, I knew nothing about English, and the majority of the school spoke English, especially the teachers. When I wanted to go to a place outside the class, I used to talk to the teacher in Arabic, my native language, because I did not know how to address him well enough in English to be understood. But he was able to understand me by my movements. Everyone was surprised.

People would ask the teacher: “How do you understand what she said?” They would laugh because the teacher would try to guess from my movements and the word of English I would mix in with Arabic.

At times when we were reading, I would utter wrong words that had another meaning, which embarrassed me but prompted laughter at the same time. Despite that, everyone encouraged me in school, especially the teachers. They gave me advice and books to read. Today, I am getting better and learning more. I will continue until I fully and correctly learn the English language.
Those who care about children, education, workforce opportunity, high-wage jobs and the future of the State of Michigan must unite to amend the State Constitution, adding a right to a quality education.

This quality component added to Article VIII, Section 2, must include language to force the Michigan Legislature to fully fund a quality public education in every community, and define public education as exclusively not-for-profit, promulgated only in the public interest.

For decades, Michigan has been slipping down the rankings of U.S. states with declining industry, population, birthrate, and education outcomes. Most Michiganders have adjusted to a lower quality of life than their parents and grandparents, not because they wanted to, but because they had little choice.

Almost zero legislative innovation, negative investment, and tax breaks for business and wealthy neighbors have yielded the current state of affairs. Legislative atrophy has resulted in bad roads, bad water, a well-developed school to prison pipeline, and some children graduating while functionally illiterate. A small forest has likely been destroyed printing the sheer volume of reports, analysis, surveys, and punditry surrounding Michigan’s structural challenges from sources local, national, and international. Now we grapple with possibly the greatest challenge in modern American history: the social and economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Over the years, term limits have extinguished state legislative institutional memory. In other words, most State Representatives and Senators are incapable of fixing the problem of quality education because they perpetuate plausible deniability arguments: “it’s not my fault,” or “the problem is too expensive to fix.” We have heard excuses time and again. By design, novices and amateurs (even if well-intended) are charged with electing leadership in the State House who, with few exceptions, can have no more than four years of experience writing and approving an annual $56+ billion budget.

While residents of Michigan have the right to a public education, it is unfortunately the policy of the state of Michigan, the residents don’t have the right to a “quality” public education. Former Attorney General Bill Schuette argued this on behalf of the state in 2014, and won his argument in the Michigan Court of Appeals against students in Highland Park. Those students had been robbed of a quality education by an “emergency manager” who reported to then Governor Rick Snyder.
Amend the Constitution to Improve Education

continued

For context, here are a few points regarding the declining quality of education in Michigan, via expert reporting and analysis from Bridge Magazine:

Michigan ranks dead last in K12 investment between 2005 – 2014, declining 7%, when funding increased 3.6% nationally.

Student performance has rapidly declined across the board. Michigan 4th grade reading skills fell from 28th in 2003, to 41st in 2015.

Over $100 million is spent every year on college level remedial instruction.

A 70% decline in university enrollment for new teachers has been realized in Michigan between 2009 – 2017. The destructive politics surrounding education policy has effectively poisoned the well for new teachers.

Another helpful bit of context, the following tenets of a quality education are based on the author's experience as a political scientist and a workforce development systems expert:

• Proficiency in reading and arithmetic,

• Digital and financial literacy, with access to broadband internet and technology in the home,

• Soft skills exposure and attainment including: timeliness, presentation skills, and awareness of social norms,

• Critical thinking inspired by broad-based, cross-cultural, experiential learning,

• Career awareness exploration, and appreciation for life-long learning.

Denied a quality education, students in communities of color (and even in poor white communities), have experienced a dramatic increase in long-term unemployment, creating structural obstacles to housing, work, and unreachable auto insurance premiums that further depress labor market opportunity.

Now we grapple with possibly the greatest challenge in modern American history: the social and economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Regardless of race, the zip code one is born in is a greater indicator of one’s life-time earning potential than many other factors. Life-time earning is directly correlated to access to a quality education. One could make a strong case, in fact, that Jim Crow has found his way into Michigan law, with hardly a finger lifted in opposition by the Michigan Legislature in the six years since the Highland Park case.

Even though legislators and governors have campaigned on the importance of public education for decades, our challenges continue and grow. Michigan voters, however, have the power to demand that every child receives a quality education.

A template exists for voters to take education prioritization into their own hands. In 2018, an amazing thing happened. Actually, according to the pundits and political wonks in Michigan, an impossible thing happened that year.

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Genocide in Disguise

by Antoine Marshall

Genocide is right smack in your face but yet you cannot see it. The new era of genocide is disguised behind a lack of suitable education and financial stability. There is a better way to kill us and that’s through lack of resources.

During the early 20th century, a prominent concentration of African-American businesses in Tulsa, Oklahoma became known as the Black Wall Street. African-American business owners, educators and others worked hard to create a beautiful life the right way. During a race riot on May 31 and June 1, 1921, 300 African-Americans were killed and hundreds more injured. The neighborhood was demolished within hours.

In West Philadelphia, a group was founded in 1972 known as the freedom fighters. The freedom fighters were seen as a radical terrorist group. On May 13, 1985, they were bombed on U.S. soil.

This is a prime example of a group of young minorities fighting against oppressors and trying to build their community. The group wanted the same resources and opportunities for their own people and were tired of the disrespect because of the color of their skin. This is the real reason these freedom fighters were killed.

Genocide occurs when one race feels another race is inferior and is able to enforce and adjudicate laws to cut into their livelihood. There are many ways to kill a race of people. One way is to take away their hope for a better life.

Without a sense of history, it is easy to fall trap to genocide because the destruction is accomplished through multiple yet subtle means. People are not blatantly coming into African-American communities and killing minorities like the riot in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Instead, a new form of genocide is occurring right under our noses fueled by a weapon of sorts that’s been prevalent since the 1970s. Drugs. Illegal drugs have helped destroy African-American families.

There are other factors helping to destroy African Americans. Many are denied access to quality food and health care. They lack safe, decent housing and often the proper financial literacy to help elevate their standard of living.

Another form of genocide is to damage a race’s education system. If you take away education, you can destroy the community overnight. Lack of education means people must accept whatever they are given or told. They can even lock people up for crimes they
did not commit, or lock them up for petty misdemeanors while others only receive a slap on the wrist for the same offenses. If you kill their spirit, they become zombie-like within their own community.

How do we as African Americans fight back against a system not created for us? First, we must continuously educate ourselves and those around us. Education does not begin in the schools, nor does it end with the schools. We have to seek out and do a better job with financial literacy, financial independence and financial responsibilities with how and where we spend our money.

Finding information can be as easy as a click of a mouse. Once you have learned something that can benefit your community, it is your responsibility to bring back what you’ve learned to help build your community.

We cannot sit around expecting politicians and others to deliver us to the Promised Land. Freedom starts with changing the way we think. The formula for a successful community existed 100 years ago in Tulsa, Oklahoma. It is time we recreate that success.
Financial aid affects many college students because it can cause students to withdraw in the middle of a semester, delaying their progression towards degree completion. Withdrawing also could hurt a student’s eligibility for aid received from the MD State Scholarship Commission, UMBC merit scholarships and awards from private donors.

Financial aid is typically applied to the student account at the beginning of each semester with the assumption they’ll remain enrolled for the term. If a student withdraws from all their courses before completing at least 60 percent of a semester, they may become ineligible for a substantial portion of the aid they were awarded for that term.

Many students take advantage of government funding. Federal student aid, in the form of grants and federal student loans, is intended to help students pay for the cost of higher education and living expenses.

At times, however, students are offered an excess of subsidized federal student loans, more than they need to cover the cost of education and rent. Instead of taking only the amount of loans they truly need each year, students sometimes accept the maximum loan amount they are eligible for, even if they don’t need the money. Why? Often, the justification is that student aid is just free government money and federal student loans offer lower interest rates than rates from private personal loans found at banks. But instead of putting the funds towards the cost of living, some students go on weekly shopping trips with friends, buy Christmas gifts for friends and family and even buy cars with their student aid.

Ultimately, the reason for this financial recklessness and disregard for the government assistance is that these students are financially illiterate and do not comprehend the long-term impact of their actions. Many low-income students are sometimes not qualified for financial aid which results in them being unable to attend colleges due to lack of recruiting.

"Students should stop taking advantage of the government system/programs because they have ensured each individual get a better education to become the next best thing of this generation."

Former President Obama outlined his proposal to offer two years of free community college tuition for students. Or as he put it in a speech, “Lower the cost of community to zero.”

There are consequences for defaulting on student loans while federal loans are generally more lenient than most others. But repercussions for defaulting on federal student loans are much more severe than for most other debts. If Direct Loan payments are due monthly, default will occur after 270 days (about nine months) of missed payments. If payments are due less frequently than monthly, default occurs after 330 days of missed payments (about 11 months). However, a Perkins Loan is in default as soon as a payment is missed or there is a violation of any term of the payment agreement.
Many students abuse financial aid and I believe this is unfair to society because the students who are less fortunate rarely get the opportunity to attend colleges. Students should stop taking advantage of the government system/programs because they have ensured each individual gets a better education to become the next best thing of this generation.

I expect that people who receive financial aid help produce an increase in educational attainment rates. Despite having the best grades and work ethic, a student who is unable to pay for college will be unable to continue their education. This seems so obvious, and yet many students struggle to fund their education. Many students and their families try their hardest to make college a reality, but are often unable to sustain such great expenses year after year.

I believe it is the government’s responsibility to be up front with students about the potential costs of each college. This knowledge will help them to make more informed decisions.

Government counselors should discuss the affordability with students, and ask them to have a candid conversation with their parents about how their family can truly afford to pay out of pocket. I feel very confident that the government will be able to advise students to attend schools where they will thrive academically and have the financial means to persist long enough to reach their goal of receiving a college degree.

Letting others determine your goals and dreams is a losing proposition. People tend to tell you what you can’t do rather than what you can. Such negativity serves no purpose other than to limit your possibilities.

When people tell you your dreams are not attainable, you will feel lonely, less confident, and depressed. Without encouragement, it’s easy to think; “Why am I doing my best when no one believes in me?”

Most of us have had doubts put into our heads. When I was almost 4-years-old living in Yemen, I was preparing to go to America. At that age, according to my mother, I was a very talkative and intelligent girl. I would always tell my friends, family and even strangers about my dreams.

My dreams were very extraordinary. But no one believed I would be able to achieve them. They would say “You will never be able to achieve your dreams, no matter what you do. Wherever you go, even if you travel throughout the whole world, you won’t be able to achieve your dreams.”

I would always feel sad when they told me that. When I asked why, they would respond: “Because you are a girl, you won’t be able to do these things. You won’t have enough time.”

I was determined to prove them wrong. I wanted people to know that no matter what your gender, you can achieve anything through determination and perseverance. My family and friends just didn’t know anyone can do anything, even if it’s considered impossible.

The negative feedback I received in America had me thinking about giving up. But I remembered a quote I had read, “Believe in yourself and you will be unstoppable” by Emily Guay. I decided to adapt my own version: “Believe in yourself and Allah and you will be unstoppable.”

I have overcome the negativity of others and continue to strive to achieve my dreams. I aim to be a dentist, to open two dental clinics, one in Yemen and one in Detroit. But, my biggest dream is to open a business to help all the poor people of the world. I am doing my best to do the impossible with the help of Allah, because Allah makes the impossible, possible.

I have studied hard, day and night, to achieve my dreams and all thanks to Allah, I received good grades in middle and high school. Hopefully, in college, I will try to keep my GPA at 3.0. In the future, I will never lose confidence in myself and will do my best to achieve my dreams because I know what I am doing will not only benefit myself and my family, but hopefully other people in the world.
Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson: Behind His Success

by Bazlur Rafi

Dwayne Johnson is also known as The Rock. He was born on May 2, 1972, in Hayward, CA. Dwayne Johnson is an American actor, producer, investor, and retired professional wrestler.

He became famous for his iconic role in the wrestling industry known as World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). Mid-journey, he decided to join part-time acting in Hollywood. Now he’s in the worldwide Megastar.

The fame did not come easily, though. Johnson traveled a road of difficulties and failures for many years. Others can learn from Johnson, how he overcame all the odds, and how he chased his dreams and gained success.

At the age of 14, Johnson was the only one to carry his family financially. They were living in an apartment in Hawaii. He and his family had a little income and so paying rent became impossible. Rent was due weekly. When the family was evicted, Johnson had $7 in his pocket. He was helpless but he knew he couldn’t give up.

Because of their struggles, the family had to move out of Hawaii. As a young kid, he fought a lot and even ended up in jail at one point. At the time, he made a promise that he would not let that happen again.

Early in his teenage years, Johnson wanted to be a professional American football player. During his freshman year of high school, he joined the high school team. It was going well. He was having fun playing with the team. At the time, he was one of the best on the team. He was big and physically strong.

After graduating high school, Johnson went to college in Miami. Still, he had the vision of being a professional football player. So, he joined the Miami college football team. He won a national championship in 1991. Everything was going well until he entered the 1995 NFL draft, but he went undrafted. Due to an injury.

He dropped out of college football. With another failure on his path, Johnson still clung to hope for a better life.

His life became tougher. Hoping to have better days ahead, he started working out in the gym. With the belief of being strong mentally and physically, he stayed motivated. He kept going to the gym and that time, he started to think back to his childhood.

He decided that he wanted to be a wrestler like his father and uncles. He is from a Samoan family, and they have a huge wrestling background. So, he decided to follow his family’s tradition. At that time, his father was under contract with World Wrestling Federation (WWF). With his father’s help, Johnson successfully joined the WWF. Finally, he made his debut with the name “Rocky Johnson” in a Survivor Series match in 1996. After some time, he changed his name to “The Rock.”

“The Rock” became very famous for playing his role in WWF. Later the industry changed its name WWF to WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment). The Rock became known as the most electrifying athlete in sports entertainment. He was widely watched and loved in the wrestling arena. In the late 1990s, he decided to join Hollywood as an actor. He eventually became a worldwide famous actor. He played lead characters in the movies, The Hercules and The Scorpion King. It was another success for him in the movie industry. All of that was possible because he believes in not giving up and hard work. He is a role model and someone to admire.

On the day “The Rock” and his family were kicked out of their apartment and left the island, he made a promise to never look back. With hope and self-belief, he walked through that path of failures right onto a road for success. Today, he is one of the highest-paid actors in Hollywood. The will of never giving up and hard work made Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson a Megastar.
Against All Odds, I Am Still Here

by Gabrielle Young

I defy gravity by flying over streets.
I have overcome adversity that has also made me weak.
Against all odds, I will persevere.
I've had to overcome defeat rendered outdone and obsolete.
Stayed the course through tough and coarse roads beneath my feet.
Against all odds, I will persevere.
Undermanned and overworked, I've muscled through so much it hurts but...
I WILL PERSEVERE.
That's the only plan.
Against all odds, I am here and here I stand.

My Future

by Imara Hyman

I refuse to let go of my future.
Brought to me by those who've gone before, I refuse to let go of my future.
I refuse to let anyone close that door. I refuse to let go of my future.
Where I can be better than I am today. I refuse to let go of my future.
I refuse to let another have that say. I refuse to let go of my future.
With its possibilities of better days. I refuse to let go of my future.
Fading into some distant haze, I refuse to let go of my future.
Or, have it defined by someone not me. I refuse to let go of my future.
Losing it through thoughtless laxity.
I refuse to let go of my future, and all the promise it holds.
I refuse to let go of my future, now is my time to be bold.
I refuse to let go of my future, leaving no path for those after me.
I refuse to let go of my future, fading away in mediocrity.
I refuse to let go of my future, the only legacy I can leave.
I refuse to let go of my future. It's where to hope, I cleave.
Girl to World
A poem inspired by Langston Hughes “Mother to Son”
by Paulasia Sims

Well, world, I tell you:
Life for me ain’t been fair.
Life for me ain’t been crystal clear.
It’s been up and down,
I’ve been turned around.
Cold.
But all the time,
I keep my head up,
I stay afloat.
Because my ancestors were
brought here by boat.
We did not have a choice,
Just had to keep our poise.
Called inferior, needed to be docile
But all the while,
Waiting, patiently,
For our change, I mean our chance
to rise up and make new plans
Plans to improve,
Making ourselves clear.
Never to be pushed to the rear, again.

Don’t you settle and fret,
And never forget.
Because you find it hard,
There are people who had to starve,
Just so I can be here.
But all the time,
I’se still climbin’ and reaching
for the North star with reason
So, world, I tell you again,
Life for me ain’t been fair:
Life for me ain’t been crystal clear.
One would think in the situation where you find yourself against all odds, there’s no light at the end of the tunnel.

All this debt, time, and struggle just to have all of your knowledge shoved into a funnel.

A piece of paper, this beloved degree, that says I’m only certified to do this one thing that now sums up me. Is this really right for me?

Only thing being applied is motor skills, repetitive motions and notions just to pay bills. Did I go to school to go to work, or did I go to work to go to school?

All of this stress gives me convulsing chills, you’d never want to know how this stomach feels.

I could break away from the conformity, constantly questioning what’s really in store for me. I could take a gamble for the unknown, and have the world show me what is yet to be shown.

I believe the path I lead is right for me due to the way the stars have been aligned, perhaps I am desperately seeking a way to unwind.

The price of my education determines the outcome and livelihood of my future. Saying goodbye to my past without any closure, I refuse to allow my financial struggles to define me.

These stresses may be overwhelming, but they are temporary and I know I will overcome and become the successful individual I aspire so deeply to be.
It’s Called TRUST
by Deborah Trotter

How did a five-letter word become so precious?
Something like a rare diamond that is hard to find.
Many in search because they lack such a gem
Thinking we can place it in things and others will make it more divine.

It’s called TRUST.

Never underestimate a small word with large magnitude.
Never ignore the feeling in the back of your mind,
You may detect something you missed before,
Time will tell but with experience you find.

It’s called TRUST.

The warmth of a touch,
The glow of a smile.
It’s the secrets that told to one soul,
that creates something as rich as the Nile.

It’s called TRUST.

The happiness in the heart,
The bounce in the walk,
The faith in a new beginning,
The love felt in your talk,

It’s called TRUST.

Finding the Right Path
by Charles A. Taylor, Jr.

Finding the right path isn’t easy.
Your mind wonders.
You suffer from depression and anxiety.
Fighting obstacles every day, to overcome them.
You fear! Because, you think you will not succeed!
You cry almost every day, to find a way to be happy.
Wipe your tears and stay focused!
More obstacles will come your way.
Be strong and knock the pain away!
Keep your head up, be the best you can every day!
You Have Everything
by CaTerra Selley

You could put the food on the table, but you can't make them eat. Especially, if they rather starve with ones that could never supply for them.

Why hurt yourself over people that don't even care about what they need? If they don't care...you shouldn't make them.

Take that time and energy that you spent on half of them and invest it in yourself.

Because it’s your DIGNITY.
Your HAPPINESS.
Your LIFE.

That the pressure of the world can’t take from you,

Because if this is what you want, you have everything.

I Am That Girl
by Jay’aee Howell

I am that girl
That girl who was told
You’ll be pregnant before 16 years-old.

I am that girl
Who was easily manipulated into lust instead of love.

I am that girl
that had no guidance
I am that girl
who had granny as a mommy.

I am that girl
That girl who graduated first gen
With top 3 percent, all honors, and $60,000 in scholarships.

I am that girl
that girl who came out on top.

I am that girl
that’s undefeated and no one can stop.

I am that girl.
When this photo was taken, the connotation was less serious. It was the end of a photo shoot and my friend just threw on a pillowcase to be silly and I took the photo. But after showing the photo to friends, in its current black and white form, they said it reminded them of the “Me Too Movement.” The idea of women having this struggle, this inner anguish, but feeling silenced (a Silent Scream if you will). Suddenly this picture took on more meaning and became something bigger. An inadvertent unofficial symbol of the voiceless voices, and the struggle they endured while being silent.

When presented with the title of “Against All Odds” I need to look no further than the city I love: Detroit. Detroit has a long-standing history of adversity, which ranges all across the board. Yet still, the city continues to thrive, to flourish, and against all odds, it’s still standing. Things may change, people may come and go, but just like the Joe Louis Fist, it comes back harder and stronger, and punches adversity in the face.
Now here is a tragic tale with a happy ending. As much as we know it shouldn't happen, sometimes people are cruel to animals, neglect them, and do any number of horrid countless things. This is one of those cases. I woke up and took the trash out, and saw a stray dog walking down our street. At first I didn't think much of it, until I saw how thin it was and my heart immediately sank. It came and laid down in the shade of our tree, and just looked lost and alone. I didn't know what to do so I called the Humane Society. A representative arrived almost immediately, conveniently being in the area. She safely coaxed the dog out, fed it, and put it in her truck. I had her explain the next process to me to completely ensure the safety of the dog, and even called to check in on it. It was fed, and went to a deserving home. Against all odds of starving, possibly being injured or worse, it survived and lived to see it go to a deserving home.
Growing up with a single mom on welfare and three siblings was hard enough and adding sexual abuse by my mother’s boyfriend to the mix I would say it was against all odds that as an adult I would not turn out as a product of my environment. I was always a shy person and my life was constant pins and needles never knowing what was around the corner for me. I was determined not to follow in my mother’s footsteps and decided to set goals for myself. When I started college, I had no idea of what I wanted to do with my life so it seem as though I was floating along until I dropped out of school and got a job where I could take care of myself. As a young teenager, I loved photography but didn’t know it at the time and discovered later in life I could have gone to college and made photography my major. Over the years, I decided to take photography classes at WCCCD and reignite my passion. From the knowledge I’ve attained and using the skills I’ve acquired, I am pretty proud of the photographs I have taken thus far.

This photo was taken on the lake front of Lake Erie in Cleveland, Ohio.

It’s against all odds that a person could retire at a very young age and just enjoy the simpler things in life.
I had been taking summer trips to the Detroit Zoo. Every time I went, the animals were less than lively, so I had made my mind up that I was not going to the zoo ever again. Then a friend of mine talked me into going with her for seniors day, and to my surprise the animals were up moving around and doing what they do. As we walked around the zoo, I learned it was mating season and standing near the giraffe I happened to look over and catch them in a compromising position when I snapped the picture. It was against all odds that I would be at the Detroit Zoo at that particular time when I was determined never to go back.

It is a well known fact when I come to Cleveland my family and friends know I want to go out and shoot something. It was “Against All Odds” that I would be able to go out and get this photo because it was taken on the day of my cousin’s funeral service and his brother is the person who took me.
Zen Time
continued

Belle Isle bridge - after attaining knowledge on how to shoot night photography, I guess it could be said I became obsessed with it. Night photography is never anything less than stunning, with vibrant colors and dynamic compositions. The water so still and clouds in the sky made such a peaceful site.

During a snowstorm, I wanted to get some photos of the snow falling and again I drove to Belle Isle riding around looking for something interesting to take a photo of. When I looked to my left, I saw this tree surrounded by standing water that was rising high in some areas of Belle Isle.

It was such a beautiful day when I took a drive to Belle Isle just driving around with my camera looking for something to take a photo of. As I was coming around the curve, I noticed this tree and the young lady sitting under it. She just looked so peaceful and something inside me said, “Back up and take the photo.” So I did.
Zen Time  
continued

I had just gotten off the plane and boarded the tram to take me to baggage claim. I had my camera hanging around my neck, and when I looked up and saw this amazing picture of a reflection I knew I had to capture.

On my last visit to Orlando, Florida I wanted to do something other than go to the Disney Parks. So, I decided to take a drive downtown and came across Lake Eola Park with a sidewalk that circles the lake .9 miles in length. The fountain sits in the middle of the lake and lights up and changes colors. It’s an awesome place for relaxing and reflecting amid beautiful flower beds and a spectacular view of Orlando’s skyline.
Zen Time
continued

Family photos. It’s “against all odds” that I could keep this very energetic young boy still long enough for me to take these great family photos.
Unexpected Queen

by Crystal Trotter

This artwork is of a young woman who stayed motivated while all the odds were against her. She pushed through the self-doubt from the rumors of her being "slow" or "having a slight mental illness" by surrounding peers. She pushed through personal issues in her life. She walked across the stage to receive her well-earned degree, leaving people astounded. Showing everyone that even though all the odds may be against you, you can still achieve your goals as long as you believe in yourself and push through with your head up.
Amend the Constitution to Improve Education

continued from page 38

Voters Not Politicians (VNP), a West Michigan, grassroots pro-democracy organization, gathered the requisite number of voter signatures to eliminate legislative gerrymandering in Michigan, using only volunteer labor. Then, Michigan voters overwhelmingly passed a constitutional amendment taking the power of redistricting away from the vile and short-sighted tendencies that rule the culture of our partisan legislature. It is time to build upon VNP’s success for the sake of students and our shared economic future.

The systems we have today are almost entirely the fault of Democrats and Republicans elected to “represent” our interests. Their failure to represent our interests is open and obvious. Just ask any business what their number one challenge is: finding qualified workers. Despite our declining population, we have plenty of people in Michigan to fill every job available, but we have chosen not to educate hundreds of thousands of residents. A person gets one shot at a no-cost public education. Without an update to Michigan’s State Constitution making that a quality, not-for-profit public education, we are doomed to continue to lose our best and brightest. Businesses who can’t find high-quality talent will scale-down, close and relocate, and we will have fully embraced Jim Crow-era policy as the pathway forward for our state.
him that whatever he heard from the doctors had no bearing on whether he recovered. That outcome depended on him and God.

As the weeks passed, his condition improved. He was taken off the CRRT machine and began dialysis three times a week. His brain returned to normal size. Though he could not yet speak, he understood and followed instructions in a way that led doctors to believe there had been minimal, if any, brain damage. The cellulitis was improving as new skin grew and covered over the deep fissures. He was taken off the ventilator and began using the oxygen machine. Though his respiratory system was getting better, the trauma to his vocal cords and esophagus was such that he still could not speak or take solid foods.

One day, standing outside my brother’s hospital room while he was being changed, I overheard the following at the nurses’ station: “They don’t know if or when he’ll be back. You know he went to China for the holidays.” I knew they were talking about the novel coronavirus because it was discussed each week in my class. And just like the protocol during the Ebola issue, I did not think much of it. Ebola had come and gone with light impact in the United States, and so would the coronavirus, I thought. My biggest concern was the potential for economic devastation given China’s integration into the globalized economy.

Stabilized and healing, my brother was moved to a rehabilitation facility in Detroit where he made great progress with his speech and physical strength. Gradually, his vocal chords became more flexible and his speech more and more intelligible as did his ability to take deeper and deeper breaths. Hand and arm exercises increased his strength and allowed him to shift himself while in bed. Several times a week, he was taken for dialysis, which was discontinued after about a month because his creatinine levels fell within normal limits.

He was in good spirits and we began to set goals. First, be able to get to the restroom on his own. Next, to be able to get across the street to the Detroit River by late spring, whether by wheelchair or walker. We shared that we both found great peace and solace at the water.

March 12 came, and I stood at the door of my brother’s nursing home unable to come in. The social worker said for the safety of the residents, nursing homes were shut down to visitors statewide. What had been the source of news story exercises in my class and
speculative conversations with friends and family was now a real threat. I thought nothing of signing the check off sheet reporting whether I’d been to China or had a cough or fever. I remember when we had to do the same thing for the Ebola virus and so assumed this too would pass. Not so. This was a serious disruption at a time and under circumstances that were spirit draining.

Phone calls, surprise meal deliveries, word search books and Spotify concerts are the ways we get through the days. Like at any other institution, receiving appetizing food is a challenge. It’s a bigger challenge when the food you get is pureed blobs of muddy colors on your plate. So Doordash and UberEATS are heroes when it comes to lifting his spirits! Word Search books help him ignore the drumbeat of coronavirus news on TV.

And it is a drumbeat as he imagines that he has the virus and worries that he is dying. Every other call becomes an exercise in reminding him of all the reasons why he may have symptoms similar to the virus but not the virus itself.

As our time apart lengthened, our conversations deepened. I have learned so much about my brother that I did not know! I knew he experienced some trauma in his life, as did I, but I knew little about his life once I left home. Like, when he graduated high school and came home one day to find a packed suitcase and my mom telling him he was going to Pittsburgh with my Uncle Wilbur. He was shocked. He stayed for two months, and his flight back home was the first and only time he rode on a plane. “Sis, that turbulence, they call it. That had me praying and everything… I ain’t never been so scared in my life! That was no joke! And that stew- ah stewardess, she tried to tell me it was going to be alright. Man, I thought I was gonna die!”

I knew my brother and another cousin, Raiford, were remarkably close and that through their teens and twenties, they did a lot of alcohol and drugs. It became clear why when he recounted how he saw a cousin shot and killed in his stepfather’s sister’s kitchen. “Sis, you remember Bud, right? He was Isaiah’s nephew.”

“No Charles, he was Lillie Mae’s son. Isaiah’s nephew.”

“Oh, ok. Yeah. You know I watched him get shot in her kitchen. You know when she lived in that place on Fenkell.”

“I didn’t know about that…”

“Yeah.”
“Did you ever get counseling?”

“Nah. That’s like when me and Ray went to the hospital to see Howard and he was dead in his bed.”

“What???”

“Yeah, we went to his room and nobody was there, but he was already dead. That was cold. Nobody told us he was dead.”

These are the conversations we are holding twice a day. Conversations that place in context so much of my brother’s behavior and attitude about things.

MICHIGAN STATISTICS
APRIL 30, 2020 =
45,630 CASES
4,256 DEATHS

Late night April 30, my brother called in a panic, “Sis,” he huffed, out of breath, “they say they moving me to the contaminated floor!”

“Charles, slow down. Breathe. What do you mean contaminated floor? Is that what they told you?”

“Yeah, something like that. They said the contaminated floor. That’s what I know.”

We spent a half hour talking with me trying to get a clear idea of what was happening and trying to calm him down. We went over each of his complaints and I tried to help him see that his complaints were many of the same symptoms for COVID-19 and that he had those symptoms long before the virus was an issue. I reminded him again that his symptoms were a direct result of his having spent time on a ventilator and now being on oxygen. But I am also aware that he could have contracted the virus from any of the workers. Right then, my job was to allay his fears. I assured him I would call the social worker in the morning to get a clear picture of what was going on.

The next morning the social worker said that yes, my brother was moved because of his complaints and pre-existing conditions. She said the doctor felt he would get more attentive care until he was tested.

The next few days were tension filled, and our conversations stilted as we avoided talking about the thing most on our minds. Neither of us was sleeping. Most of our conversation was spent reassuring him that what he was experiencing had nothing to do with COVID-19.

But deep in my heart, I’m like “Really God? This is how I am going to lose my brother? Apart? No chance to be together? No chance to comfort him. Just DAMN!”

I work hard to keep these thoughts at bay. I safe distance walk with my neighbors. I come...
out to the drumbeat at 5 p.m. that calls neighbors to the reminder of community. The beat that tells us we are not alone in this neighborhood. But those thoughts creep in between walks, between drumbeats. Would God bring us to this point for my brother to die alone? I pray hard for the strength and correct steps in accepting God’s will – whatever it might be. I pray really hard. I meditate on the strength and wisdom of my ancestors and pray that I am endowed with the same strength, and that they will help me when I fall short. Though flawed, they overcame traumatic circumstances. In fact, they had those flaws because of those circumstances. I find solace in the fact that the symptoms the doctors were concerned with were symptoms that he had well before COVID-19 was in our consciousness.

MICHIGAN STATISTICS MAY 4, 2020 = 47,754 CASES  4,546 DEATHS

On Monday, May 4th, my brother called. “Hey sis,” he rasped, “I need you to talk to this nurse.” My heart dropped. My breath caught. I closed my eyes.

“Hello ma’am. I’m the nurse manager here. We were telling your brother that his test came back negative for the virus.”

I breathed, “Thank you.” My brother Charles is not at death’s door, but he remains on her block. The medical decision is to NOT remove him from the “contaminated” floor. Charles is now in a room alone. It’s the doctor’s contention that he’ll receive more attention due to his pre-existing conditions on the “contaminated” floor. While it’s not a decision that makes me happy, it does provide a higher level of care for my brother. Right now, he remains alive. Against all odds.

MICHIGAN STATISTICS MAY 8, 2020 = 49,954 CASES  4,804 DEATHS

WAYNE COUNTY STATISTICS MAY 8, 2020 = 8,994 CASES  974 DEATHS*

DETROIT STATISTICS MAY 8, 2020 = 9,676 CASES  1,156 DEATHS

*Detroit stats are not included in Wayne County stats

sources: https://www.michigan.gov/coronavirus
https://clickondetroit.com

Healing in the Time of Corona
continued
Makings of a Lady Lumberjack

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Seniors doubling as the grandmothers I never really bonded with. I felt most at home running the girl’s program at Delray recreation center. They were just like me dealing with life’s troubles way too soon. In the past, I often cried out, “Can somebody help me?” I hoped just one person would. That’s why I helped them all. I loved them. Sleepovers, shopping, beauty day, any way I could make them smile. Even so, tragedy’s rash never stops itching, it only spreads. One of the young ladies in our group committed suicide. She had dropped her diary at school, someone found it and passed the pages around the school. She was embarrassed and bullied to the point of taking her own life. I vowed always to support people by showing, not just telling them of love.

During this time, I met and married my husband after six months. I was happy and shocked I had found what I thought was true love.

One day, my supervisor summoned me to his office. “What are you going to do?”

“What do you mean,” I asked with a puzzled look on my face.

“It’s time for you to go.”

“Where?”

“Away from here” he shouted. Was I doing a bad job that would lead to more displacement, I feared. As we entered the gym, he started to point out coworkers, telling me how long they had held the same position.

“It’s only been a year,” I said.

“That’s a year too long.”

I was comfortable and stagnant just like the people I left not so long ago. Each week, the city would issue job postings for available new positions. An opening for a position called “Tree artisan helper” sounded familiar. As it happens, my father was a tree artisan, the city’s term for “lumberjack.” I asked if he thought I would be able to perform such difficult work. “You can do anything you set your mind to baby girl,” he said. I passed the written test and was set to start a 12-week training course to learn how to become a lady lumberjack.

On day one of field training, the building was filled with flannel-clad men. I inquired as to where I should go for the tree artisan helper training. No answer. There was complete disbelief that a woman was here for training.
Piercing eyes, enough to make me leave the building, but I couldn’t and wouldn’t. This went on for 35 minutes with no directions. Soon other trainees began to enter the building. Most were men except for one other lady who seemingly already had relationships with everyone at Chandler Park. The hollow room echoed questions mixed with accusations. Clearly, I was only viewed as a sexual object. I walked over to what was known as the tool room and asked the woman there if she could direct me to the supervisor. She turned with a look of a disdain: “He’s not here right now, who are you?”

This was to be obstacle number two; women can be very territorial when a new and especially younger woman comes on the scene. Finally, a group of white older men came into the waiting area and instructed all trainees to follow them. We left the building walking through the untouched snow in the park, heading towards a grouping of large trees. They appeared menacing against the brightness of the snow, as if any minute their long decrepit branches, which moaned if the wind blew, would grab you up. No longer under protection of the building’s brick walls and the tunnel of massive vehicles used to remove trees, we faced nature head on.

Never before had I understood what it meant to endure a Michigan winter. I had purchased what I thought would be appropriate lumberjack apparel: Texas steer work boots, a pair of blue jeans with long johns, a thick flannel-lined shirt, a skullcap and work gloves that looked like Muppet hands when I wore them. Back then, there were no work clothes, gloves or boots made for women. You had to wear ill-fitting men’s garments. I absolutely was not prepared. Every exhale of the wind cut through as a seamstress through a pattern, easily and precisely. Each exposed area of skin burned from the early morning cold, turning red instantly. It was a 15-minute walk from the building to the trees. Fingers completely numb, Muppet gloves frozen, each finger pointing in a different direction. The Texas Steer boots, I had jokingly called my Frankenstein boots because of their size, filled with cold wet snow. This began the culling of those deemed unworthy.

The group arrived to find three climbing saddles laying in the deep snow along with three bundles of 150-foot rope. A crew pulled up in what we learned was called a Hi-Ranger or tower truck. It held only three people; they had no intention of letting us get warm. Today, “you’re going to learn to climb” and if you can’t do it then you fail! One of the men said this as he began to put on the saddle while explaining how to do it. The other started to do the same, showing us the knot needed to tie into
the saddle. We had learned, a “taunt line hitch” in class but had never done it in the field much less with frozen hands. This particular knot was very tricky, it needed to be tight enough so you wouldn’t slide down the rope and fall to your death while climbing but loose enough to allow the knot to slide freely as you ascended the tree stem into the crown. For the next two hours, until our 30-minute lunch break, we attempted to tie into the saddles using this knot. Now tying the knot was one thing, however handling the rope was quite another. The ¾-inch thick rope was made of hemp, it soaked up the wet snow then froze. This made the 10-pound rope twice the weight. The hemp had a jagged texture which poked like needles through the gloves into your frozen hands.

Lunch time came, but rather than the trainers taking the equipment back on the trucks, we wrapped the stiff heavy rope, carrying them back to the service yard. The 30-minute break was over in a blink of an eye, with just enough time for the frozen parts to become wet and soggy. After lunch, we didn’t return to the trees. We had not properly wrapped up ropes, according to the trainers. Rope is the lifeline, it must be handled with great care, they explained. Stretching out and coiling of the python-length rope ended the workday. My hands had hundreds of red marks like I had massaged a porcupine. I went home chilled to the core and with a new appreciation for a hot shower. I drifted off to sleep planning to bundle up as much as possible.

That morning, just gripping the brush, raising my arms was painful due to that heavy ass rope! In agony, I said to myself out loud, “I dare you to beat these trees,” and I dressed. Two of everything, pants, sweatshirts, socks, hats. Doing a perfect Emperor Penguin imitation, out to the trees I went. When it came time to put on the saddle, all the clothes made it too tight. Making fun of my size passed the day for the men on the crew. Immobile, I watched as other trainees attempted their first climbs. I didn’t perform so well, and I didn’t like that one bit. All weekend was spent practicing the knot and climbing in my dad’s backyard. When I returned on Monday, I hadn’t gotten any better. The next four days, I tried but couldn’t tie the knot properly or climb two steps into the tree. The men told me I needed to pump it, and
made a gesture with their pelvis, back and forth. "You know how to pump right? I bet you pump really good."

The next day, we were called into the office one by one. I was effectively berated, the bottom line: Climb tomorrow or fail. I cried, but not for the reason they thought, not because I was a girl! There’s no crying in forestry, they said! Now I was backed into a corner, strangely it felt like home. The corner was the source of my strength. Friday, I climbed, using inner legs, thigh to ankle, gripping the tree so tight, I couldn’t fall back down. Bruises resembling dark purple sweet plums in size and color lasted for two weeks. They said I couldn’t. I said I could and did. I never climbed on the job again for the entirety of my career of 17 years in forestry.

I will never forget meeting my new best friend, a beautiful 036 Stihl chainsaw. Orange and white in color with a heavy steel casing. The dents and scratches proved she’s put in some work. She purred when speaking, only judgmental ears heard a roar. Let me first make this perfectly clear: Chainsaws are dangerous! As with any dangerous thing, you must have a healthy fear and the utmost respect for that thing because failure to do so will end badly. Learning to use the chainsaw was the most enjoyable of all the aspects of forestry work for me. The moment I felt the weight while cutting through the wood, I was in love! Of all the skill sets that require you to wield your profession’s tool as an extension of your own body, using a chainsaw is most certainly one of them.

By the time training was finished, the only sound I could hear was that of my saw. My ears were attuned to its engine. I could tell if a chain was sharp or dull just by the sound or if the bar was not getting proper lubrication and needed to be cleaned. This beautiful noise sheltered my heart and mind, it drowned inappropriate sexual banter, body shaming and the racist overtones of what had been classically a white man’s profession, therefore deemed beyond any woman’s mental comprehension or physical capabilities, especially a black woman. These once overt slights were minimized to secret whispers in hallways. I was now officially a Tree Artisan Helper. The other young lady, my best friend of 25 years, trained and failed; she was told her body type was not suited for lumberjack work. She later retrained and passed with her same 5-foot height and hands that resembled a baby doll. I was ecstatic, for the first time I was doing something that other people couldn’t. To put it plainly, I felt important.

Very soon, my marriage began to suffer. Conversations were sure to include reasons why my husband didn’t like me working there. “I don’t like you working around all those guys,” was the most common complaint. He was becoming threatened by my independence. We argued daily, always about the job or the
care of our daughter. He insisted I quit. "I’ll take care of us, I’m your husband," he said.

But I had tasted the freedom of expression and like my favorite caramel cupcakes, I wanted more. I felt the constraint of chauvinistic control, so I ran to work on every occasion I could. I spent countless hours of overtime on the job honing my craft and escaping a dysfunctional marriage. As we all our aware, Pro has a twin named Con, there is never one without the other. Whether it was selfishness derived from the residue of childhood slights or wanting so bad to be my own person, I forgot I was now responsible for another person. Although excuses at the time seemed valid, they didn’t offer much value for my little girl who just wanted me to come home. I can say this because she told me so, around the age of 16. My failure was thinking she only wanted things. Perhaps it was because for much of my childhood I was without.

I had forgotten the most important thing childhood lacked for me: parental loving care. It was hard to hear; I was forced to be honest about my actions. I was so proud she was strong enough to speak out which allowed me to right my wrongs. The most important challenge of my life was right in my face. How was I to repair the broken bond with the love of my life? Time was the only answer. I needed to spend many hours breaking down the barrier I created, just as many or even more than I had worked. I used everything I had to reach my baby’s heart. She fought it tooth and nail, the same feelings I once had of abandonment were now hers. I couldn’t let that stand. We are now best friends. It’s not perfect rainbows and cotton candy, we simply understand and depend on one another. She is intelligent, strong, independent and kind, all the attributes every mother wishes for her daughter. For this, I am happy.

One day, a few of the crewmen had come in hungover and weren’t in any shape to handle chainsaws. It was a chance at last to get some sky as they called it, going up in the 55-foot bucket truck. The foreman had one of the other guys go up with me in the bucket. I didn’t want to get in the bucket with this man who was the absolute definition of the word “masher!” In this supposedly two-man bucket, he pressed firmly against my butt. No matter how I turned, he made sure to keep pressure on my body. I am 5-foot-4 and he was 6-feet and I was completely shrouded by him in this tight space. His breath reeked of liquor; every word spoken directly into my ear sent curdles down my neck. I bore it for two reasons, to prove them wrong and to improve my skills. The men actually took turns going up with me, deciding who would get the free feels that day. Summer arrived, trees fully bloomed, and all manner of animals scurried about, singing of the new season’s arrival. I had learned to operate the bucket and was decent with my
Makings of a Lady Lumberjack

continued

cuts, although the ground crew complained I was too slow. If I managed to pick up my speed, then they said my tree didn’t look good and would go up behind me to finish it. It was insulting and really infuriated me. I was doing exactly what they had shown me. Silly girl hadn’t thought, “Maybe they are not teaching me on purpose?”

The next week I reported to the service yard on my own and requested reassignment to the removal crew. All the best cutters were on this elite crew. The supervisor refused without hesitation, announcing sternly that it was too hard for me. I began to train myself by coming in early. I would sit on the porches of the houses carefully learning the shapes of various species of tree. A haircut, I told myself, make it pretty. After a week, I had improved. I requested again to be placed on the removal crew. “You don’t know enough,” the supervisor said. “How I was ever going to know enough if I stayed on the trim crew,” I debated. He shuffled away mumbling about nagging women.

Before the shift ended, I was ordered to report to the yard in the morning. Much to my surprise, it wasn’t the reassignment expected but what seemed punitive in nature. A Tree Artisan named David Roper was my partner for the day and he was visibly annoyed. The work order for the day called for a 051 chainsaw, which was the biggest saw we had at the time. It weighed 23 pounds. We were to walk the massive park, which is three times the size of Belle Isle, removing dead trees and down limbs.

I prepped the saw, filling the gas and oil, changing the chain and started it to be sure it ran properly. From bar tip to handle it was from my feet to my elbow in length if you stood it upright. I walked about a half mile carrying this monster of a chainsaw, stepping in the groundhog holes lacing the park grounds, stumbling all the way. The wide-open sky let every sunbeam rain down and dance freely with the sweat beads on my face and head. The slightest disturbance of the grass sounded the breakfast bell for the biting bugs. We reached a few small dead trees to remove. They were easy, but the saw was not. It was almost like it was angry because it had been asked to do such menial task. Chainsaws have a pull cord start, much like a household lawnmower with much greater tension. It refused to start. One pull, two pulls, three pulls, each time the cord angrily snapping back taking my fingernails with it. Pain and blood filling up my glove, which I didn’t reveal to the trainer had my hand throbbing. I had not primed the saw; it was never going to start. So, pump and prime I did but now it was flooded. The fumes shot up my nose like mixed cleaning products. One more pull, gripping the cord firmly, placing my foot solidly on the handle, locking my arm at elbow and pull! Success, it started, and I cut.

We came across a 50-inch huge black olive tree that had been struck by lightning but was still partially standing. Roper gestured for the saw, which I was still carrying with my injured right hand. I was about to hand it to him, and the lava bubbled inside my stomach. “I want to cut this one,” I said. He paused, retracting his outstretched hand. “If you can cut this down, you will be the queen of forestry!” he said. I smiled, removed my gloves, wiped bloody hands on my pants and started the saw.

Unlike the previous trainers, he walked me through the process step-by-step. First, cut the notch low. The tree was twisted and splintered so the only smooth area was at the
very base of the towering tree. Next, he said
the notch should be slender in order to control
the direction of tree falling. Most important, he
said, be prepared to jump back when you start
to cut because splintered trees have an explosion
effect once you start cutting. “You don’t want
to mess your face up,” he warned.

During the final cut, the tree stem burst open
like fireworks. The sharp wood spikes flew
everywhere, then silence as the huge tree
slowly laid down to slumber for the night, lightly
touching the pillowed grass. I was in awe of
what I had just witnessed. He was in awe of
what I had just done. “You’re the Queen,” he
said. I was overflowing with excitement. Upon
my return to work, people were more
respectful, even the supervisor. I waited in line
as was the custom of our yard. All of forestry
would stand against the wall of both sides of
the hallway as the foremen would
get the work orders for the day and
call out the names of the crew
members. The removal crew
foreman called out my name!

As is the theme of life, triumph is
wedded to adversity. Soon after
my marriage ended, I was a single
mother who worried what would
become of us. During a volatile
argument, my then husband
boasted that he wasn’t worried
about me leaving. I couldn’t
make it without him, he yelled.
That never left my mind. I had to make it for
my daughter more than anything else. Single
parenthood can be difficult, but I found solace
in trees and nature. It was a way to destress,
it had become who I was, The Queen. I never
left the removal crew; in fact, I became one
of the top lumberjacks in the city.

All my experiences made me who I am today.
During the Detroit tornado of 1995, I removed
hundreds of trees citywide, becoming
employee of the month that September.
Nothing compared to the looks of citizens
surprised by a lady lumberjack saving the day.
I once removed a hollow tree filled with a
beehive the length of the entire tree. Imagine
seeing thousands of bees up close buzzing
around their hive, dripping with honey so thick
it clogged up the saws. I must have been stung
at least 30 times.

There’s a thrill being 55 feet in the air, taking
fallen trees off houses during a rainstorm at
2:00 a.m. Rain so hard that you’re blinded
and cutting on instinct and nerves alone. The
fright of falling into a sink hole during a
waterboard special. The street is flooded, and
the ground gives way to sand. Down I go, to
be saved by a coworker who grabs my hood at
the last moment.

Little children
running, with inspiration on their faces, down
the street calling out your name: “Bye, Kim,
bye!” Looking eye to eye with a huge owl as I
trimmed away a dead branch. Squirrels who
frantically jump into the bucket with me while
I’m cutting, mad because you’re removing their
home. The smell of saw dust, the feel of a sharp blade that cuts wood like butter. The teamwork of a crew that was not born together but grew together. And, oh the competition. Who could stack the brush the highest? Who could trim the best? Who could top the tree the fastest? These experiences will never leave me. They are forever etched in my heart as war wounds and badges of honor.

From day one, September 13, 1966, each step was meant to lead me to where I currently stand. Those steps built the ladder I climbed to accomplish the things I have thus far. I was promoted a total of five times during my 34-year career with the City of Detroit before I retired. I am honored to have been 1 of 18 Lady Lumberjacks employed by the City of Detroit through the years.

I was blessed to be the first African American woman to become Superintendent of the Grounds Maintenance and Forestry Division. Amazingly, I was asked by the Mayor to assume the position of General Manager of Operations for the Department of Transportation, which previously had been held only by persons with a degree, which I didn’t have. I am most proud that I was allowed to serve the city and its people with utmost dedication. These experiences were wonderful and life changing in their time.

Becoming a Lady Lumberjack saved my life. I was truly meant for something special – that’s what the trees whispered. No matter what happens going forward, tree work will always be my core. Forestry filled me with confidence, making me hunger for more of life.

As strange as it may seem, there’s still a void that hasn’t been filled. That is why I stalk my purpose; my calling is my prey. I am a purpose predator.
The Story of Zeke

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Even though there were people ready and willing, no one was given that special assignment. Just the option to end my child’s future.

I hated to confront the doctor but he needed to hear what he was proposing for me. I repeated to him what I had said to the female professional: “You know, you can kill all your children if you want to. Go ahead. Kill ‘em all. But we don’t kill ours. We don’t kill ours!”

Jesus was tempted three times in the wilderness and when Satan was not successful, he left Jesus alone and God sent the angels to strengthen Him. And now, after offering me this terrible option three times, he was leaving me alone, and God was comforting me. Even though those experiences left me shook up and somewhat frightened of the evil in the world, they left me wise to it, too.

The baby was born by C-section. We had started a stress test, not for me but for the baby, to make sure he could tolerate the birthing process. Children with Down syndrome have about a 50/50 chance of heart defects. Without a strong heart, a baby can die during delivery. Even though I had refused any prenatal interventions, those who knew better insisted on this test. Most health professionals get in the business to save lives and this is where they really shined. As the mild dose of pitocin took effect, his heart stopped. Screaming at me to “get on all fours,” the irritated clinician immediately stopped the procedure. The baby’s heart rate recovered and so did the clinician’s. Within minutes I was in the operating room for a C-section.

The sac was carefully cut and the baby gently lifted out. Unlike my other pregnancies, there were no congratulations and hearty laughing. Just silence. I looked at the different faces in the room. They were all so serious. And sad.

“Let me see him,” I said. They brought him close and I looked into my new son’s face and smiled. A shock of red hair burst out of his little head. Red hair! I had always dreamed of having a red-haired kid or two. My brother had two himself. It’s a family trait. But I had given up on having a red-haired kid a long time ago. What a gift! I looked upon my little son with pure joy. Like light that shines through a crack of an old door on a sunny afternoon, a little ray of hope broke into the room and into the hearts of some of my attendants.

“Does he have Down syndrome?” I asked but I already knew the answer. I could see it in his almond-shaped eyes.

“Yes,” the nurse said as she showed us the simian crease in our son’s little hands, one of the common traits shared by people with Down
The Story of Zeke

continued

syndrome. My husband, who had forgotten about the Down syndrome concerns, suddenly had trouble breathing and was sat down and wheeled out of the room. They were so attentive, watching us for signs of distress like this, maybe that’s why the room had been so quiet. They had been trained well.

The whole experience left me a little shook up, but our baby was here, alive and well. He didn’t seem so different. Like our other children when they were born, he was awake and alert and doing fine. He was a baby, just a normal everyday baby!

My poor husband returned into the room after a few minutes. He was back on his feet. They explained that our son was stable but would be observed in the neonatal unit, and specialists were being called in to examine him.

They asked if we had a name picked out. “Yes,” we said, “Ezekiel.” More quiet in the room. They seemed quite bewildered by the name we had chosen, a whole lot like the time when my husband first suggested it to me. And although they were the first to give us that odd glance, they wouldn’t be the last. Funny, but that was his name. In Hebrew, it means God strengthens. Another variation is God is strong.

God strengthens; God is strong. All the way to this moment, this little baby and his parents were being strengthened by God. God had shown Himself strong and capable to get us through to a safe delivery. When the so-called professionals came to me suggesting that my life would be better without this child, I knew just how wrong they were and I was able to stand up to them.

Are we smarter than God? Should we decide who lives and dies? No. That job is for God and God alone. What if I had begun labor on my own, away from the immediate help of the hospital? My baby’s struggle through the birth canal could have proven too much for his defective heart and he could have died.

As for his heart, at 4 ½- months-old he went through open heart surgery. The incredible invention of the heart-lung machine made it possible to fix the two holes in his heart. Because of the genius of that machine and because we lived in Detroit where one of the two best pediatric heart surgeons in the world practiced, we didn’t have to bury our sweet boy by the age of two. If he had been born 20 years earlier, the leukemia he contracted at age four also would have buried him. But here he was with an 85-percent chance of surviving instead of the earlier prognosis of a 15-percent survival rate. And that’s how it’s been; against all odds, he is flourishing.

There are so many triumphs that were against the odds. Through the years, he had some of the finest teachers to be found, right here in Detroit. But stepping into that first classroom was another story. The teacher told me children with Down syndrome learn to read by turning the pages. Did she really think I was that stupid? Who says that kind of stuff?

So, I began teaching Zeke how to read. At the age of 10, his ability to read was greatly improved after a visit to the local optometrist. The curious doctor asked: “Does he read?”

“Well, it’s a funny thing,” I answered. “Sometimes he can and sometimes he can’t.”
How do you feel about trying him out with bifocals?” he asked.

The light went on. Poor kid couldn’t read because he needed bifocals. Now he reads at about a 4th-grade level. And he writes, volumes literally. He copies entire children’s dictionaries, church bulletins and the whole Book of Psalms. Anything he finds particularly interesting is worth copying. He’s overcome numerous obstacles.

A year and a half after Zeke was born, we welcomed our last child, a daughter. Our family was complete with seven children and two very busy parents. Zeke’s relationship with his siblings is special and very sweet. They want to be around him and share time with him.

Today, Zeke enjoys playing sports, dancing, singing and going to camp. At this moment, I hear him on the phone with one of his brothers and his wife. He just asked them to be a part of his wedding, a theme that is always present in his mind. Will he ever really get married? I don’t know but he has a whole lot of love in that heart of his. Tomorrow he’ll be talking about joining the NBA or the NFL or bowling a 300 game. His joy is infectious and his hope never dies. He is sweet, loving, forgiving, smart and funny. And he gives the best hugs this side of heaven!

My husband and I have learned so much in raising this child. We are thankful for what God has given us. Raising Zeke has taught us true love, compassion and patience. We understand and respect how fragile life is and how special too. We enjoy seeing life from Zeke’s perspective. It unfolds joys, innocence, tons of heart and great imagination we would never have witnessed if he hadn’t been born.

Caring for a child with special needs is challenging. It is a battle. But it’s a battle worth fighting because the rewards are so great. Against all odds, we have an amazing son.
They turned it into a room that was very small, only able to accommodate one person. There were women with us in the car, me and two others. After a long search, we did not find a place to stay. The owner of the car suggested the women and their relatives could stay in his house while I could stay in the storage room at the hotel. Indeed, I slept there without much feeling in my exhausted body.

I slept until one o'clock in the afternoon, waking up from the starvation. Outside, the heat was stifling in a way I had never experienced. I searched for a place to buy the currency of the Djiboutian franc without success. There are women who operate like the central bank of Djibouti because all people change the currency through them. Surprisingly, they did not have a special place, but a chair on the street together with a bag with cash. I bought the Djiboutian franc and went to buy food.

My condition was lamentable. I bought cake and juice and then returned to the hotel. I still remember when I was eating, my hand was shaking and I couldn’t eat the cake so I just drank the juice. The hotel was very expensive, so I decided to find another place. I found my cousin, and he and others in his room were tenants, so I went to live with him for days.

The one who rented the room to my cousin was not the original owner of the house. When the owner found out, he asked us to leave that day. It was the morning, and I went to the bathroom to wash. When I went back, I was surprised to learn the owner of the house had thrown all my belongs out of the room. I changed my clothes outside, took my things and left.

It was an unforgettable day and a difficult journey. Even recalling this nightmare is difficult. But after three weeks in Djibouti, I received an appointment at the American Embassy. When I got my visa to enter America, it was one of the happiest moments in my life.

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**The Journey of Death That Carries Life**

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