

FAMILY SCHOLAR HOUSE

Stories That Define Us



PAM PLATT

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The cover photo shows the Family Scholar House art glass window, generously created and donated by Tim Allen, MD, and on display at the Louisville Scholar House campus. Dr. Allen beautifully captured the Family Scholar House logo, complete with family tree and a child's swing.

The striking portraits of the participants whose stories are featured in this book were taken by Scott Utterback.

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FOREWORD

She was 18 with a five-year-old son and she was scared. It had taken all of her courage to come to meet with me and now she was struggling to find the words to share what had brought her to our organization. Yet, she could find the words to say what she wanted. She wanted to go to college and, while doing so, she needed a place for her and her son to live and be nurtured.

This was June 2005 and I had only been in my new role as the executive director of Project Women for about 10 weeks, but this young woman and her son were the reason our not-for-profit existed.

Founded by representative women religious from six different orders, Project Women rented apartments that could be used by single mothers so that they and their children had a safe place to live while the mothers completed their college degrees. The small staff of Project Women also provided academic advice and case management to help student mothers navigate college, social services, and other systems that felt foreign to them.

In the short time I had been at Project Women, I had learned that the organization's finances were a bigger problem than I had suspected, our services were under utilized, and the number of people in the community aware of our mission and our activities was sadly minimal. I had thought about

leaving—admitting that I had made a mistake and didn't belong in my new role—but those thoughts vanished when I met with this young woman with her little boy in tow. How could I give up on her?

As I learned her story, I came to understand that many people had given up on her and she was looking for a reason not to give up on herself. She had been in foster care for as long as she could remember. She was 12 years old when she got pregnant and 13 years old when her son was born. He had been raised with her as her brother in the same foster home until she turned 18 and decided that she wanted more. While she had always been a good student, she quickly found that it was tough to balance work and school and learning to be a parent, and that she had no way to cover the cost of child care. We were her only hope for a stable place that would allow her to focus on her education and her son. If, with everything she had working against her, she still had hope, then how could we not have hope, too?

Hope.

When I describe the many things our professional staff members do to create a college-going culture for our adults and children, the programs and services that support education, physical and mental well-being, responsible financial management, healthy relationships, and more, the one thing most difficult to describe is how we nurture hope. If there is even the tiniest pilot light of hope burning in the eyes of one of our participants, we will do everything in our power to fan that flame so it becomes the ignition source for a much bigger fire, one that will burn brightly in the life of our participant and spread to others.

If this young mother still had hope, then how could we not have hope, too?

FOREWORD

From that moment, everything changed for me and for our organization. Many of our new initiatives took time to put into place and longer to bear fruit, but they were all born of a new understanding of what could be beyond what was.

Make no mistake; it was a challenge to birth Family Scholar House from what had begun as Project Women, but like the many construction projects we have undertaken, we built it one brick at a time. Each new initiative led to new opportunities.

In 2008, we officially renamed our organization to more accurately reflect the depth and breadth of our mission. Our new name said it all: Family Scholar House was born to empower families through education and provide the housing necessary for them to focus on their goals. That same year, we opened our first campus, Louisville Scholar House, with 56 apartments for our participant families and an academic services center where our professional staff members provide academic coaching. We also began providing family counseling, financial education, access to technology, art therapy, tutoring, mentoring, and community meals, and a state-of-the-art early childhood education center, in partnership with the University of Louisville, to give our youngest scholars a good start on their own educations. At the time, many in the community saw this as *the* campus. We knew that, because the community needs were so great, this was the *first* campus.

So, in 2011, we opened Downtown Scholar House, which was followed quickly by Stoddard Johnston Scholar House and then Parkland Scholar House. As I write this, the Riverport Scholar House campus is under construction and will open in December 2017. Each new campus created apartment homes for our single-parent participants and their children, and each new campus offered a safe place for our families to live, learn, grow, heal, achieve, and celebrate their successes.

Our participants graduated from college and we celebrated. They entered the workforce with good-paying careers and we celebrated. They bought homes and we celebrated. They sent children to college and we celebrated the opportunities available for this second generation of Family Scholar House participants.

With the recognition of our scholars' successes and our role in supporting them, came national awards and honors. Those honors helped spread the word about our work and have led to the development of our affiliate program, which helps other communities replicate our program model to serve their residents.

All of this began with the desire to build a campus—the first one—to serve and support our single-parent college students and their children as they transitioned from chaotic lives of poverty, homelessness, and domestic violence to self-sufficiency and opportunities to be the authors of their own stories.

We are builders. We have built buildings and campuses to house and serve single parents and their children. We have built Family Scholar House from the great beginnings of Project Women but with the nimbleness to adapt to the needs of our community and more fully address the challenges our participants face. Most importantly, we have helped our participants build and rebuild their lives by nurturing their hope and providing the fuel for them to turn their dreams into goals and then achieve them. Like the single mother I met in June 2005, our participants since have trusted us with their lives, their children's lives, their aspirations, their fears, and, especially, their stories. Stories like that of the 18-year-old mother and her little boy.

Having been around since Family Scholar House began, I have become the story-keeper. I hold it as a sacred trust that so many of our participants have shared their stories with me.

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Further, I have been along for the ride as they have written new chapters in their lives, putting past experiences into perspective, learning from mistakes, and forging ahead to build the lives that they most desire for themselves and their children. All of their stories are sacred.

As the number of stories has grown, it has been a goal to preserve them in a way that allows them to inspire others.

This book was born out of the desire to make our participants' stories available to you, our readers, and offer insight into their lives. I believe you will find that we are all much more alike than we realize in what we want for ourselves and the hopes we have for our children and our community. I know that I have learned far more from our participants than they could ever learn from me. They are heroes of mine not because of what they have accomplished, which is very impressive, but because of what they have overcome and because of their resilience and persistence in the face of challenges that seemed insurmountable. They are remarkable not only because they have faced difficulties and had the hope and grit to work through them, but also because they are willing to share their stories in the hope that their experiences will inform and inspire others. To a person, I am proud of them for offering their stories to you.

There are so many people to thank. Pam Platt has done a masterful job of putting these stories on paper so that they live beyond our memories and serve as a testament to the human spirit and the love of parents for their children. Scott Utterback has taken the striking portraits of participants that accompany their stories. The wonderful supporters at PNC Bank and PNC Real Estate embraced the opportunity to support this book as they have so generously supported programs and affordable housing at Family Scholar House.

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I am grateful to the friends who joined our board of directors, saw the possibilities, and shared in a vision to change lives, families, and communities through education. I'm grateful, too, to the board officers who put aside fear of failure to take big risks that led to great rewards for our community. The social workers and academic advisors who said yes to joining our organization, knowing it would require difficult work with long hours, deserve recognition and praise for their efforts to address all of the challenges facing our families. I appreciate each of the community leaders and donors who have invested in the success of our scholars and are realizing the return on the investment in thriving families, well-prepared employees, and a new generation of leaders. From my friend and development partner, Jake Brown at The Marian Group, I learned everything I know about building campuses where people want to live. I cannot imagine having a better person to guide me than he.

My participation and leadership at Family Scholar House would not have been possible were it not for my own family and the unconditional love, high expectations, and occasional reprieves that guided my maturation and taught me to appreciate being part of a family. I owe the passion I feel for my work and the connection I have to our single parents to my daughter, Emma, who from her birth, became my reason for wanting this world to be a better, more compassionate, and empowering place for everyone.

Most importantly, I must thank the single parents who have trusted us to offer them guidance, support, and encouragement in a structured program focused on education as the primary way to end the cycle of inherited poverty. I offer them my heartfelt appreciation for becoming part of Family Scholar House, sharing their lives with us, and deepening our understanding of what it means to be family.

FOREWORD

I began with the story of a young mother and her son. Just as I remember the first time we met, I remember the day we celebrated her graduation from the University of Louisville. Her son's was the loudest voice in the room, shouting, "Yay, Mom," when her name was called. I also remember the pride beaming on both of their faces. She did it and he helped. Both were proud of themselves and of each other. Today, she is a nurse, serving our community, and he is a young man headed to college to follow his mother's example. She is his role model and he is the greatest joy of her life. That's the story of Family Scholar House.

— CATHE DYKSTRA
Chief Possibility Officer, President,
and CEO, Family Scholar House

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Every day we pass people in the store, on the street, in traffic, and we barely glance at them. Chances are we also couldn't begin to guess the stories they would tell about their lives if we asked.

I've spent almost 40 years asking, first as a journalist for two newspapers and now as a freelance writer and editor. I've learned that everyone has a story to tell. And some of those stories will move you, change you, and shake you to your feet. Such are the stories of the people in this book.

For this assignment, I talked with participants at Family Scholar House. Chances are you've passed them in the store, on the street, or in traffic and never realized the magnitude of their experience and efforts, nor the depths of their personal strength and integrity and the love they have for their children.

Now is your chance to learn and to know.

I thought I was familiar with the work of FSH and with the people it accepts and empowers in its programs for single-parent families.

But sitting with them, hearing them, seeing them, as we talked about their lives up until they became part of the FSH family, and about their lives afterward, schooled me on how much I didn't know—about them, about the program, about the beauty of the human spirit.

I hope these stories will do the same for the reader.

We drew upon qualities of the participants and the program for the chapter headings in the book: courage, community, commitment, achievement, work, resilience, persistence, hope, love, and legacy.

We wanted the readers of the book to be participants, too, so we drew from the *Lectio Divina* to encourage reflections with each chapter, each person, each story, each quality:

What does the story, the participant, teach? What message is being communicated? What does it mean to me personally and to the community? How will I carry the message forward?

My own reflections after asking questions, and hearing the answers that form this book:

Heroism comes in all shapes, colors, sizes, ages, faiths, and gender.

It is found in big and small moments.

It comes in as little as one syllable—“No”—assigned to the past, and in another syllable—“Yes”—that accepts a different future.

It comes in young adults who have taken the hard steps to break free of the hurts and struggles of their own childhoods and pasts and the equally hard steps to ensure a better, healthier environment and life for their own children.

It comes in imperfect human beings who make mistakes, as we all do, but ones who also epitomize the mightiness and the promise of the proverb, “Fall seven times; stand up eight.”

It comes in these participants. And it comes in the program and program staffers, who nurture an innate thirst for education in the participants, and who create a place and a space where young families have the breathing room and support to build their lives and their futures.

How fortunate I have been to meet these remarkable, unforgettable people, and to help share their stories. I know I will continue to learn from them. I hope you will, too.

—PAM PLATT

Stories that Define Us



CHAPTER ONE

Courage

Noura's Story

She wants to be called Noura.

It means “light” in Arabic.

“I like the sound of it,” she says in a soft but firm voice, and in smooth English that still carries the lilt and burr of her faraway home country and her first language.

A scarf covers her head, in accordance with her observation of Islam, but the head is decidedly unbowed.

She is finally on the good side of too many tough years, but she can't completely drop her guard against the danger and pain of the recent past.

An abusive marriage, now over, and the unknown whereabouts of the former husband who physically, emotionally, and psychologically mistreated her, dictate her choice of safety first. Especially for their children, who live with her. She and they are on firmer footing now, but she has worked too hard to take today, tomorrow, and the more settled life of her family for granted.

So, some telling details will remain untold here, and she will be Noura for this sharing.

That she chooses “light” to express her identity conveys much of what you need to know about her: optimism, buoyed by rock-solid faith, suffuses her story, despite the real challenges, dangers, and struggles she has faced.

But of course, there is more to learn about a woman who stands on the threshold of a new, brighter life after weathering such dark and desperate times.

Noura is well educated and smart, mastering complicated knowledge and practices in two separate cultures and languages and at two very different times in her life.

When she was younger, she wanted to be a writer, and though her career path veered in another direction, she never really let it go. That is how she comes to read numerous passages from a small stack of notebooks. They are her journals, the repositories of the facts and fears she recorded as the ground she knew, or thought she knew, gave way beneath her, threatening to swallow her and her children as she battled to keep their family alive and intact. She pulls the narrative as much from unclouded memory as she does from her penned loops of Arabic.

She turns the pages. Dates and disasters mount as she reads selections. Pauses rest like islands between the flowing words. Throughout the trials she recounts, faith is a constant, like water filling the spaces that need filling—including the space inside her that needs it, too. “God, I know you are there, you exist . . . I just have to do my part,” she reads on one occasion. “Make me strong for my kids, make me able to forgive,” she reads on another.

The words in later pages, and the presence of Noura herself, support her statement that sometimes her life feels like a movie she’s watching, but she thinks it’s one with a happy ending. She’s working her way toward that, a belated reward

to a relationship that went bad, as the partner she knew disappeared bit by bit and seemed bent on erasing her, too.

The real tests for Noura began after the ones experienced by most young couples—stretching to make ends meet, trying to gain traction professionally; she and her former husband had the additional learning curve of living in the United States, a new home but a foreign country to them, far removed from their families.

But the hardships that fill Noura's books, the ones it took years for her to overcome, started and grew later: after her then-husband started earning a better salary, after they bought a home, after they had children, after she agreed to be a housewife and a full-time mom, after she gave up her own professional ambitions, after what she suspected turned out to be true. He was straying from the marriage and seeing other women. "A wall of glass" suddenly seemed to separate them, she said.

The infidelity was hurtful enough. But it was only the beginning.

He undermined her self-esteem by telling her she didn't know how to do anything. He made sure of that, by isolating her, depriving her of trusted friends, of access to bank accounts, of driving the car. He tried to make her think something was wrong with her.

The abuse was physical, too.

Her voice is soft and low when she matter-of-factly tells of the time her husband hit her and dragged her along the floor. That is when she threatened him with not seeing the children anymore. And she called the police, a call that turned out to be her lifeline in what he had planned next.

He convinced her to go on a vacation to visit their families and to try to work things out. A believer in family first, she

wanted to try. He booked the round-trip tickets. She packed for herself and the children, clothes, passports, official papers. She got on the plane with him and their kids. She noticed he brought no luggage. Once they were flying, she said, his niceness disappeared.

When they arrived in their native country, he tried to turn family against her, suggesting she was disloyal and the cause of all their problems. Then he left her and the children at her family's house. After he disappeared, she discovered he had been through their luggage and had stolen their passports, their Social Security cards, their birth certificates, and the driver's license she had kept but which he wouldn't let her use. And she had no money.

High and dry thousands of miles from their Kentucky home. Stranded—but for one thing, Noura said.

In his theft of his family's documents, he had missed the card given to her by the officer who had taken the one call she made to the police in Louisville. It had a report number on it.

She took the card with her to the American embassy, where her story of abandonment and abuse checked out. Between that and money she borrowed for provisional passports, she and the children were able to fly home.

But to what?

Legal machinery, ranging from domestic violence orders to foreclosure notices to applying for food stamps and eventually petitioning for divorce, became part of family life.

So did worry, always there, always roiling.

She was terrified for them, she said, and what tomorrow might bring. "The kids, the house, the bills; how am I going to do it?" she wondered.

Shelter, safe shelter, was always at the top of her mind. The home they had lived in offered little comfort. Her missing

husband had gotten rid of many of the furnishings. There were no utilities. And there was the real concern that he might return. Changed locks did not offer reassurance. Friends and agencies provided occasional, alternative haven, and so did the family car; having learned from her overseas experience, she kept all their documents with her, no matter where they slept and lived in those uncertain years.

Bigger picture, there was her future and that of her children.

Yes, she had given up her career and had been out of the workforce for years. And, yes, a destructive marital relationship had undermined her self-confidence. But kids are the ultimate reality check, and she knew she had to be able to support them on her own. She wanted to keep her children together, she wanted to provide a new home for them, and she had to find a way to do that.

“Maybe I can go back to college and find myself again,” she recalled thinking, “and do something good for my kids.”

So at first, she worked part-time and took online classes. Then, as she became surer about herself, she attended college classes and excelled at them—and that’s where a counselor echoed what others had told her: she might be interested in Family Scholar House.

The more she heard, the more interested she became. She took the classes. She filled out the applications. And she didn’t wait long.

“When they handed me the keys,” she said, “it was the happiest day of my life. It is the best help God gave me.”

In her new apartment, Noura washed for prayer, sat on the floor, and thanked God for keeping her children with her, and keeping them in a home and not a shelter.

She restarted from there, supported, she said, by Family Scholar House activities for the children, tutoring, therapy

sessions, and, above all, feeling as if she were in a safe space for the two years she was in the program. The safe space allowed her to focus on her children and her studies. It was where, she said, God sent the light for her and her family.

When Noura recounts her struggles, as she flips through the pages of journals that tell of her past, she is on the eve of a success she imagined, and which the programs and staff of Family Scholar House supported and nurtured.

She has graduated.

She has moved and moved on.

She has aced a professional board exam.

She will start a new profession, one she loves, in the following days.

“Life,” she says, “is a test for everybody.”

She has passed, while living into her belief that—as a favorite passage of the Quran teaches—the best rewards from God are for people who are very patient.

But no more waiting.

The future is now, and Noura is ready to meet it.

Noura in Her Own Words

How has your participation at Family Scholar House impacted you and your children?

Family Scholar House was the light that God sent for me and my children. They brought back my confidence in myself and kept me and my children focused on our goals. They were always there when I had any struggles and they always helped me to solve them.

What message from your experience do you most want to share with others?

Have faith in God. Do your best and don't give up. There are always many open doors if one closes. Stay positive because everything happens for a reason and the thing that hurts you might be the thing that makes you a better and stronger person.

If it were possible, what guidance or encouragement would you want to share with your 15-year-old self?

Life is a gift. Be enthusiastic. Work for your dreams. One day they will come true.

What are your hopes and dreams for yourself?

To do good in the job that I enjoy and to pay back for the community. Go on with my education soon.

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What hopes and dreams do you have for your children?

I hope to see my children successful with good characters. I hope they know what they want to do and to work for their goals. I hope all of them get the best college education and to be always dedicated and helpful to everyone around them.

Reflection

What does Noura's story teach, in a few words?

What message is being communicated?

What does it mean to me personally?

What does it mean to the community?

How will I carry the message forward?



CHAPTER TWO

Community

Courtney's Story

Seven years separate her from it, but Courtney's sense of isolation at the time of her big turning point seems fresh and real. Tears cloud her eyes twice as she speaks of it: once when she relives a memory from a musical she performed as a teenager that is both cautionary and prophetic of her life as a single parent, and once when she recalls the relief of overcoming barriers to arrive at a place where she belongs.

She is the youngest of five, an integral part of a close family. The sunny, vivacious woman she is now hints at the number of friends she must have had when she was younger. But when she became pregnant at 19—having the first unplanned pregnancy in her family, she said—she felt alone, part of a new club whose other members she did not know.

Yes, her family stuck by her, loved her, and supported her, but as with most good things, she would later learn there can be unexpected layers and complications to that. And, yes, she had friends . . . and they kept going out—only without Courtney; just one friend still made it a point to see her after the tectonic life shift of pregnancy. Her daughter's father? A non-starter; she said his emotionally and verbally abusive behavior shut that down.

Looking in her own rearview mirror, Courtney said “the whole mix” then made her afraid to live on her own, to be on her own. But finding a place to live wasn’t the same thing as finding a place to thrive, a place that felt like her home.

She didn’t know how she would manage to take care of a baby, study, keep her grades up, and work to support herself and her child. The very thought of all that overwhelmed her. So Courtney and her infant daughter lived with her parents while she started college classes for a career in orthodontia, which seemed to her a smart call for a single parent. Additionally, she labored at her small business of making children’s clothes in the shards of time left after she got her daughter down for the night or for snatches of the night.

Sometimes sleep was rare for everyone in the house, and Courtney recalls with empathy for all involved, how the tension could boil over.

That wasn’t the only challenge.

Everything had changed.

Most young college students aren’t breastfeeding and don’t have to think about finding a private area to pump breast milk, but Courtney did, and school was too far away for a quick zip to her parents’ house between classes to pump. And her new normal—being a new, young, and single mom—kept her from joining in her school’s binding social rituals of Greek life and sports events.

In her world of have-to, no one around her spoke her new language or seemed to understand the landmarks of her new country.

“Even though I had that family support, they had no idea what I felt like, what I had to deal with,” she remembered.

Enter a cosmic nudge.

Someone once said that coincidence is God’s way of remaining anonymous.

The anonymity part of that adage, and this new interruption of what had become her regularly scheduled programming of baby-school-home-work, doesn't jibe with Courtney's understanding of things seen and unseen. When a friend sent her an email containing information about an internship with an organization that helped single parents, Courtney said this was God's way of telling her, "Here you go."

Of course, she took the hint, and there she went.

"I'm a single mom. I'm the people you help," she said to Family Scholar House.

Courtney got the FSH internship, and she was immediately surprised—and consoled—by the discovery of so many single parents, people who knew her battles and shared her same challenges because those battles and challenges were theirs, too.

"Maybe I should look more into this," she thought.

Her application and completion of the prerequisite courses was quick and motivated. Her relief was immediate, too. As was acceptance by fellow participants.

When she and her daughter moved into their FSH apartment—conveniently closer to school, which saved on time and worry and hurry, and the cost of a parking pass—she said five women welcomed them. This, finally, was the sorority she had missed: neighbors who had their own places, their own homes, but who watched each other's children, stayed up late and studied, and wanted each other to succeed.

If you think this is the point where Courtney's life changed again, you would be right, because it certainly did with her newfound community. But it changed in an unexpected way, too.

About that would-be career in orthodontia . . .

Courtney, the good student in high school, became a C student and falling in her early college days. And the GPA crash wasn't just because she had a baby.

In addition to the other residents at FSH are staff and advisers who help participants stay on track with all the balls the student-parents are juggling. “They recognize small successes and big ones,” Courtney said. And the staff members notice trouble spots when they arise. The support is not passive. That’s part of the community to which Courtney belonged, too.

So Courtney’s FSH academic adviser met with her. “What are you doing?” the adviser asked, and the question was about more than grades. It was about life and about where Courtney was going.

Courtney admitted that her pre-orthodontia biology major was not her passion, and that conversation led her to a meeting with her college adviser. She said she wanted job security, and she figured being a dentist, having regular hours and good earnings, were just what she needed as a single mom.

But the adviser’s questions about her life up to this point opened her eyes: Her past jobs had included sales and entertainment. She had danced since the age of three, acted since age seven, and had been in 21 musicals since eighth grade. The college adviser also asked this clincher: “Where do bones and teeth come in?”

The answer was nowhere, and Courtney changed her major to communication. And she found another home. She called it “the biggest game changer.”

She loved her new classes. Her grades came up (she called her mother and then her FSH adviser when she earned her first “A”). She wasn’t as stressed, which made her a better mom for her daughter. She was on her way to graduating and to finding something, career-wise, she loved to do.

She said she is grateful for the “pestering” about her future, certain she wouldn’t have reached out to the college adviser had she not been encouraged by FSH.

Working toward that future wasn't easy. There were hardships. There were still tearful nights. Courtney and her daughter lived on a very limited income and public assistance, and the FSH classes in finance came in very handy for the lean years.

But there were comforts, too. Courtney noted that the program gives participants experiences as memories. Through FSH, they received tickets for events they otherwise couldn't afford, and Courtney cites attending *The Nutcracker* as a lasting gift for her and her daughter.

She "knew-ish" that she wanted to work in public relations or marketing after her graduation (3.5 GPA!). She got an internship at a radio station, doing promotions, commercials, and social media. "This is a dream," she thought. One that came true.

Courtney applied to 100 stations for a job, and heard back from one—another game-changer. Though she needed a full-time job with benefits, she took the part-time job that was offered and she filled in for other people, took advantage of every professional opportunity, and signed up for every event. When a full-time opening came up shortly afterward, she got the job. She became the social media and events coordinator at the media company that had hired her only two months earlier.

On the home front, more headline news. In less than two years' time, she and her daughter went from visiting a food pantry for help with groceries to moving into a house they own, thanks to Courtney's hard work and a loan from her parents.

She has her full-time job, and she is working at three small businesses out of her new home. Her daughter is going to the school Courtney wanted her to attend.

Courtney freely acknowledges that it's scary to think where they might have been without the program that allowed

her to become a woman one step at a time, breathing room that provided space for the whole family to get better. Her community at FSH encouraged her and led her through college, she said, and her family met her at the finish line.

The performer Courtney once recalls a song from *Into the Woods*. It is one of the two times she tears up in talking about her journey. “Children Will Listen” resonates with her now in a way it couldn’t, when she first performed it as a young teen: “Careful the things you say, children will listen. Careful the things you do, children will see and learn,” the song goes.

She hopes her daughter understands the hardships they went through to get where they are now. “I would never have made it if it weren’t for her. She helped me study, kept me on track, understood I had to stay up late after she went to sleep, either to make clothes to sell, or study.”

Courtney the FSH participant, tears up the second time when she remembers another form of graduation: She recently was able to make her first donation to Family Scholar House. She wrote a check for \$20, her first step toward giving back.

Courtney in Her Own Words

How has your participation at Family Scholar House impacted you and your child?

It gave me the support I needed to realize I was not alone in this journey, but rather with 50 other women and men in the exact position I was: trying to better their lives for themselves and their children by getting their degrees. Living at FSH allowed me to meet some lifelong friends, residents, and staff members.

What message from your experience do you most want to share with others?

Donations to FSH allowed me to get where I am today and I cannot thank the people who made them enough. The number of single parents in our community is unbelievable, but FSH takes 50 of them, at only one campus, and gives them the resources to graduate college, as well as the life lessons needed to become successful members of our society and role models for their children. We oftentimes take for granted the resources and people that God places in our path, but we need to realize God does not make mistakes or coincidences. I would not be where I am today without my family, FSH, or my faith.

What guidance or encouragement would you want to share with your 15-year-old self?

That you're going to hit some really difficult times where you feel like it can never get better, and even then, seems to only get worse. But I promise you, if you keep pushing forward, one day at a time, you *will* come out on top and you *will* become a stronger, more faithful woman because of it.

What are your hopes and dreams for yourself?

A year ago, my hopes and dreams were to be able to go to work, come straight home, spend time with my daughter and not have to worry about staying up to study, and to become self-sufficient. To be able to buy a home and to be able to financially be able to send my daughter to the school of my choice, a Catholic grade school that I graduated from. I have achieved all of that. Now my hopes and dreams look a little different. I hope I never lose my faith again. I hope I am able to give up my control and trust that God will lead me to the path he chose for me and give me the courage to allow His will to be done.

What hopes and dreams do you have for your child?

That she understands the hardships we both had to endure to get where we are, and that she understands I never would have made it if it weren't for her. She has been my partner in life. She helped my study, kept me on track, understood that I had to stay up after she went to sleep to either make clothes to sell, or study. I hope she doesn't have to endure those same challenges, but still stays humble and realizes that everyone's story and journey are different. I hope she always keeps her light-hearted spirit and her love for not only our family but also all God's people.

Reflection

What does Courtney's story teach, in a few words?

What message is being communicated?

What does it mean to me personally?

What does it mean to the community?

How will I carry the message forward?



CHAPTER THREE

Commitment

Maria's Story

“You can’t start the next chapter of your life if you keep rereading the last one.”

The deliberate resolve and implied promise of that post on Maria’s Facebook page are very much alive in the bright-eyed young woman who extends her hand and offers a warm “hello,” with apologies for rushing from work on her lunch hour. Underscoring her social media declaration, Maria seems not only to have survived the previous chapters of her life. She is thriving in the new ones she is writing now.

She is 31 years old. Mother of four sons, ages 16, seven, three, and eight months. Happily married. College graduate. A manager at an area business, on her fourth promotion.

These bright facts of her life today fan out like sunbeams from a radiant person and personality whose wattage will dim a little when she speaks of rough and tough spots from her childhood and those she encountered on the road to adulthood. But the radiance never recedes entirely, it clouds only momentarily, because she has prevailed over the sad and the bad. The commitment to the positive she has held onto and

built upon seems to light the way for the life she has today, and the one she wants for herself and her family tomorrow.

“I look at where I am,” she said, “and I appreciate the fight, the never giving up and pushing forward.”

She has pushed forward from the time she was born to a mother who struggled with substance abuse—crack—and a father who lived away from the family until Maria reunited with him in her late teens. He had his own issues with alcohol.

Maria, her siblings, and her mother occasionally lived in a car or crowded into a too-small apartment with her mother’s friends who also were on drugs. The five of them—Maria, her mother, her two brothers and her sister, the latter of whom she describes as mentally challenged—slept all together in one bed. Coming home to the water and electricity being turned off wasn’t unusual.

She was often in what she calls “survivor mode” and part of that was looking after her siblings. “I don’t remember not taking care of someone,” she said.

Life pressed in on her in other ways that robbed her of youth.

Along with school, she went to work at a restaurant owned by a family member when she was 13.

She became pregnant with her first child when she was in eighth grade. “I didn’t want to get an abortion,” she said. “I was taking care of kids anyway.”

Her young pregnancy drew the attention of the appropriate agencies, and she went to live in foster care while her baby went with his paternal grandmother; she didn’t want her baby in foster care. She was separated from her siblings and her baby boy for more than a year.

Maria shares these stories when she is asked to talk about her childhood. But you get the sense that the stories—what she has already lived, what her past was—are more than

tragedies and setbacks that might have sidelined a lot of other people. They are the hard-shelled seeds for the later flowering in her own life, which would come only after two more unplanned pregnancies, the death of one of those babies, and an unsuccessful attempt to make it on her own.

At 18, she was pregnant again and went to live with her dad. She had another little boy, who did not live to be a year old. Maria says that when her baby died while he was outside her care, she went blank and stayed blank until she could bear it, and then she began to re-evaluate her life.

The one idea she kept coming back to was that her deceased son's life could not have been in vain. She had to keep going. "I want to go to college," she told herself, and soon she was on a computer looking into majors and financial aid, and finding an academic home far away from Florida, where she was living at the time. She found a place to live, got a job, and her father helped drive her and her surviving son to their new springboard into a better life she imagined for them.

But there was no getting around it; she was on her own in a place far away from any home and anyone she had known.

She was working; she was raising her son; she was going to college; she was 19. She saw a different reality for herself eventually. When she could, she watched legal shows on television, marveling at the strong women she saw, telling herself, "That's going to be me one day."

It wouldn't happen quite yet.

Soon, too many responsibilities and too much isolation led to the collapse of her grades. And she was in another relationship and pregnant again. "I was so disappointed in myself," she said. "I let everyone down."

From the vantage point of now, Maria says, "I didn't know my value or my worth. That's why I got into the relationships I had."

She didn't want to give up on school, so she looked again.

This time, geography would be fortuitous, because the move she made would bring her to college in Louisville. That would bring her to join a church in the city. That would introduce her to a new friend. And that new friend would introduce Maria, now with two children and intent on succeeding as a woman free of unhealthy, abusive relationships and as a secure, providing parent and as an achieving college student, to Family Scholar House.

"Stability was always my issue," Maria said. "I wanted to finish school in the same house, but we were always evicted."

Her childhood dream had finally found her.

It would take about two semesters for it to sink in—"The light switch just clicked"—but she was home.

The introductory workshops to Family Scholar House encouraged her with their emphasis on healthy relationships. She also appreciated the accountability aspects of the program. But more important than any of that was the effect the support system, and the people who embodied it, had on her.

"You're going to see me cry," Maria says, as she recounts how the young woman she was a handful of years ago—the one who wouldn't talk—felt the walls being pulled down by the Family Scholar House staff who believed in her and taught her to believe in herself.

They helped her get a tutor to bring up her grades. They modeled the strength and confidence they told her she had inside of her. "You can be whoever you want to be," they told her.

In finding them, in finding herself, she found her voice, too.

The extended stability of school, shelter, and support put Maria on track to authoring the rest of her life.

She found the time and space to focus on becoming a "better me."

A place to call home allowed her children to develop the friendships she couldn't in her patchwork childhood, to do well in school, and to build the skills they will need for their own futures.

Security wasn't just a distant goal anymore. It was part of their lives.

The move, the church, and her new reality of value and voice led her to her college degree—and to the man she would marry. She had learned her own worth; now her husband knew it, too. They are raising four sons: the two she came to the marriage with and the two they have had together since they were married.

While she and her own father have remained close, Maria did the hard work of addressing unfinished business with her mother. She used the voice she found as an adult to say the words she needed to say before they could travel to a place of healing. Her mother heard them and said she was sorry. Maria says she is the one who led her mother to sobriety.

Maria has used her education, her conscience, and her confidence to try to improve the lives outside her family, as well, advocating for victims of human trafficking and speaking on Capitol Hill about the program at Family Scholar House.

The radiant young woman says she never wanted her children to live the life she did, and they haven't and they won't. "I refuse to let them live what I lived," she said.

She doesn't want her life to be defined by her past, and it isn't. "We are blessed," she said of her family.

She wants to make a difference in other people's lives, which is why she has shared the telling of the older chapters of hers.

"Everyone has a story," Maria said. "It's what you do with the story."

Maria in Her Own Words

How has your participation at Family Scholar House impacted you and your children?

Growing up in foster care and not having stability caused dysfunction to be the normal in my life. Moving homes and schools frequently wasn't unusual. FSH gave me and my children stability, which, in return, allowed me to identify areas that needed to heal from my childhood.

Having the lack of stability impacted me completing goals such as my education. Having the support from FSH, I was able to break the cycle, and [change] what was once a path to becoming a statistic to now becoming a success. I gained confidence, boldness, and identity.

As a result of me becoming a better me, my children benefited as well. They now value education because they watched how I remained focused on our family and academics. They were given the opportunity to develop relationships and have friends because of the stability the program provided. They were not consistently changing schools and homes. The programs such as Toddler Book Club gave my seven-year-old the passion of reading and he is now reading on a fourth- to fifth-grade level. My oldest was given the opportunity to participate in leadership summits, which gave him tools he is now using to run for class president his senior year of high school.

Most importantly, FSH empowered me to set a standard that will live on through my children and their children. The old cycle of poverty was broken and the new cycle of prosperity has begun.

What message from your experience do you most want to share with others?

Every day we are growing to become better and stronger. Never allow where you were yesterday to determine where you are going today.

What guidance or encouragement would you want to share with your 15-year-old self?

I would tell my 15-year-old self to read this scripture daily: “I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.” —Psalm 139:14

I would remind myself of my worth and I would tell myself daily how much I’m loved.

What are your hopes and dreams for yourself?

My hopes and dreams are simply not to allow my trials and tribulations to be in vain. I want to make a difference in others’ lives.

What hopes and dreams do you have for your children?

My hopes for my children are for them to not make the same poor decisions I made. I want them to grow up and be strong, respectable, educated men that love God. I know if they love God and live according to his will for their lives, then they will contribute to society and make this world an even better place.

Reflection

What does Maria's story teach, in a few words?

What message is being communicated?

What does it mean to me personally?

What does it mean to the community?

How will I carry the message forward?



CHAPTER FOUR

Achievement

Janine's Story

Janine knew from the time she was six that “it was me against the world.” The feeling would compound a few years later when she came home one day to find she didn’t have a home anymore. “I didn’t know what eviction was,” she said.

After that day, however, she knew—and she knew how it felt to see her childhood, her belongings, thrown in a Dumpster. She remembers that to this day. Down to the detail of what kind of Dumpster: Rumpke.

Reading would be her way of coping in her younger days, before she left the instability of two parents grappling with substance abuse for a home with her grandparents.

When Janine grew older, she still found inspiration and solace in words. She loved English in school. And she found something that spoke to her in the work of poet/rapper Tupac Shakur. She evokes his imagery when she describes herself as “the rose that grew from a crack in the concrete,” one that, Shakur wrote, learned to walk without feet and learned to breathe by keeping her dreams.

Yes, the world, the one Janine squared off against from the time she was little, can seem like that concrete. But, as the poem promised, there are roses to be found and to be cultivated.

The 24-year-old says she does not have hopes, but she does have dreams: “To become a phenomenal, admirable Jefferson County Public Schools teacher,” she said. She mentions that her mother was a teacher once and so was her great-grandmother.

But this is her dream, one she has kept, and it speaks to the tenacity of her survival and her flourishing.

Janine has stayed on track to graduate in late 2017 with a bachelor’s degree in elementary school education. “Magna cum laude,” she said with a lilt of her voice in that telling detail.

Months before she realizes that achievement, her professional signature on her emails already shows pride in profession as well as immersion in activities to prepare her for the classroom leadership and relationships about which she speaks with clear passion.

After her name and projected date of graduation, she lists several stations of important experience that line the track to her hard-won diploma: President, Student-Parent Association. Mentor, Students for Students. Mentor, Seneca Mentoring Project. Minority Teachers Recruitment Project Recipient.

But the professional, as important as it is, comes second to the personal: her four-year-old twins (a boy and a girl). They are her company in taking on the world, and the biggest reason for her crisp and polished correspondence and comportment. The aspiring teacher almost sounds like a student when she says, “I wouldn’t be the person I am without them.”

She certainly wouldn’t be at Family Scholar House, and within reach of her goals, without them.

After the ups and downs with her parents, Janine lived with her grandparents until she was 18. She said they encouraged her

to be independent and not to be distracted from her studies. It would take a while for that advice to kick in—but to her credit, and with the help of Family Scholar House, it did kick in.

She took off in school—great grades and lots of extracurricular activities—in her early teens.

A little later, a distraction she'd been warned about: She fell in love and joined her life for a while with the person who would be the father of her children. They went to school and then college together and worked together, succeeded and fell short together in some of those endeavors, and along the way Janine discovered some hard truths, among the biggest of realities: She was pregnant. Of the two would-be young parents, she was going to be the one to step up. The concrete was back.

There were starts and stops to her education. “I was a mess,” she said. For the first time, she failed a few classes. “I believe in myself,” she said, “but my heart and my head were telling me different things.”

Finally, they spoke in unison to her. She left her partner and he took steps to get serious about his own life. She said they are now co-parents to the twins.

Just when she needed to—home was tough, school was tough, life was tough—Janine heard about Family Scholar House through friends. They told her about a place for single parents who also wanted to get a college education and to learn life-management skills that would serve them and their families in the future.

Janine had already tried too much juggling without that structure and it left her frightened and overwhelmed. Though the requirements she needed to qualify for FSH also were intimidating, this seemed a more promising course for her and her children. She was interested in the course on healthy relationships, and her son would be helped with support in

socialization. She and her young family joined the FSH family in the middle of 2015.

She found “motivation to be greater than what I was.”

She refused to be only a statistic, she said, “a black female who had kids when she was young.”

She changed her major from theater to elementary education. “I was meant to be used another way,” she said.

When she speaks of the difference a good teacher can make, she is speaking of the kind of teacher she wants to be: someone relatable and compassionate, someone who sees her students’ potential and helps them reach their goals. She also could be talking about the people at FSH who “woke” her up.

There is something of the little girl she was who speaks of loving the FSH apartment home she shares with her children, the one that has allowed her to grow as a parent and to spend more time with her kids:

She remembers what it was like to carry heavy bags of laundry to and from a laundromat for washing and drying when she was a child; her apartment has its own washer and dryer generously donated by GE. She also speaks of the apartment’s floor. “I learn on the floor, I do my thinking on the floor,” she said.

And maybe some dreaming, too.

The other dream that has stayed with her, another she has kept, is that her children be happy, that they learn from her mistakes, and know every day that they are loved.

In their apartment home on a Family Scholar House campus, there are constant reminders of their worth to the outside world and to each other.

Janine has put together what she calls the Achievement Wall, in which framed prizes, awards, certificates, and other goodies greet the family each time they enter their home.

JANINE

There is no chance that her children will see their childhoods piled in a Dumpster.

Their photos are placed on a counter that greets visitors as they walk in the door. More photos and artwork paper the refrigerator. And certificates bearing their names hang on the Achievement Wall.

“Anything they get,” she said, “I collect. I’m a keeper.”

The Achievement Wall is for Janine, too—her honors and awards hang there, as well.

And, soon, she said, she will hang a copy of Tupac Shakur’s “The Rose That Grew from Concrete” with this garden of family treasures.

There is another poem attributed to the late writer, who didn’t live to realize his own potential, that also speaks to Janine’s purpose and drive to provide a platform for her and her family’s success. Janine has embodied the poet’s message of learning from pain and believing in oneself, in “Ambition over Adversity.” The message of the title is like a pulse feeding her life.

“When I know I want something,” Janine said, “it doesn’t go away.”

Next stop: graduation. “I want cords; I want honors,” she exclaims.

Then on to graduate school for a master’s degree.

And then, perhaps to start a business that helps income-strained families realize their own dreams.

There is more than one bloom to this rose. She’s going to need a bigger wall.

Janine in Her Own Words

How has your participation at FSH impacted you and your children?

Family Scholar House has given my family a place to call home. We have a spacious two-bedroom apartment that allows us to enjoy our space and utilize what it has to offer. When we moved in, the apartment came furnished with our own washer and dryer, computer, telephone, and kitchen utilities (dishwasher, stove, oven, microwave). With my computer, I have the chance to do my homework. With my telephone, I have a back-up line to use that alerts me when danger is around my home and campus. With my washer and dryer, I have a stationary laundry room that I can perform chores in without having to haul baskets of clothes to and from laundry locations. My children have a variety of children to interact and play with. The porch is the best part of our space because we enjoy the outdoors and we have a safe place to enjoy it in.

Being involved in this program has allowed me to grow as a mother and advocate for my community and education. My first semester at U of L in this program, I earned my first 4.0 GPA. I was ecstatic. The workshops that take place here are amazing and help me to become a better person. My favorite workshop is the Mommy and Me cooking classes. I learn so much about healthy snacks my kids can eat and healthy dinners I can make at home.

FSH has also helped me grow professionally. I attend Speed Mentoring workshops and receive feedback on my resume. I attend various luncheons and events throughout the year that

give me the opportunity to “strut my stuff.” I didn’t have any business attire coming into the program, but Linda’s Closet in the Downtown Scholar House campus equipped me with the outfits I need to have the confidence to keep pushing forward in the professional world. FSH keeps me busy. I appreciate the attention, encouragement, and support the program offers because I wouldn’t be the independent, self-sufficient woman I am without it.

What message from your experience do you most want to share with others?

Take advantage of what this program has to offer ...opportunities are unlimited. But only come into the program when you are ready. There is a lot of responsibility to balance when involved in this program and you have to be prepared to accept the challenge if you want to graduate and be self-sufficient.

I would also say don’t underestimate your potential. Don’t be shy; come out to the workshops and events FSH hosts. You never know what connections you’ll make! I have met and even have had personal coffee with individuals who are speaking for conferences. The opportunities are unlimited. Seek them and they’ll find you.

What guidance or encouragement would you want to share with your 15-year-old self?

I would have encouraged myself to focus on my studies and my relationship with God. At 15 years old, I was worried about the wrong things in life, wrong things that have caught up to me and caused me to be in the situation I’m in. But we learn

from experiences. I would never take back anything that has happened because all the turmoil and lessons brought me to be the powerful woman I am today.

What are your hopes and dreams for yourself?

I don't have hopes. I make goals and order my steps to achieve them. Nothing is hope when I know goals can be achieved . . . especially with the grace of God. I do dream, though. It's what makes me eager to accomplish my goals.

My dream is to become a phenomenal, admirable Jefferson County Public Schools teacher. Eventually, I would like to branch off and start my own business in a day care or something that helps give income-strained parents what their kids need. As much as I enjoy working under someone, I want to establish my own business with families and kids that helps my community.

First, however, I must graduate and I plan to walk across that stage for the second time with my bachelor's degree next December. I plan to enroll in the master's program also and begin my teaching career.

What hopes and dreams do you have for your children?

I dream that my children will be happy. That is all I want for them to be. Happy with what we have and what we have been having—each other. I dream that my children are wise and learn from the mistakes I have made and use that base to justify what their choices will be in life. I just want my babies to wake up every day knowing they are loved and valued, and I wouldn't be the person I am without them. I do all I can to

JANINE

give them the experiences I appreciated when I was young . . . whether that means taking a free trip to the park or a week's vacation to the beach or reading a cheesy puppet book . . . I do what makes them happy. I just want them to live a happy life and support one another. Just as my sister and I do.

Reflection

What does Janine's story teach, in a few words?

What message is being communicated?

What does it mean to me personally?

What does it mean to the community?

How will I carry the message forward?



CHAPTER FIVE

Work

CayWanta's Story

From the outside, maybe people couldn't see or know about the upheaval in CayWanta's young life. Her father wasn't around and her mother's bouts with drug addiction and sobriety were tidal . . . in and out.

Now, at 23 and long removed from the home that taught her to recognize it, CayWanta remembers the particular smell of crack, like a paper plate burning on the stove, she said. That meant her mother was using again.

Except for confiding in a high school counselor who would be an invaluable ally, CayWanta kept the family pain private, even when she and her siblings were taken somewhere else to live. She just got up earlier to go to school, because school was what mattered.

She maintained.

Make that more than maintained.

The tangle of home didn't show in her grades: she had a 3.9 GPA in high school.

It didn't show in her extracurricular activities. She was a cheerleader and she was in a work-study program that helped her earn money and college credits. She and her boyfriend were voted homecoming and prom queen and king; she still has the crowns.

And she did a lot of that overcoming of an unsteady home life and balancing the grades, the school, the work, the popularity, as a full-time teen mom and full-time student.

She had her son when she was 16 and a junior in high school.

The face she showed the world at that time—the young woman who had, in her words, “drive and determination regardless of circumstances,” the one who seemed to rise to meet the many challenges of her radically changed life—was not the one she saw in the mirror or the one she judged in rare, quiet moments.

She felt “hopeless, tainted,” and that having her son when she did would impede her strides toward her goals of college and, after that, law school.

The reflection, as unnerving as it was, provided a way forward.

It became fuel for her forward motion toward a future in which she achieved her goals.

It inspired her to be for her son what she did not have growing up; she would be the opposite and equal positive reaction to what she had known as a child.

Aside from her own character assets, she had three other things going for her in scaling the “mountain of struggles” she faced.

Her good grades and graduating at the top of her class.

Her high school counselor, who knew what she'd been up against and how focused she was on school, and who helped her enroll in college.

Her chance meeting with members of Family Scholar House when she made a speech upon winning a school district-wide award for the work-study program she took in high school.

She graduated from high school in June 2011.

She turned 18 in July.

She and her son moved into their Family Scholar House apartment in August, and she would go to college on a full-ride scholarship she had earned with her hard work.

She said she doesn't know what she would have done without Family Scholar House, especially the academic and family support the organization and staff provided for her and her son.

Even with that support, the first semester was hard. Living on her own, paying bills on her own, supporting her son on her own, all took a toll on her grades.

The young woman at the top of her class just a few months before ended up with several Cs, which put her scholarship at risk.

She hunkered down and righted her school boat. "I've never been there again," she said. "I got four Cs in five years [at college]."

The family life she kept private when she was growing up, but which molded much of who and what she has become, started coming into play in college.

CayWanta already knew that drugs would not be part of her life, the way they were part of her mother's. The up-close-and-personal witness she was to the hardships wrought by addiction were searing reminders of what hell drugs played in people's lives.

Likewise, her close relationship with her brother offered her an intimate look at what she wanted her future profession to be. She was the person in their family who showed up to

support him; she attended his court hearings when he was arrested, and what she saw further stoked her fire to become a lawyer—specifically, a public defender.

It was her observation that those without “dream team” representation, people of color and people without financial means, received harsher charges and sentences than what their alleged crimes merited. She saw court-appointed lawyers who weren’t prepared, weren’t thorough, and were not in touch with their clients.

These experiences, coupled with her college internship as a court-designated worker, led her to one conclusion: “I know I have to be an advocate for people who can’t speak for themselves.”

That guiding principle dictated her major of criminal justice. Her own work ethic provided the extra push for a cum laude diploma.

But beyond her personal and future ambitions, was the little person who has been with her since she was 16.

“My son is my biggest motivation,” she said.

He knows how much and how hard his mother works. He watches her, and she tells him what she’s doing. He knows she studies. He knows she has goals.

She wants him to find his own passion and to follow his own heart, once he knows it.

“I’m here to provide everything that I was not provided so he does not have to experience what I went through,” she said. “I’m here for him whenever he may need guidance.”

CayWanta was the first person in her family to graduate from college.

Twenty-five guests came to see her walk across the stage and receive her degree.

Her son was one of them.

So was her father, no longer absent. She wrote him a letter when she was 17 and he answered. "I just wanted to know my dad." They have an understanding, she said. They visit on holidays and talk every couple of weeks.

Her sister was in her cheering section. So were extended family members such as nieces, nephews, aunts, uncles, and cousins.

She wanted her mom to attend, but she didn't. CayWanta doesn't talk to her now.

But on the day she reached one of her biggest goals, to graduate from college, she wasn't thinking about her mother. She was thinking about herself as a mother, her son's mother, and a mother to whom other aspiring women might relate.

In a letter she wrote for law school applications, CayWanta recalled, "On the day of graduation, I reminisced about the nights I had stayed up late studying for exams, the days I tended to my sick child, about the days I did not know how I could study for an exam while working and mother my growing child. Initially, I wanted to earn my degree and enter law school for other teenage parents who did not have the opportunity, for family members that could not achieve their goals. However, as I have grown, I see that I earned this degree for myself. I am seeking law school to help others."

The result of her first try at the law school admissions test wasn't what she had hoped it would be, so she has retreated to a familiar pattern that has served her well: she's working on it.

"I'm willing to take another year to better my score. I will continue working harder to get in," she said. "The plan may change, but the goal does not!"

As she keeps her eye on that prize, she works as a family advocate for AmeriCorps and she has started a part-time, temporary job at a law firm to get her foot in the door of her dream profession.

STORIES THAT DEFINE US

She goes into that door with an inspiring reminder.

When she graduated from college, she had written “Always have faith” on the cap that went with her gown.

When she stepped into the law firm a year later, she went with a tattoo of “Faith” behind her right ear.

The word can be hidden from view, if need be, but CayWanta always knows it’s there . . . to erase doubts should they ever whisper in her ear.

CayWanta in Her Own Words

How has your participation at Family Scholar House impacted you and your child?

My participation has opened the doors for a lot of opportunities. You would be surprised how many people are affiliated with Family Scholar House and how excited they are to even know what the program offers, and who extend their hand if help is ever needed. As a post-resident, I am able to look back on everything I was given coming through the program and I am so very grateful for it.

What message from your experience do you most want to share with others?

When you have set a goal for yourself, it can easily be very attainable. I had just turned 18 upon moving into this program. My main goal was to take care of my child and graduate with a degree in criminal justice. My child is safe and sound as of today and I am proud to say that I earned that degree this past May. My message to others: you can do anything you put your mind to!

What guidance or encouragement would you want to share with your 15-year-old self?

I am now 23, so the 15-year-old me is still pretty recent. If I had words of encouragement, it would be to take it one day

at a time. At 15, I had a lot of things going on that a normal 15-year-old should not have going on. But if those things didn't take place, who knows where I would be?

What are your hopes and dreams for yourself?

My dream is to become a lawyer. I have already graduated with my BS in criminal justice. That step is done. I had high hopes of becoming a student this fall semester, but it may not work out that way. In the meantime, I'll just continue working harder to get in. The plan may change, but the goal does not!

People have passions for a reason. I do not know anything else that I would be *great* at besides being a lawyer. It's just destined to happen.

What are your hopes and dreams for your child?

For my son, I will always tell him to follow his heart. I'm not here to dictate the career he takes in life. I'm here to provide everything that I was not provided so he does not have to experience what I went through. I'm here for him whenever he may need guidance. If he has that determination and drive to be successful, I will back him up, always and forever.

Reflection

What does CayWanta's story teach, in a few words?

What message is being communicated?

What does it mean to me personally?

What does it mean to the community?

How will I carry the message forward?



CHAPTER SIX

Resilience

D. Hunt's Story

For this telling, she wants to be known as D. Hunt.

The last name is more important to her than her first.

It's the piece of her, she says, that's not supposed to be there. It's the last name of her beloved grandmother, and it has been with her since her 1981 birth. The "Hunt" is an attribute of who she was, is, and will be. It is a sign of the woman working toward a better present and future. She wants it with her here, as it is and has been all her life.

Her attachment to her grandmother and to her grandmother's name speaks to and for her single-minded devotion to all that is important to her. Mostly, that's her daughter, now 11.

"Everything I do," D. Hunt says, "I do for my daughter."

Everything means everything. And that's more than most of us can imagine.

When we speak of walking in someone else's shoes, chances are we would rather hear about walking in D. Hunt's shoes than making her trek our own. Because having goals for herself and her daughter but having no car, she walked miles to and from bus stops. Each step was a promise toward

a home—step, an education—step, a future—step, for both of them. Step after step after step.

Her journey started before she found Family Scholar House, and before Family Scholar House found her. The steps started long ago.

Her mother looked out a window of the hospital where she was giving birth to D. Hunt and saw the school she wanted her new daughter to attend. But they would leave her birthplace of Pennsylvania for Iowa for some years, where her mom went to college on a scholarship and worked as a radio deejay, before D. Hunt would return and go to that very school. “I was the kid at the radio station, the kid in class [with her mother], and I repeated that with my daughter,” she recalled of her Iowa childhood and her own daughter’s Louisville one. But that’s getting ahead of the story.

They moved back to Philadelphia when D. Hunt was a few years younger than her daughter is now. She was smart, good in school, and learned to play violin and clarinet. Her mom bought her a Sony Walkman to keep her daughter company for the dozens of blocks she walked home from school. The woman she became remembers that someone stole it from the little girl she was. She still remembers that it was bright yellow.

No one could steal what came next. Her mom wanted D. Hunt to be able to join clubs, be in the band, take part in sports, without worrying about how she would get home and whether another Walkman thief or worse might be waiting. So D. Hunt took the admissions tests and did the interviews, and she was admitted to a co-ed boarding school in the city. It would be her main home for the next five years.

Her mother moved to Kentucky in D. Hunt’s freshman year. By her sophomore year, D. Hunt knew she wanted to go to the University of Kentucky, and she moved to Louisville

halfway through her senior year and finished school with kids she didn't know.

This turning point brought bumps at home. D. Hunt said she and her mother had issues stemming from chores and authority. Her scholarship at UK ushered in a welcome break from that tension, but introduced another. D. Hunt said her stepfather already had told her that her mom didn't want her at home anymore, but it still stung when her mother told her there was no room for her in the new house as she helped D. Hunt move into her dorm.

She had moved from a nurturing place—her boarding school with small classes and a sense of belonging—to vast freshman classes populated with 500 strangers. She had no support system.

These are not excuses. They are reasons—and there were more—for what came next.

By her sophomore year in college, her grades had tanked and she had lost her scholarship. She moved off campus and started working as a waitress and attending community college.

When she was 21, other reasons surfaced when her mind pushed back and reminded her of what she had tried to bury. She had what she calls a series of dreams that dredged up memories of being molested at a swimming pool when she was seven years old, and being physically abused, punched, by someone else. She had lived without reckoning with these forgotten episodes, and none of these events came with any clarifying conversations with a parent.

By the time she met her daughter's father, she said she was "a mess." She went to parties. She didn't care about grades. She didn't have a home. "I didn't know who she was," she says of herself at the time. She had even less of an idea during her relationship with the father of her daughter, who was born in 2005.

In 2009, she and her daughter moved to the Virgin Islands to do missionary work with her beloved grandmother, before moving back to Lexington. A year later, she and her daughter moved to Louisville, into the basement of her parents' house. There she started the steps toward becoming the woman she wanted to be, was meant to be.

"I needed to come home. I needed help. I needed salvation. I needed shelter. And I needed to be restored," she said.

She will never forget April 8, 2013. She describes it as the day her life changed.

Like others in Louisville, she and her stepfather had stepped out into the community to celebrate the NCAA championship win of the University of Louisville Men's Basketball Team.

They drove to the school's Belknap campus. Their efforts to find a more navigable route took them down a small side street in Old Louisville and she saw a sign for Gladys and Lewis "Sonny" Bass Louisville Scholar House. Intrigued, she immediately started investigating the "scholar house" on the smartphone she clutched.

The chance encounter would usher in her own championship season.

She called FSH the very next morning and learned she could attend an orientation that week.

The stars had aligned: She also had just been accepted to U of L to pursue a degree in political science, which she hoped to use as a springboard to a law degree.

More steps:

"I walked almost five miles each day to get to the bus stop [near her parents' home] so that I could participate in various [FSH] workshops. I was determined to earn enough points so that I could secure a home for myself and my daughter," she said.

“There were times of breakdowns. There were days I would walk from class, in the blistering heat, sobbing and confused as to how I was going to make it. I was blessed with a guardian angel [at FSH], who was there to comfort me, hug me, and reassure me that everything was going to be okay. She hugged me like a mother and loved me like her child.”

She and her daughter moved into the Parkland Scholar House campus in August 2013. “My new apartment was beautiful,” she said. “I cried as soon as I walked through the door. I rejoiced in knowing my daughter had a beautiful place to call home. She had more than enough kids to play with, and a secure campus to roam. She was thrilled to know she and her mommy had their own rooms to sleep in. I lived in a safe, child-friendly environment. I never worried about strangers at my door, or if I could let my daughter go out to play.”

And the daughter D. Hunt had been when she sat in classes with her mother when she was a little girl? She was now a mother who sometimes brought her own daughter to class with her; sometimes her professors even handed her daughter the test her mother took, too.

And more steps:

In December 2015, as D. Hunt walked across the stage to receive her degree in political science and paralegal studies, she used sign language to say “I love you” to her daughter in the audience.

Today D. Hunt works as a paralegal. Recent health issues have put the thought of law school on hold, at least for the moment. Still, she also has had another idea for her future, perhaps providing a program for vocational training and job placement.

She doesn't sense any limits for herself.

“I don't want pity. I achieved and earned what I did because

I worked hard. I'm here and I'm grateful. I'm not going to allow things to stop me," she said.

"I am a single mother. I am a survivor of domestic abuse. I am a proud parent. I am a graduate of the University of Louisville. I am a Family Scholar House success."

All that and more.

She is a strong mother whose love for her child led her to every step taken with the drumbeat of the thought, "This is what I have to do."

The "Hunt" is still on for tomorrow. There is more yet for her to accomplish.

D. Hunt in Her Own Words

How has your participation at Family Scholar House impacted you and your child?

FSH helped me to realize that my job was not done yet. That I had it in me to go a little further. The staff at FSH gave me the support I needed at a time I needed it the most. It was a great opportunity for my child and myself, and I am forever grateful to the entire team.

What message from your experience do you most want to share with others?

Know that no matter what you're facing in life, your children must always come first. If I did not have a child, I would not have been afforded this opportunity. In having a child, I knew I needed FSH to achieve the goal of completing U of L's program.

I'm appreciative for all the support, yet am aware that I had to determine for myself how hard I was willing to work, and what I was willing to sacrifice for the sake of my child.

What guidance or encouragement would you want to share with your 15-year-old self?

My 15-year-old self was very strong-willed and determined to remain at the top of her class. She had great friendships, had traveled, and enjoyed life.

So, to her I would say, "The world can be unforgiving and harsh. Don't let it swallow you in. Remember who you are

and where you come from. Don't lose sight of the goals you have set out for yourself. Stay strong and lead. Do not ever forget how hard you had to work to get to the finish line. And lastly, know that that finish line is always in sight, because *you determine the end.*"

What are your hopes and dreams for yourself?

I honestly don't have hopes and dreams for myself anymore, because I know hoping and dreaming won't accomplish my goals. I simply work diligently at accomplishing the things I desire. It might sound harsh, yet it is a reality of my existence in this society.

To me, hopes and dreams are words we use in our adolescence. When we have the freedoms of wishing upon a star or fantasizing about how life might be. As an adult, we must work for the things that we want, unless, that is, we are born into wealth and have endless opportunities afforded to us.

I remember wishing I was an attorney, not knowing the immense training I had to undergo to achieve that dream. Now, I'm aware of what obstacles await me and proceed meticulously at reaching the finish line.

What hopes and dreams do you have for your child?

My only wish for my child is that she stays true to who she truly is. To accomplish whatever it is she wants to, knowing I'll always be by her side. I do not want her to live her life based in fear. Rather to follow her dreams fearlessly, tackling the goals she set for herself day by day.

Reflection

What does D. Hunt's story teach, in a few words?

What message is being communicated?

What does it mean to me personally?

What does it mean to the community?

How will I carry the message forward?



CHAPTER SEVEN

Persistence

Shawneece's Story

Family Scholar House is a place of and for second chances. The program accepts and encourages young women and men who are determined to succeed in family, education, and careers despite life events that may be seen as roadblocks or setbacks to that success.

Because the program is distinguished by a lot of persistence among all its participants, as well as its infrastructure and staff, singling one person out for that quality at FSH may seem redundant.

But when you meet Shawneece, you know it is not.

Her persistence deserves a telling of its own.

She truly has tried and tried again, under the most challenging and tragic of circumstances.

In her own telling of her stop-and-start steps toward her goals, the 24-year-old mother of two is a living testimony of FSH's aim to end the cycle of poverty by empowering families and youth to succeed in education and achieve lifelong self-sufficiency.

Indeed, the details and introspection Shawneece provides in recounting her young life so far underscore and punctuate that mission statement.

She knew she was making mistakes as she made them. She knew she had to rectify them if she wanted the life she imagined for herself and her children. She also knew where she could turn for that support, because she had turned there before.

Shawneece was a straight-A high school student when she got pregnant for the first time. She said she was fine when she had her first daughter at age 17, and she graduated on time.

She knew she wanted to go to college, and she knew she wanted to be on her own with her child. Enrolling as a participant in FSH was a way to achieve those objectives. She moved into her FSH apartment in 2011 and started to attend college classes.

Shawneece soon realized that the apartment, and being on her own, was a bigger priority for her than her degree. The independence, a new boyfriend and wanting to work more—“outside life,” she called it—turned her head and distracted her gaze from the finish line. She started to skip more class hours and the absenteeism took the air out of her GPA.

The support system at FSH kicked in. Shawneece said she met with advisers about her falling grades, and they wanted to help her readjust her priorities for graduation.

It didn't take. She wasn't ready. It was her decision. She moved out of her FSH apartment and quit the program in 2013.

“I left thinking I would never come back,” she said. “I thought I could do it on my own.”

She got the alternative life she seemed to want, but its pitfalls were evident. She was working more, but the pay wasn't great. “I knew I didn't want to work these jobs when I got older,” she said. Plus, the jobs she was able to find weren't compatible with

her young daughter's day care and her transportation. Her new, non-FSH apartment was, in her word, "substandard."

As she was finally seeing the bigger picture that had eluded her in her first stint in FSH, she had another baby, her second daughter. With two children to raise, she went back to school, this time to be a dental assistant. "I knew I had to do something," she said.

A third pregnancy did more than stop that restarted trajectory. It ended in heartbreak: the baby's delivery was early and the premature child died after three days. After the birth, Shawneece got very sick with septic shock and she was hospitalized in intensive care for eight weeks. She had numerous surgeries, had to undergo rehabilitation, and learned to walk again. Her mother, grandmother, and aunt helped with the children while she healed.

Two things happened in that terrible, revealing time of recovery.

Shawneece met a nurse who was there for her, and not just in the sense of her shifts and her job. When family couldn't come in, the nurse would sit with her. She helped brighten Shawneece's time with games and movies and her room with little touches and decorations. The nurse's above-and-beyond kindness awakened an empathy in Shawneece, one she wanted to share. "How can I help people feel better?" she asked herself.

She already knew the answer.

She understood, finally, that she really wanted to go back to school to earn a degree, to earn "nice money" to support her children. And she wanted to go back to Family Scholar House.

"You have more of a different mindset at 23 than you do at 17," she said.

Her young life had already taught her that she needed all the benefits and supports the FSH program afforded single-

parent participants as they cared for their families and worked toward their educational goals: the apartment, the washer and the dryer, the onsite computers for homework, the transportation.

When Shawneece was able, she called FSH to see if it was possible for her to return. She let them know that she had been a resident once before, and asked, “Can I come back?”

The answer: Yes. Here are the steps. We’ll set this up as soon as possible.

“I want to do it this time,” she told herself, and them. “I want to learn as much as I can and to be the best I can.”

She also knew better, this time around, about not taking any of FSH for granted: the resources that help the parents to be successful; the stability for her children; working toward a job—a career—that would enable her to make a living and pay back her student loans.

She was a participant again by the end of 2015, telling herself, “I’m going to graduate.”

About that nurse she met while she was in the hospital recovering from losing a child and being so sick in the wake of that tragedy: Shawneece was inspired to switch her major from business to one that would provide her a degree for a job as a medical assistant, and she hoped to work in OB-GYN. This time, it took. All of it did.

Shawneece’s grade-point average rose with her interest and her passion in her new calling. She was on track to graduate with honors in June.

On the eve of graduation, Shawneece said, “No, I didn’t think I’d get here.”

She said she needed Family Scholar House to make it. But make it she did.

Now, the “real world” awaits.

Shawneece will greet it with a degree in hand, with a job that's more than a job to her, and with children who also have benefited from being young participants in a program that helped their mom reach her early goals in life.

Her daughters are seven and three years old, and her voice warms when she talks about them. The older girl, who is in school, has perfect attendance, is on the honor roll, and has received certificates and awards for her schoolwork. This is what everything is all about, what everything is for.

“My hopes and dreams for my children are to never give up, never be afraid of failure, chase your dream, and always know their mother is their biggest supporter,” she said.

They should also know their mother persisted in working toward what she knew she wanted in and out of life, for herself and for them.

“Don't let your stops keep you from starting,” Shawneece said.

Or restarting.

Shawneece in Her Own Words

How has your participation at Family Scholar House impacted you and your child?

Family Scholar House has impacted my children and me by providing transportation to and from school, reliable child care, as well as living stability. My children understand that when they come home every day they will have shelter, a meal, clean clothing, and love. Not only from myself, but Family Scholar House as well.

What message from your experience do you most want to share with others?

The message I want to share with everyone is that it's never too late for a second chance to achieve your goals.

What guidance or encouragement would you want to share with your 15-year-old self?

I would want to share with my 15-year-old self to value your time, do it right the first time, be the best you.

What are your hopes and dreams for yourself?

My hopes and dreams for myself are to graduate with my bachelor's degree in nursing and to own my very first home by the age of 28.

SHAWNEECE

What hopes and dreams do you have for your children?

My hopes and dreams for my children are to never give up, never be afraid of failure, chase your dream, and to always know their mother is their biggest supporter.

Reflection

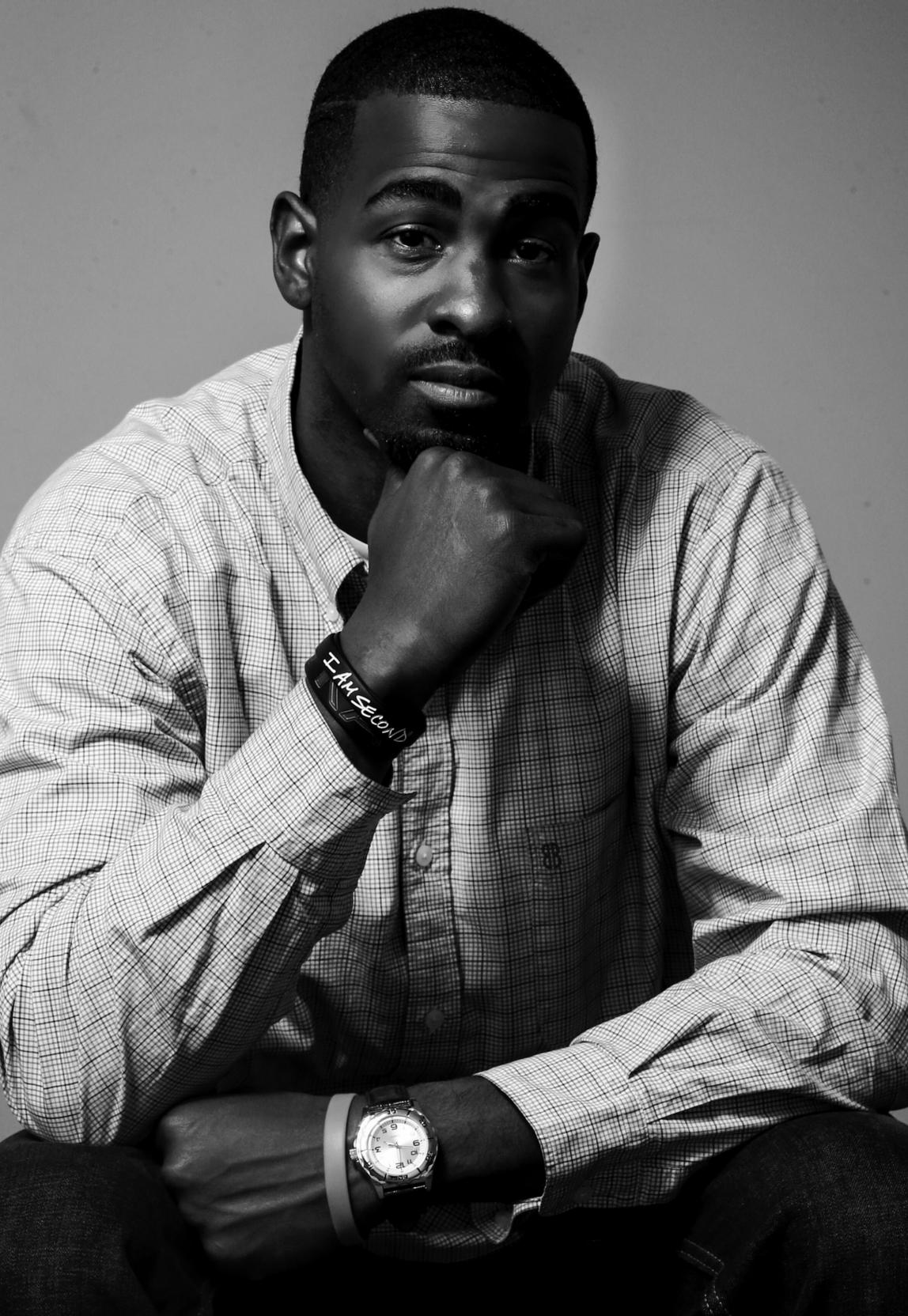
What does Shawneece's story teach, in a few words?

What message is being communicated?

What does it mean to me personally?

What does it mean to the community?

How will I carry the message forward?



CHAPTER EIGHT

Love

Channing's Story

Mornings are important in Channing's home, and the 32-year-old single father of three is deliberate with his time at the start of each day.

He gets up before his daughters—11, eight, and five years old—and plays worship music. He likes to lie on the floor when he prays. He says most people consider prayer to be a monologue, but for him, it's a dialogue. So listening is part of praying to him, too.

He's a believer. He wants his children to be, too.

He has given his daughters affirmations to read every morning. He has even put the words up on the mirror for them to see as they're getting ready for their days, too. They say the words out loud, as if saying—as well as listening—is believing:

Beautiful. Strong. Smart. Loving. Kind. Leader.

If their dad seems to be of the “if you believe it, it will come” mindset, that's because it has worked for him.

He is a long way from where he was at the end of his teens. He was living in another state, involved in gangs, selling drugs. He got arrested. “When I woke up, I said, ‘I'm really in jail.’”

It took another wake-up call before he responded to the grim realities of his young life: he was lying by his window one evening, and he heard gunshots and someone running down the alleyway.

It sounded like a version of his future, unless he decided to do and be something different. “I hit a wall,” he said. “I got to get out of here and do something better.”

That life also contradicted what he knew to be true about himself. “It didn’t make sense, how much I love people, to be involved in random violence.”

Channing knew change meant leaving. He was the only son among four sisters, a member of an extended family so large he said he felt as if he knew what it was like raising kids before he had his own. “I’ve never not known or not felt the weight and responsibility for someone else’s life,” he said. But, having heard if not seen what might happen to him if he stayed where he was, he knew he had no choice. His father lived in Louisville. He headed east.

A sense of guilt for leaving his family went with him. But so did this: his grandmother (he describes her as No. 1 and his mother as No. 1A) had numerous grandchildren, but she always told him he was her “lead dog.”

It was an early affirmation of his potential, almost like the words he has placed on his daughters’ mirror. In a new place, with a new understanding of love and an acceptance of help, he would grow into that description.

His first daughter was born right after his 22nd birthday. “I was not raised to be a baby daddy. I was raised to be a father first,” he said. “I took to it like a fish to water. Not bragging.”

The history of being a brother and a cousin to so many girls undoubtedly helped then, and it would help as he had two more daughters and as an unhappy marriage crumbled.

He wanted custody of his daughters. “No second guessing,” he said. He didn’t want to leave his family again.

In really tough times, he found support and temporary shelter from his home church, from friends, from his soon-to-be ex-mother-in-law, from his school. Despite that support, his bus-driving job couldn’t cover his expenses. There were short stints of homelessness and he was stretched financially, bills were piling up, utilities were being cut off in temporary shelter. “It was the captain-goes-down-with-the-ship kind of thing,” Channing said.

But . . . affirmation, one in particular that he cites today: “Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.” Romans 12:12

Another affirmation: Someone told him about Family Scholar House.

“Do they take guys?” Channing asked.

Yes.

Eight months after he started college, seven months after the divorce was filed, he and his daughters moved into a new FSH apartment. He didn’t even fuss at them when they once rode their bikes in the hallway, exulting at the space. He regarded it as a blessing that they had the space—and that his daughters loved it.

The home and the program at Family Scholar House gave him footing to start classes that would lead to an Associate of Arts degree in general and religious studies, which he has earned, and position him to continue studying with a goal of a bachelor’s degree in business. His goal is to provide financial advice to families, helping them reach their goals and dreams. He still drives a bus on weekends.

And the program provided a platform on which to ply his parenting philosophy—Channing believes in the three Gs: guide, guard, and govern—and to become even more confident in his role as a man and as a father. “Being a male is

a birthright,” he said. “Being a man is a choice.”

Of the program, he said, “Family Scholar House not only gives you a hand to pull you up, they stand beside you and then give you a boost up and over the wall.”

That boost led them to the family’s next step: their Habitat for Humanity home. It’s where they live now.

Channing tells a story about a doorknocker that hangs in the house. He bought the doorknocker long before he and his daughters had their home. He held onto it throughout their quest for a Habitat house. Once they moved in, he put it up, inside, so they would have a daily, tangible reminder of what faith is.

He shares the lessons with people beyond his blood family.

A youth pastor, he helps to lead a mentoring class for young men, ages 12 to 18, at his church. He is honest about his life when he was their age. “I don’t hide anything. They need to know someone has been where they are,” he said.

As a licensed pastor, he presided at the remarriage of his parents, an event he describes as “surreal.” He added, “I don’t ever remember my parents being together.”

His life now is a series of affirmations. Ones he speaks and ones he hopes to hear.

When asked about his own hopes and dreams, his answer is other-directed.

“My dream is to become all that God wants me to be and to relentlessly pursue all that God wants me to have and to save as many souls as possible. To be a phenomenal businessman and philanthropist.”

Channing says he has a passion for business, one that drives his goal to earn his bachelor’s degree (and, further on, a PhD) and to “pay it forward.”

“Love is the only motivation for what I do,” he said. “The more you have, the more you do for others.”

Channing in His Own Words

How has your participation at Family Scholar House impacted you and your children?

It truly is hard to put into words how Family Scholar House has affected our family because it's still affecting us in new ways. Other than my home church and my university, there is no other entity or organization that has had the impact that Family Scholar House has had. Family Scholar House not only gives you a hand to pull you up, they stand beside you and then give you a boost up and over the wall.

What message from your experience do you most want to share with others?

First of all, don't give up on your goals and dreams that you have for your family. Find your "why" when it gets tough; your why is what's going to carry you through. Third, stay humble and hungry, up every day on purpose. And please do not underestimate the most underrated asset of this program—and that is the networking opportunities.

What guidance or encouragement would you want to share with your 15-year-old self?

Stay put and blossom where you are. You are right on the edge of all that you want.

What are your hopes and dreams for yourself?

I hope that my story gives hope to someone who is on the verge of losing their hope. I feel hope is like trust: Once it's lost, it's really hard to get it back. I believe losing hope is the worst thing to be lost. My dream is to become all that God wants me to be and to relentlessly pursue all that God wants me to have and to save as many souls as possible. To be a phenomenal businessman and philanthropist. Oh, yeah, and a doctorate degree by 40.

What hopes and dreams do you have for your children?

I hope they will be change agents and women of high morality with tender, compassionate hearts that see the world through God's eyes. My dream is that they will completely surrender to God's will. Fearless Proverbs 31 women, phenomenal wives, mothers, and leaders, ridiculous athletes (LOL, sorry, the man answer), and valedictorians.

Reflection

What does Channing's story teach, in a few words?

What message is being communicated?

What does it mean to me personally?

What does it mean to the community?

How will I carry the message forward?



CHAPTER NINE

Hope

Aleshia's Story

The other kids noticed, even if no adult outside her family did. Aleshia loved to read so much that fellow students called her “Encyclopedia”—as in, “Go ask Encyclopedia.” If no one knew the answer to something, they knew she would. That’s because she was always in the library, and she was always reading—under the covers at night, and paging through the words in the dictionary, and the topics in, yes, the encyclopedia, if she had run out of storybooks. She loved the poems of Shel Silverstein so much that she remembers the name of one of his books 20 years after she read it.

How could it be that she flew under the radar of teachers and counselors in her elementary, middle school, and high school years, even with her honors recognitions? How could it be that such a bright human being was left to leave high school thinking her goals beyond graduation were getting a job and not getting pregnant? “I didn’t know what to do next,” she says today, “No one in my family had gone to college.”

She grew up poor, in hand-me-downs and in a home made hectic and chaotic by turmoil and arguing. Her dad wasn’t

living with the family, and her mother eventually married someone with whom there also were arguments. Aleshia left at 18, as soon as she could.

A high school co-op program in which she went to class part-time and worked part-time led her to acquiring a license to be a certified nursing assistant. She loved helping people and she discovered an interest in the medical field. She followed that up with a job as an EMT and worked as a dialysis technician.

If she enjoyed these early jobs she had, the woman she is today said life seemed very small then. She saw no horizons. “Due to many obstacles that came into my life, I was changed from a top scholar in high school, graduating with honors, full of promise, to a woman that felt like there was no hope, there was no way out, and there was nothing left to live for.”

Maybe that’s what led her to be and stay involved with a man that she understood, on some level, wasn’t good for her. Maybe it was her relatively sheltered life, her inexperience with relationships. “One boyfriend took everything out of me,” she said.

She was almost out of her teens, he was eight years older. She thought he was the perfect person for her. She met him at church, where he was a musician. He cared about God. He knew the scriptures. That’s what she thought.

But he didn’t work consistently. She worked two jobs. When she had a miscarriage, he offered no comfort. When she learned she was pregnant a second time, he showed no interest. She stuck it out because she had an idea that a child needed to be in a two-parent home, even though her home as a child had been less than nurturing. Almost for the entirety of their involvement, she continued to entertain the idea of a long-term relationship with him, even though arguments could take a turn to the physical; she remembered a time when he had her pinned down.

But something happened one day when she was eight months pregnant, working two jobs, and came home early. She saw her partner talking to another woman. When Aleshia pressed him for answers about it, he was, as he had been before, dismissive. This time, despite the frightening timing of the epiphany, everything fell into place. She was finished with him.

“At my lowest point, the only thing that kept me going was my daughter,” she said. “My fear of her growing up in a violent home, trumped my fear of what he would say and do to me. So I called my family and the police, gathered my things, and left.”

In the next year, she and her daughter did not have a place of their own; they stayed with her sisters. Aleshia had no car, only the little money she had set aside from her jobs (there would be no help from the child’s father), and a future that seemed even smaller than it had before.

The girl who read Shel Silverstein jotted down her own poems when she got older, and felt lost. She remembers a shard of one of them:

I look in the mirror
I look at myself
And I see a reflection
I want to crack

The crack that did happen would let in the light.

She heard about Family Scholar House and its programs for single-parent families. And, after a five-year absence, she would go back to school.

Both choices would remove the bushel that had hidden her light, and it—and she—would shine.

Aleshia strapped her eight-week-old baby onto her and walked into a FSH orientation meeting. It was terrifying to her because, she said, “It felt like admitting that I had messed up, that my life was not what I wanted it to be. And that if I do this, it means it’s real.”

But there was another reality for her there, too.

She was met as she came in by an adviser who said she was glad to see her, that she had made the biggest step toward her future, and for her not to be embarrassed or ashamed. For Aleshia, who had not received that support even in her church (she said she kept her relationship with God), it was as if a huge weight had been lifted. “No one ever told me, ‘It’s okay,’” she said.

It was also a pathway back to school, an idea she had all but given up on. “We will help you,” she heard at her FSH meetings. “It was like a ray of light.”

“When my daughter was four months old,” Aleshia said, “I carried her with me as I enrolled in college after being out of college for five years.”

She set her sights on a two-year degree for nursing. She thought she would keep her head down and make quick work of the degree so she could support her daughter. And that might have happened if her previous school experience had been a prologue to college. It wasn’t. Several of her college professors noticed this particularly bright student and encouraged her to reach even higher. “I’m here for you,” one professor told her. “I see how smart you are.”

As she blew through her classes, she decided to transfer to a four-year university, where she would switch her major to biology. She also was accepted in a six-week medical/dental program in another state that would allow her to explore new areas of study and career options. She put on a white coat and

signed up for organic chemistry and microbiology, courses she hadn't taken before. These were challenges she regarded as fun. "It didn't scare me," she said. "It made me try even harder."

While she was away, Aleshia was able to Skype with her daughter, who was being cared for by Aleshia's family members.

At the end of the program, Aleshia, the only parent in it, won the leadership award for the class, which included students from Ivy League schools.

She decided she liked the feel and the fit of the white coat. The woman whose life had felt small was suddenly looking at a huge world. She wanted to be a doctor.

Her classes kept getting harder. She kept doing well.

She methodically took the steps she needed to take to apply to medical school. She earned good grades—not a 4.0, but good. She took the seven-and-a-half hour MCAT exam and scored where she needed to score. She performed her community service. She wrote her personal statement. She filled out the 20-page applications to three schools. When one of the schools awarded her a big scholarship, she couldn't turn it down. "I was on Cloud Nine, that I was worth a scholarship," she said, "that they thought enough of me to invest in me."

In 2017, her daughter finished kindergarten and Aleshia finished her first year in medical school at the same time. "We're both starting a fresh chapter in our lives," she said. "I've been in college her whole life . . . there's a lot she gave up as a child so I could go to school."

Aleshia's goal is to be an OB-GYN physician. She presents a unique experience and access point that she thinks could impact her patients' health and lives. "There aren't many African-American women who came from nothing who are in medical school now," she said. They might go to the doctor if the doctor is a familiar face, and might be more likely to open

up and talk to the doctor for the same reason.

Likewise, Aleshia has become a mentor and a sounding board for other students who know her story and who want to be on the same track toward independence and careers. Aleshia says their turning to her for counsel is “humbling.”

But at the center of all of it is her daughter, her greatest motivator and motivation. She is why Aleshia worked hard, why Aleshia left an abusive, unhealthy relationship, and why Aleshia decided to spread her wings and advance her dreams and knock calculus, microbiology, and organic chemistry out of the park.

The girl other kids called “Encyclopedia” had to wait a while for others to catch on to her brightness. Aleshia won’t allow that to happen to her daughter.

“I hope that she values her education as much as I have taught her to,” Aleshia said, “and to shoot for the stars in her own education and future career.”

Right now, Aleshia’s daughter says she wants to be a baby doctor, just like her mom.

Aleshia in Her Own Words

How has your participation at Family Scholar House impacted you and your child?

Family Scholar House made it possible for me to go back to school, focus completely on my work, and not worry about how I was going to be able to make ends meet at home. I know that I would never have had the courage to go to medical school if they weren't supporting me every step of the way. It allowed me to raise my daughter in a safe environment. I forgot to mention how every Christmas, they blessed us both with many gifts, taking a huge weight off my shoulders. Many of the things they have done for us have reduced me to tears, and they were always there with a shoulder for me to cry on. The tools they gave me were used to break the cycle of poverty, which means my whole family will have a chance to succeed now. Generations down the line will feel the impact from this program.

What message from your experience do you most want to share with others?

I would like others to know that regardless of their situation, past, or mistakes, it is never too late to turn their lives around. By participating in this program, I was given a second chance and an opportunity, and I used every resource to the best of my ability to reach the goals I had set for myself and my family. Every sacrifice made was matched by the support of Family Scholar House. If someone is wondering if they should participate, I'd say do it and don't look back. If someone is

just now hearing about this program, spread the word so that other single parents can break the cycle. Lastly, a huge thank-you to everyone involved in this program, from Mrs. Cathe to the volunteers that fed us, taught us, and gave their time. I know that both of our lives will forever be changed by this program because someone took the time to let us know we mattered.

What guidance or encouragement would you want to share with your 15-year-old self?

I would tell myself to be wiser and open my eyes to the things going on around me. I would tell myself to never quit and never lose sight of the goals I had set. For every friend that is lost, you will have a whole host of friends, new and old, that won't leave your side. You will face even greater challenges and suffer even larger losses, but you will not be defeated. There are bigger things in store for you than you could ever imagine. You will also have a beautiful baby girl that will make your life worth living and be the motivator behind every move you make. I would say that your story isn't over yet; it is just beginning.

What are your hopes and dreams for yourself?

I hope that I continue this educational path until it leads me to my career. I hope to become either an obstetrician or a family medicine physician and make an impact in whichever community I serve. I hope to finally break free from the poverty that has surrounded me my whole life and provide my daughter with as many opportunities as possible. I hope that I

can continue being a mentor to those who are coming behind me so that they, too, can achieve great things. I want to make the most out of my time here on earth, so that when I am gone, I would have touched the lives of all those around me.

What hopes and dreams do you have for your child?

Parenting is one of the most difficult things I have done and I take it seriously. I am aware that the life I live before my daughter will be the ruler she uses to measure her own life with. I hope that she recognizes the struggles and sacrifices that I have made so that she can choose to be an even better woman than I was. I want her to know that she has my unconditional love and support, no matter what. I hope that she values her education as much as I have taught her to, and to shoot for the stars in her own education and future career. I hope that she takes my successes and goes even further, makes less mistakes, and never loses her spunky attitude and huge smile.

Reflection

What does Aleshia's story teach, in a few words?

What message is being communicated?

What does it mean to me personally?

What does it mean to the community?

How will I carry the message forward?



CHAPTER TEN

Legacy

Jaydee's Story

“It’s never too late to be what you might have been.”

That saying, attributed to author George Eliot, means a lot to Jaydee, 26, a mother of one, a traveler of paths steep and treacherous, a crusader who has found her voice and her passion in helping herself and others to be their best, strongest, most loving, and authentic selves.

The message resonates in Jaydee’s telling of her own life’s ups and downs. It is reflected in the work and advocacy she has chosen to do after making the climb to her accomplished present, which is a springboard to an even fuller future. It fuels the community building she does in an online hub called—appropriately enough, by someone bent on emotional rescue with an assist from coffee—*The Soul Grind*.

Jaydee’s business card describes *The Soul Grind* as “a place of self-exploration, healing, radical self-love, and searching, and some beautiful and powerful empowerment.” Those words are also sprinkled throughout conversation with her, but they are not the fluff and stuff of feel-good, refrigerator-

magnet slogans. They are tools and goals born of experience, and of triumph over pain and real struggle.

That's why a heart dominates *The Soul Grind's* logo—but it's not one of the Valentine's Day variety. No, it is an anatomical muscle, the inner machine dedicated to loving and living, with sprigs of flowers stubbornly sprouting from its tough arterial branches, a full cup of coffee perched atop one of its chambers. Soul. Grind. The hard work needed to be what you might have been . . . and can be.

Jaydee knew the feeling behind the saying probably before she knew of George Eliot.

A bumpy academic career started in high school, aided and abetted by an undisciplined personal life. She freely describes her troubled teen version as bedhopping and homeless and rife with behavioral issues that also were fueled by alcohol and prescription meds, symptoms of the deeper problem: She was a girl trying to find herself. That would take a while, and more than a few reckonings with soul grinds of another sort.

She got into college, but she couldn't stay focused. She was on academic probation after one semester. Parties that had her name on them always seemed to beckon.

Looking back on who she was then, living “a life of numbness,” Jaydee said she was aware of the distance between what she wanted and what she did, that the life she had then wasn't worthy of her, that she always knew there was something better, and she wanted that something better.

She didn't find it right away.

She was “testing the waters of everything” when she met someone. She'd never had a long-term relationship, and there was no honeymoon period for this burgeoning one. After a brief time of dating, she was pregnant. And even at that early stage, she knew their connection was toxic. He already

had been abusive and manipulative. She knew her life had to drastically change, but she tried to stick things out with him. They were going to be parents.

Jaydee was 21 when she had her son. Several years later in her life, she would call her boy “my heart outside of my body”—and one can see the flowers in *The Soul Grind* logo as representative of that feeling. Later, she would say that her boy saved her life, her boy helped her to womanhood, that she would never be what she became without him.

But just two months after the birth of her son, Jaydee took out a domestic violence order against her partner, which said he could have no unlawful contact with them. A year later, she took him back. But a terrifying nightmare of being stuck in deep muck, of being told in her dream “this is where you belong,” would rouse her, wake her up. The dream helped her to find her voice and her way, and pointed her to the cause and mission of her life: helping other women like her, single parents who were survivors of domestic or intimate partner violence.

Her pregnancy and the birth of her son also had brought her back together with her mother, who stayed by her daughter’s side through the toughest moments and “loved me through the guy thing,” Jaydee said.

Jaydee had always been independent, but she knew she needed to go to school and she needed to work, and she needed help to do that. She found Family Scholar House, and the second she walked into orientation, she knew it was where she was supposed to be. Her son was two years old when they moved in.

“It’s never too late to be what you might have been.”

Jaydee knew from the beginning of her two-and-a-half years living at FSH that she wanted to do social work.

“I cannot fail,” she told herself.

She was in a place designed to help her succeed, where she had an opportunity to pursue her goals and dreams without worrying so much about fitting together the puzzle pieces of finances and schooling for her son, a place where she didn’t have to choose waitress work over what she was meant to do. “My soul is on fire for social work,” she said.

She buckled down and worked hard. But there was more to it than that, as she recounted in an interview for her university’s Alumni Spotlight.

“Was school difficult? Absolutely. Did I sleep much? Absolutely not. Did life have its rocky and turbulent moments during these years? Absolutely—some of the most difficult. Did I turn in some assignments late? Absolutely. Did I get some bad grades? Absolutely. Did I get behind? Absolutely. Did I wonder why I chose to go back to get my master’s—every day? Absolutely. Did I learn, grow, heal, gain knowledge, amplify passions, become stronger and build my skill set, and connect with incredible people? Absolutely. Was it worth it? Absolutely!”

She graduated magna cum laude.

She went into a social work graduate program and finished it in a year’s time.

Now she is a family advocate at FSH, counseling single parents who come into the program just as a family advocate once counseled her.

She sees the parents she works with, as she was seen: not as a statistic, not as a person who is defined by past missteps, but as someone who is going to be successful.

“It’s never too late to be what you might have been.”

Even as Jaydee notes the daunting numbers and life experiences in her new work—hundreds on the waiting list

for the FSH program, 95 percent of participants having encountered domestic violence—she presents her own experience of deliverance as an achievable one for others.

“It’s my turn to be the hand that pulls the other beautiful struggling and disheartened beings from the muck so that they see there is something other intended for them than sitting among the rubble of their lives,” she said. “I simply want to be a bystander to the beautiful unfolding of others finding themselves and fighting for their lives.”

There is a logo other than that of *The Soul Grind* that Jaydee and her son epitomize.

The Family Scholar House logo shows a full and healthy tree with lots of branches and leaves. It has a sturdy trunk and it holds a welcoming swing for a child.

Jaydee and her son are two of the people who have given life to that tree and that swing. Their story fulfills the promise of that logo:

The becoming isn’t just about the parent who is part of Family Scholar House. The becoming is about the child, too.

And so it is about her son that Jaydee, the passionate social worker who is giving back, reserves a special wish.

“I want him to see life through an aware and loving lens, and to love and have grace with himself,” she said. “I want him to fall only to realize he can get back up stronger and for him to feel supported and loved in every step he takes . . . He has taught me so much and I can’t wait to witness the rest of his journey unfold.”

Both mother and son found some respite and renewal for the rest of their travels in the nurturing shade of that tree.

Jaydee in Her Own Words

How has your participation at Family Scholar House impacted you and your child?

The program gave us the opportunity to become closer as a family, and our own space to grow and flourish. We could focus on our relationship and the path of life we were on and where we dreamed of going, without constantly worrying about how we would survive everyday life. We were supported and loved.

What message from your experience do you most want to share with others?

Being a single parent is not easy, yet it is so rewarding and beautifully exhausting. There will be days of pure exhaustion, fear, sorrow, loneliness and feelings of defeat—but hold tight . . . the beauty is coming. You are going to make it, but you must fight for it with every inch of your being.

What guidance or encouragement would you want to share with your 15-year-old self?

I would probably first tell her that there is much that she will encounter, experience, witness, experiment, and many different roads she will travel on in the search to find herself. I would not sway her opinion or steer her in any different directions. Each and every road traveled made her who she is today and

when she is 26 years old, she will be able to state how proud she is of the woman that she has become and is striving to continue to be.

What are your hopes and dreams for yourself?

I have been incredibly blessed by so many on my journey and I want my life to be about giving back, empowering others, radically loving on others, and using my journey to assist others in seeing the beauty in theirs.

What hopes and dreams do you have for your child?

Oh, the things my little human will do for this world. He is a difference maker and touches souls even at his young age. My dream is that he finds his passions and that he pursues them with all he has. I am already so incredibly proud of the little man he is becoming and the beautiful heart and soul that he has. I want him to see life through an aware and loving lens and to love and have grace with himself through his journey. I want him to fall only to realize he can get back up stronger and for him to feel supported and loved in every step he makes. I want him to know just how extraordinary a human being he is and that he is so worthy of living a peaceful and beautiful life. I want his time in this world to be breathtaking and radiant and brilliant. He is my heart outside of my body. I am so incredibly blessed to be his momma. He has taught me so much and I can't wait to witness the rest of his journey unfold.

Reflection

What does Jaydee's story teach, in a few words?

What message is being communicated?

What does it mean to me personally?

What does it mean to the community?

How will I carry the message forward?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pam Platt capped a 38-year journalism career as the editorial director of the *Courier-Journal* in Louisville, Kentucky. She is currently a freelance writer and editor.

HOW TO HELP

These stories of triumph and success were made possible by the generous donations of supporters like you. Please consider a donation to Family Scholar House to provide the life-saving, life-changing power of education for disadvantaged families, foster alumni, and youth. Every donation makes a difference.

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UPDATES ON PARTICIPANTS IN FSH'S

Stories That Define Us, Volume One, *as of May 2022:*

NOURA: Noura has married and is working for a local healthcare system. Her work involves neuro-monitoring for patients with spine injuries. Her oldest child is now attending college and studying neuroscience. In May of 2022, she celebrated the graduation of her second-oldest child from high school, who will next matriculate to college with plans to major in business. Her two youngest children are thriving in middle and high school.

COURTNEY: Courtney is employed full-time with Alliant Purchasing as their marketing manager. Additionally, she runs a small business on Etsy and Facebook where she sells her custom-made tumblers and license plates ([etsy.com/shop/Tribe5Tumblers](https://www.etsy.com/shop/Tribe5Tumblers) [tribe5tumblers.com](https://www.tribe5tumblers.com)). Her daughter Annabelle is now 10 years old and is a rising sixth grader. She is looking forward to trying out for the volleyball team and dance team in middle school. Courtney states that she and Annabelle are living their dream lives!

MARIA: Since the publishing of this book, Maria graduated from Washington University in St. Louis School of Law, with a master's degree in law. She is a special agent trainee with the FBI. Maria has married, and she and her husband have added three more boys to the family. They purchased a home in 2019. All of Maria's children are honor roll students. Her oldest son is currently in an internship in Oklahoma, sharing his expertise with the media department of a church.

JANINE: Janine bought her first home one year after graduating with her bachelor's degree. She is employed with Jefferson County Public Schools and has earned her master's degree in teacher leadership and a certificate in diversity literacy. She has earned the following awards: Outstanding Professional Disposition Award, Outstanding Master of Education Student Teacher Leader in Elementary Education, and Outstanding CARDS Teacher, and, most recently, a 2022 Educators of Color award. Janine has taken on leadership positions in the school creating The Maupin Misses Initiative. She also became a member of the Family Scholar House board of directors, representing participants and graduates. Her twins are doing well in school. Additionally, her daughter gained recognition as a local Girl Scout and was featured on the news for her creativity in cookie sales. Currently Janine is engaged and will be getting married in 2023.

CAYWANTA: CayWanta is working full-time for a family court judge in Jefferson County. She has married and, in 2021, she and her husband added a baby girl to the family. Her son, who is now 12, is doing well in school and is active in football. CayWanta is focusing on parenting and exploring future career options.

D. HUNT: Since the publishing of this book, Danita has served as office manager for The Law Office of Jessica E. Green, and the Green House Family Resource Center. In March 2022, she began as an administrative support specialist in Circuit Court Division 9 for Judge Jessica Green. She will continue to act as office manager for the Green House Family Resource Center while simultaneously working on growing her own small business ideas. Her oldest daughter, now 16, graduated from high school in three years and was valedictorian of her class with a GPA above 4.0. While in high school, she simultaneously took courses at Jefferson Community & Technical College, where she also maintains an A average. She has received a full academic scholarship to the University of Louisville. Danita also added a blessing to her family, a daughter named Ari. She continues to focus on her girls, her career, future homeownership, and entrepreneurship.

SHAWNEECE: Since we met Shawneece in this book, she has married and is currently saving to purchase a new home. She is working full-time for University of Louisville Health in patient access. Both of her children are doing well. Her oldest child has entered middle school and has become a social butterfly.

CHANNING: After graduating from Simmons College and giving the commencement address, Channing pledged Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity and was accepted to BMe, a national organization for African American Men in community service. Additionally, Channing was selected to DeVos Urban Leadership Initiative. Channing is an ordained minister and serves as the youth pastor at Elim Baptist Church. He married his best friend and they added another daughter to

the family. His older daughters are successful in school, with his oldest daughter now a junior at Louisville's performing arts high school. Channing is now on faculty at Elizabethtown Community and Technical College, teaching business.

ALESHIA: Since receiving her bachelor's degree from the University of Louisville, Aleshia graduated from the University of Louisville School of Medicine with her MD degree. She moved to Kansas City, Kansas, for her OB/GYN residency and earned the Junior Resident of the Year award. She gives back to the community through several outreach programs with area community clinics. Aleshia will be getting married in October 2022 and has expanded her family with a son. Her daughter, Trinity, is a rising sixth grader and sings in the choir, plays the cello with the Honors Strings Orchestra, and is a Girl Scout.

JAYDEE: Since the publishing of this book, Jaydee has written and published her own book, *The Soul Grind: Fighting for Light Amidst the Trenches*. Additionally, she is the founder of the online hub, The Soul Grind. Jaydee is assistant program director with Family Scholar House. She has brought her voice and passion for healing not only to those served by FSH, but to others across the Commonwealth of Kentucky by serving a term on the Survivor's Council of the Attorney General's Office. Jaydee was second runner-up in the Ms. Kentucky United States Pageant in 2019. Jaydee became a homeowner in 2019. Her son is enjoying sports, doing well in school, and is getting ready for the next step in his educational journey.



FAMILY SCHOLAR HOUSE

Stories That Define Us

With a mission of ending the cycle of poverty while transforming our community, Family Scholar House is making a measurable difference by empowering families and youth to succeed in education and achieve lifelong self-sufficiency.

At PNC, we see Family Scholar House achieve its mission every day, providing resources that families need, whether affordable housing, child care, financial education, or emotional support. Family Scholar House is helping people break the cycle of poverty; single parents are graduating from college and becoming attorneys, doctors, nurses, social workers, and other professions that provide sustainable employment.

We share in the mission of Family Scholar House and applaud the positive impact it has bestowed on our community. PNC financed four of the Family Scholar House facilities, including the newest campus in the Riverport community. In addition, PNC provides grants for programming and early childhood education through PNC Grow Up Great and financial education for families on how to budget, save, and understand credit. Hundreds of our employees volunteered to landscape and build playgrounds at two facilities, collected children's pajamas and books to help foster bedtime reading with parents, and supported other activities to help Family Scholar House families thrive.

"Hats off" to Cathe Dykstra and the amazing Family Scholar House team of employees and volunteers she has assembled to empower families! We're excited to partner with them in strengthening our community and building a brighter future for generations to come.

CHUCK DENNY

Regional President

PNC Bank, Greater Louisville and Southern Indiana



www.familyscholarhouse.org



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