

FAMILY SCHOLAR HOUSE

Stories That Define Us

Volume Two



PAM PLATT

“Strong families are foundational to building strong communities, as they produce great leaders who are also effective team players. Cathe Dykstra and her exceptional team at Family Scholar House in Louisville have established a standard of excellence of helping create strong families in our communities. Thank you, Cathe, for making our families and our communities strong.”

—CHUCK DENNY

PNC Regional President for Louisville

“Homes provided by Family Scholar House are special places. They are more than four walls for the families that live there. These homes form a community for the scholars, a stable environment for learning and for raising a child, and the security that comes from being on the path to self-sufficiency. At PNC, we are privileged to partner with Family Scholar House to bring this housing to life for the scholars, their children, and for the Louisville Community.”

—TODD CROW

Executive Vice President and Manager

Tax Credit Capital for PNC Real Estate

“Family Scholar House enables a family’s self-sufficiency and economic mobility by attacking all barriers and obstacles. This method is sustainable and repeatable because it addresses the entire circumstance for these families. Moving a family from crisis and poverty to economic self-sufficiency and independence is possible when we address housing, education, and social service needs. Family Scholar House brings together the solutions from cities, schools, businesses, and philanthropies to empower and enable families, and creates thriving communities.”

—DIANA REID

Urban Land Institute Trustee and Foundation Governor

C200 Member

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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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“These inspiring stories are a reminder of the resilience of the human spirit, the devotion of parent for child, and the power of education to lift up not only an individual but also the family and the community as a whole. It is an honor to serve our scholars and play a role in their journey as they earn degrees and credentials, enter meaningful careers, raise compassionate children, and become contributing members of our community.”

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

FOREWORD

Decades ago, a high school education was enough for most folks to earn a middle-class living, build a family, and live out the American Dream. Strong US manufacturing and three decades of high economic growth (from the 1940s to the 1970s) sustained millions of relatively high-paying jobs for high school grads.

But the American economy has changed.

Ask practically anyone and they'll tell you: 12 years of school do not cut it in the current job market. Employers now complain of a skills gap and need many more employees with technical skills than they can find. Workplaces require more technological ability, better social skills, and a broader grounding in multiple disciplines. This is exactly what a college education offers, and the narrative of the American Dream holds that with intellect, motivation, and hard work, anyone can complete a degree.

But that narrative is not matched by reality.

The evidence is clear.

Wealth, rather than talent or effort, is the determining factor in who finishes college. Students with money but little academic prowess are far more likely than high-achieving, low-income students to graduate. A mature mom with kids is far less likely to earn a degree compared to an 18-year-old

with nothing but Twitter on her mind. After a semester or two, far too many talented students from the bottom half of the income distribution find that the price of college is more than they can afford. They have enough money to register for classes, but they cannot pay the bills long enough to graduate.

The ladder people must climb to reach their dreams has eroded, and a critical rung fell off.

The cause is a new economics of college in America. Prices are higher than ever, even for students who qualify for financial aid. For example, students from families earning less than \$30,000 a year must come up with more than \$8,000 a year for community college and more than \$12,000 a year for public university, and that is after all grants and scholarships are awarded. Today's prices mean that even recipients of the federal Pell Grant must accept loans and work in order to pay for a college degree that is by no means assured.

This is a major change.

When the Pell program began in the early 1970s it was meant to shield people who come from families without money from having to accrue debt, in order to encourage them to improve their lives via education. Now, 90 percent of Pell recipients graduate with debt. Of the Pell recipients who attend public colleges and universities—fully two-thirds of all Pell recipients—just 48 percent who start college full time complete any credential within six years. Of the remaining 52 percent, one in three leaves with a double burden: no credential and an average of \$9,000 in debt, which, unsurprisingly, they have great difficulty repaying.

The failings of the financial aid system are accompanied by other significant problems. For example, social safety net policies that used to help low-income parents get an education are often now working against them. Even cash assistance

to parents of young children now requires work, and college rarely counts. Childcare is also increasingly expensive, and the supply of subsidized childcare on campus is declining even as demand rises.

It is ironic and unfortunate that college has grown ever more difficult to afford as the number of non-wealthy people attending college has swelled. They are there because the pathway out of poverty runs almost exclusively through higher education. Yet popular media continue to frame college life as about living in dorms, studying with friends, receiving care packages from parents, and celebrating at graduation.

Such images are distant from reality. Just 13 percent of today's students live on a college campus. Half are low-income and qualified for the Pell grant. One in four students has a child. Almost all students work. But fewer than one in 10 low-income students has support from the work-study program. Instead most work off campus, upwards of 25 hours per week. Many students work the graveyard shift for a slightly higher wage, coming to school in the morning and falling asleep on their desks.

The consequences are devastating; poverty and college often intersect in heartbreak. Decisions about which and how many classes to take are driven not by students' interests or capabilities but rather their ability to pay. Financial aid packages include a line item for an expected family contribution, but the number is frequently a fairy tale, as most students do not have family who can afford to help them. Without sufficient resources, an estimated one in two undergraduates deals with food and housing insecurity during college, and around 10 percent experience homelessness.

How do students survive, and how is their education affected? What supports help them make it to the finish, and what more do they need to succeed?

This volume provides insights from the real experts: the students. Many educational and social programs fail to accomplish their goals, and one reason is that their approaches are often misaligned with the experiences and needs of the people they aim to serve. If we want to create effective programs that help more students to complete degrees, then we must begin by listening to students.

The Family Scholar House (FSH), where these students live, is part of the solution to the challenges just described.

Faced with diminishing support for higher education, particularly public higher education, colleges need strong partners to help them meet their students' needs. Housing and childcare are two of the most substantial expenses students face but are often not subsidized by colleges, so FSH tackles them head on.

Communities thrive when they are populated by people whose dreams are realized. Their economies are strongest when educational attainment is high, and especially when college completion is the norm. The benefits to making college not only accessible but also affordable are substantial. Not only do individuals and their families see higher wages and greater job stability, but they also contribute more to their neighbors by paying taxes, depending less on public benefits, volunteering, and voting. Moreover, since these benefits transcend generations, the education of parents is especially productive. Children raised in homes with college-educated parents perform better in school and are less likely to get into trouble. They, quite literally, cost communities less to raise.

How does FSH support its students and what difference does that support make in their lives?

The stories in this book reveal much. Most importantly, they define the experiences not only of their storytellers, but of

real college students everywhere. These are the stories we need to think about and reflect on when deciding whether to offer a student a job, support a scholarship program, or invest our tax dollars in making college affordable.

Read these stories, and more importantly, please remember these stories.

—SARA GOLDRICK-RAB, PhD

*Dr. Sara Goldrick-Rab is professor of higher education policy and sociology at Temple University and founding director of the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. Her latest book, *Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream*, is the 2018 winner of the Grawemeyer Award in Education from the University of Louisville.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is my second book of stories about Family Scholar House participants. As was true with the great people in the first collection, I will continue to learn from those profiled in these pages for the rest of my life. I think you will, too.

They are called participants for a reason: The components in the program are not done to them or for them ... but with them. As it is in life, they do not sit on the sidelines; they dive right in. They are the program. And vice versa.

We have set up these books to be the same for the reader.

Reading about the participants, getting to know them, is not meant to be a passive experience. You are called to be a participant, too.

Much of their generosity as people (it's no coincidence that most are in careers that help others) comes in their willingness to open up and share who they are, what they have learned, what they have overcome, how they have grown and changed, and how their lives and those of their children have been transformed by their participation.

Receiving this information should be as sacred as its giving.

What do we learn from it? How do we share it? How does knowing about these inspiring people and the program that influenced them transform our own understandings of family and community and what is possible?

The pages for your chapter-by-chapter reflections on those questions, and the person you just read about, are where your participation begins. They speak to and for your experience of learning about the participants, and how each of them represents their chapter title, a value or a quality held by the people of Family Scholar House and the program itself.

I thank each of the participants for talking with me, for opening up to you. They did so in the name of shining a light on the hope that served as kindling for the fires of ambition and achievement awakened in each of them by a program and people that believed in them and helped them realize and honor the best in them.

Where will you take their message? How will it change you, too?

—PAM PLATT
2019

Stories That Define Us



CHAPTER ONE

Home

Ricki's Story

Someone once said that a house is made with walls and beams; a home is made with love and dreams.

This time, a house and a home needed another shared ingredient in order to be and be realized: a woman named Ricki.

Ricki lived most of her younger years without knowing the reality or the promise of either house or home, but that seems a long way from where she is now.

As an adult, she has helped provide her own family with what she didn't have growing up: a snug and attractive home, one filled with positive, personal statements and expressions, situated on a sunny street, in a comfortable and safe residential community.

Walls, beams, love, dreams ... present and accounted for. Very intentionally so.

And Ricki, all of 32, inside that house and home, too.

Once upon a time, she was supposed to be named Sarah Elizabeth, but she said it didn't fit her. So she became Ricki instead, after her father, whom she barely knew or remembered for too many years before she met him again.

Her parents split when she was a toddler. After that, Ricki was raised by her mother, who left with the little girl, pulling up

stakes from everything and everyone. Her mom not only put up walls of a different sort around herself and her only daughter, but she also isolated them by lifting metaphorical drawbridges that might have helped, might have been available to them.

The terrible irony of that life was there were so few real walls, ones Ricki could count on, as she was growing up. The ones that did exist served as destructive barriers, not protective structures.

Maybe that's why the adult Ricki loves the motto, "Walls turned sideways are bridges."

It's not only her motto, it's one she wants her two daughters to live by, too. She said it will help them defy anything that comes between them and their dreams.

That's because from the time Ricki knew she was going to be a mother—pregnant with her first daughter at 20 and with her second at 26—her life has actively been about the same acts of defiance and overcoming. And helping others to do so, as well.

It wasn't a solo act, that repositioning of walls that could have kept Ricki penned up and held back. Her application of the motto to her own life was the on ramp to Family Scholar House (there's that word again).

If she, personally, had no model or guide in her own life about how to have and make a home, and how to be a loving and supportive parent and build a family, she could and would move one of the walls in her life enough to find a way.

And she did.

In her own words, here's the difference that initial contact, in 2006, made in her life and her family's life.

"For the first time in seven years, I had a safe place to call home. For the first time in nine years, I had stability. For the first time in 11 years, I had freedom from verbal, emotional,

and physical abuse. For the first time in 17 years, I felt like I had a family again.”

There really aren't words to describe how much all that would mean, how fantastic a deliverance it would be, to a little girl whose parental split was worse than an iron curtain clanging down. The split amounted to a complete erasure of extended family, radio silence, an absence measured in years of yearning and loneliness. That obliteration brought about desperate straits dictated by economic and emotional realities.

On the other side of those anxious and hard years, Ricki the mother and the mental health professional, the one who has made a real home for her own children, extends forgiveness to the pained woman who was her own mother. But there is no denying what Ricki lived through in order to arrive at her life now. You might even say the physics of their mother-daughter relationship—for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction—helped her achieve that place of grace. It certainly motivated her.

Ricki's mother finished high school and went to technical college so she could be a certified nursing assistant, a job she held until she contracted hepatitis C from an accidental needle stick. She ultimately succumbed to cirrhosis at 60, but as she aged, she also had other serious health ailments.

In retrospect, Ricki thinks her mother might have been addicted to pain pills. She wouldn't have known that as a child, but she knew this: Her mother was physically, verbally, and emotionally abusive to her from about the time Ricki was in the fourth grade. Even asking for ketchup could set her mother off. From that point on, Ricki lived under constant threat of the possibility or reality of abuse.

The volatility extended beyond how they lived to where they lived or didn't: They lived in homeless shelters. They lived

in the projects. For a short while, Ricki lived with people who had been neighbors. She always craved family. Her friends became that for her.

She may have been an average student, but starting in middle school, she had learned several hard lessons that would stick with her: She promised herself she would never live in a shelter again. And she was so afraid of ending up like her mother, she was determined to do anything to have an opposite outcome.

A glimmer of what the future held came in high school, when she took a psychology class that she loved. She began to reflect on what she calls her “own stuff,” noticed that she was the friend from whom others sought advice, that she was the person who held her friends together.

When the time came, and it did when she learned she was pregnant with her first child, the lessons kicked in: Living in a one-room apartment in a neighborhood of crime, she saw her first step out of that situation as enrolling in community college when her first child was just five weeks old. When a friend told her about Family Scholar House, she signed up—and was the first person to move into its new Louisville campus. She notes that her mother died the day she settled in her new, safe apartment. After she earned her associate’s degree, she started working toward her bachelor’s degree. And after she earned that, she worked toward—and was awarded—her master’s degree in education/human development and mental health counseling.

One of the springboards to all that was the family she found at Family Scholar House. The support and mentoring from the staff who believed in her so much that she also believed in herself. The breathing room and the safe space that allowed her to concentrate on school and parenting, and the resources and opportunities that presented themselves to her and her budding

family. One of which was a job offer—from Family Scholar House—after an internship there, Ricki was the first former participant to be hired by the program. She worked there for four years before taking a position as a licensed clinical mental health therapist at a psychiatric hospital. Among her clients are children who have experienced trauma.

Meanwhile, as she studied and worked toward her future, Ricki also renegotiated with her past.

She had rejected the isolation from blood relatives that had been imposed by her mother. The girl who longed for family became the young woman who reached out over the years and the miles to say, “Hello, it’s me, Ricki.” She discovered she had an older half-brother from a relationship of her mother’s before she was married to Ricki’s dad. She found her father, who didn’t live very far away. And she had emailed her mother’s mother for years without getting a response, until one day in graduate school, she did.

She also found a loving and reliable partner, with whom she has had a second child, who she said is a wonderful parent to both daughters who live in the house and home they’ve created on a sunny street in a comfortable and safe residential community.

There is even more to Ricki’s story than that happy ending.

It has to do with who else she found as she loved and dreamed and strove, no matter what.

Her experience and expertise has allowed her to reconnect with the woman who was her mother. Ricki still wants to be for her children what her mother was not for her, but she has a softer view now of the flawed woman who raised her. Ricki believes she tried her best to provide her basic needs.

“If I could speak to her now, I would let her know that I wish she would’ve gotten help for her substance abuse and

mental health, so we could've had a better relationship. I would tell her that I am sad my children didn't know her how I knew her before she became abusive," Ricki said.

She also credits her upbringing with an empathy that is one of the shining linings of the tough times she lived through. The girl who vowed not to live in a shelter again has not abandoned shelters, nor the people who need them as she once did. And neither have her daughters.

"Being raised poor and without family has instilled an appreciation in me for close and healthy relationships. It has also allowed me to teach my kids about gratefulness, humility, kindness, and helping others. My children and I donate to shelters, make food for the homeless, and find random acts of kindness whenever we see an opportunity," she said.

The girl who grew up with no real walls is now a woman who knows the power of bridges. And uses it.

Ricki ... in Her Own Words

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

My experience over the past 11 years has been multifaceted.

I began my relationship as a participant of the program in 2006, when it was exclusively just for women and children. For the first time in seven years, I had a safe place to call home. For the first time in nine years, I had stability. For the first time in 11 years, I had freedom from verbal, emotional, and physical abuse. For the first time in 17 years, I felt like I had a family again.

The staff became my family and my support, something I had longed for since childhood. My one-year-old daughter now had a mother who could focus on her well-being instead of carrying the weight of doubt and loneliness for all those years.

The program provided more than an apartment and furniture. It provided us with opportunities, with respite—both emotional and physical. And most importantly, it provided us with hope.

I enrolled in community college when my daughter was just five weeks old. I realized shortly thereafter that being a young single parent, a full-time college student and a full-time employee with two jobs was extremely difficult. I had to juggle all of that while living in a one-bedroom apartment in the worst housing projects in Louisville. I feared daily for the safety of my daughter and me. Each time I left or arrived at

home I cringed, knowing that my daughter would be forced to grow up in a place with so much violence and crime.

When I heard about the program from a friend, I jumped at the opportunity to become a part of it. Little did I know that it would change my life and my daughter's life forever.

Doors opened that I didn't even know existed over the course of the five years I was a participant there. I won scholarships, awards, and recognitions with each opportunity that I explored.

In 2011, I moved from FSH as I was graduating from U of L with a bachelor's degree and became an intern for the program. I was the first former participant to hold a job with FSH, which was yet another achievement. I was very close with the CEO, Cathe Dykstra, and she always believed in me even when I didn't believe in myself. She gave me the chance to help influence others' lives the way I had been influenced with the support of the staff and all the resources they offered.

A short time later, I became a full-time employee and had the job of encouraging people to come into the program. That was such a rewarding job because I could relate to the participants in a way the other staff could not.

During this time, my boyfriend and I moved into a home together and had another daughter. In 2014, I began grad school to become a mental health counselor, and in 2015, I graduated with a master's degree in education.

Shortly before graduation, I made the bittersweet decision to leave FSH to further my career at a psychiatric hospital. I remember feeling so conflicted while making the decision because the program and staff had been such a huge part of my life for nine years, and I felt like I was leaving my family. Since then, I have remained an advocate for underserved families and helped connect them to resources such as FSH.

I guess to finally answer the question: My experience at FSH has not only given stability and support, but it has allowed me to have a platform that has equaled the playing field and helped me succeed in my goals and dreams. I will forever be grateful.

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

No matter your current circumstances, no matter your childhood experiences, no matter how much self-doubt you contain—there are people in this world who care and want to support you. The journey to discovering yourself may be closer than you think ... sometimes all you have to do is ask for a little help. It's not an easy road, but it is much less lonely to travel with people who can encourage you along the way. Cathe always said, "All you need is one person to believe in you." After all these years, I know that is true.

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

I would encourage my 15-year-old self to learn the art of self-love. This is something I didn't realize I was lacking throughout my life, but the lack thereof definitely had had a negative impact on difference choices I have made over the years. This is something I hope to instill in my daughters at a young age. I would also encourage myself to go after my dreams, no matter what; travel the world, try new things, and follow my heart.

What are your hopes and dreams for yourself?

Career: Since high school, I have wanted to open my own practice as a licensed therapist. I still would like to achieve this within the next five to seven years. I also want to do event planning and coordinating on the side. I would like one day to write a book of some sort. Not sure what kind, but I have always had a passion for putting words together and telling a good story.

Educational: I want to earn a doctorate degree in clinical therapy.

Personal: I would like to be married within five years and financially well off enough to make some investments in various endeavors. I would love to travel and see the world.

As a mother: I want to be a role model who proves to my children that statistics do not matter when you are focused on achieving a goal. I want to show them that women are strong and will always find a way.

What hopes and dreams do you have for your children?

I want my daughters to be happy and healthy. I want them to be independent thinkers, leaders, and trailblazers. Most importantly, I want them to feel loved and supported in everything they do. I want them to live by the motto, "Walls turned sideways are bridges," and defy whatever obstacles stand between them and their dreams.

Reflection

What does Ricki'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 it forward?



CHAPTER TWO

Faith

Keneysha's Story

By all rights and any measure, Keneysha's stress should be off the charts. In little more than two years, her father, mother, and grandmother died. She also became a mother for the third time at 38. An infant son in her second marriage has joined her two teenage daughters from her first.

Keneysha's words in telling of the sorrows and the joys reflect the huge life shifts she has experienced in recent months. They also convey the grief she has felt not only in letting go of loved ones but also in accepting the stark fact that she now is someone who has no parents and grandparents. "That part is gone," she said.

But even as she recognizes and affirms the transition, she does not dwell there. That's not who she is or how she lives. Her own life already has taught her that moments are like snapshots, and the next moment provides the possibility of a different snapshot.

To be ready for her moments and her possibilities, she draws strength and proportion from two wells that reach to her very core.

Her resolve to provide “a certain life” for her children, one she didn’t have growing up, fueled her ambition to earn a master’s degree in social work and establish herself as a therapist specializing in marriage and family issues. This expertise benefits her clients, and it informs her own life, too. She knows the work and does the work.

The even deeper well, the one that feeds her love of her children and the drive to do well and right by them, belongs to what Keneysha believes: her faith is both foundation and filter in how she regards the recent passages that have occurred in her family and everything else in her life, as well.

“I do think about the giver of life and the taker of life,” she said.

God is a constant companion, like the hope that lives in her heart and plays out in her moments and snapshots.

Indeed, in conversation she will return to her special relationship with God, as if touching base, to how much peace the relationship brings her, and how prayer opens doors that need to be opened and closes doors that need to be closed.

For Keneysha, God just is, and has been from the time she was a little girl. She learned to read by age four, after watching and listening to her sister read *My Book of Bible Stories* to her. Her faith and those stories took hold with her then and never let go.

They were there during a childhood in which her father was largely absent ... in prison or seen only in summertime. They were there as her mother strove to provide as a single parent, who budgeted every last cent for bare necessities, and who weathered personal storms with substance abuse and mental illness.

They were there as she watched her parents ride and rise above their struggles. In prison, her father earned his culinary

degree and put it to use, working as an executive chef after starting as a kitchen cook. Her mother went to school and moved from entry-level secretary to administrative assistant. As an adult, well beyond those years, their daughter said, “It can definitely be said that I grew up in poverty. I did not, however, grow up with a poverty mentality. I always wanted more.”

Poverty also did not starve the generosity of her spirit.

When you talk with Keneysha, a woman with bright eyes, a smile like daybreak, and a winning, confident way, you can almost sense the little girl she was, the one who said she had to learn to live with chaos, the one who latched onto faith as the lifesaver it was and is. You also can visualize the assured professional who works with her family therapy clients, a person made better, not bitter, by tumult, and who is in a position to offer that help to others.

Maybe growing up with little in the way of possessions led her to value not only the people in her life, but all people for their potential. Maybe it cleared her vision of all but the essentials, enabling her to see the value in what her God would call “the least of these.” Maybe it always allowed her to see the value in herself, too.

Maybe growing up with the stressors in her home life led to her love of the order of school, of doing well with her lessons, of dreaming big and then bigger—and not giving up on those dreams and goals when life, even her own, got in the way, of keeping her eye on what God told her in prayers for wisdom about doors that closed and opened.

It happened. Life, that is, on and in her own time. And the doors can be tricky.

She started college. Didn’t finish. Fell in love. Got married. Supported him in his career. Had two children. Marriage ended. Things got harder. Didn’t give up on her children or herself.

Knew that going back to school was the key to the “certain life” she wanted for herself and her family. Bartered with reality, lowered her sights from being a doctor, worked full-time, was also a full-time mom. Eventually started a commute for classes that would put her on track to becoming a teacher, a more realistic goal for a single parent with two young children, mapping her schedule to fit her daughters’ schedules, terrified that if something happened she was 45 minutes away.

Behold Big Bertha, the 2002 red Ford Windstar van that aged with her children and was the faithful, reliable chariot for Keneysha as she harnessed her drive and put it to work on school and the future. “Big Grandma kept us safe,” she said.

Keneysha had earned an associate’s degree—“I needed a win”—and so bolstered, planned to continue her education by transferring to the University of Louisville. She did not want to continue the commute. When she called the school to check on whether there was single-family housing, someone told her about Family Scholar House. She began working the program, showing up with her daughters and urging the staff to “remember us, please!” A few months later, she and her daughters moved into their apartment. “Not only did I no longer have an hour drive to school, I could walk to school,” she said. Big Bertha got a rest.

Even though she was working hard to keep her commitments to her daughters, to school, to the program, other things in Keneysha’s life got a rest, too, as she settled into a two-year stint with Family Scholar House. She found a place where the whole community was behind her and rooting for her; it is a touchstone for her still.

“FSH offered the tools and became the catalyst toward accomplishing the vision for my life. I can set goals and achieve them. Confidence lost from self-deprecating thoughts and

internalizing the negative thoughts and behaviors of others has been restored and fortified,” she said.

So bolstered again, she graduated magna cum laude while at FSH, having switched her major to social work, a better fit for her traits, interests, and skills. She followed up that win with another the following year, when she earned her master’s degree.

On the personal front, it shouldn’t be any surprise that Keneysha has a church life. Also no surprise that it was from the haven of faith that she found a new friend, a worship pastor in her church. He asked her to a concert. They played Battleship (“We’re both super-competitive ... he won”). They went out after church. Then he asked her to date him. “In our faith, dating has purpose,” she said.

They dated for two years, during which he built relationships with her daughters, and they were married. The idea of having a child together was something she thought about, but her husband didn’t push. She didn’t push it, either, but she knew he needed the opportunity to be a father, she said.

They went to an appointment for conception planning, because she would be an older mother, and the doctor told her it would probably take six months to a year for conception.

No one knew it, but she was already pregnant.

More good news: she passed her licensure examination, too.

“I passed two tests that day,” Keneysha said.

Their son was born in early 2018, and they gave him an “old soul” name to match the little person who arrived to round out their family.

Another full circle: she is excited to be a substitute teacher/professor at her alma mater, filling in for an FSH staffer she reveres for the role she played in Keneysha’s life, while the staffer was on maternity leave.

Other goals remain. She would like to earn her PhD. She also still has thoughts of graduating from medical school someday.

“I want to raise confident and competent daughters who become incredible women in their own rights. I want to raise a son who is secure in who he is and what he has to offer this world. I want to remain happily married to my best friend and have an amazing life growing with him. I want to create something that impacts others in a positive way, that offers and restores hope, and empowers,” she said.

Miles to go.

And some more already under her family’s belt.

Her husband accepted a job in another state, and they have relocated there. They are expecting another child in late 2019. She is working a counseling job in her new home. And she is still teaching—online now—at her alma mater.

Powered by her faith and “God’s favor.”

Only not, this time, by Big Bertha.

They made their big move without the old reliable, afraid the trip would be too much for the van. They left it with a church friend, who asked for it. Still, in a way, in the family.

Keneysha ... in Her Own Words

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

FSH offered the tools and became the catalyst toward accomplishing the vision for my life. I can set goals and achieve them. Confidence lost from self-deprecating thoughts and internalizing the negative thoughts and behaviors of others has been restored and fortified. I have set an example for my children that can never be taken away from them. They know the value of education and the experience of accomplishing goals. We can now live the life I imagined for my family.

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

You get out of things what you put into them. Great opportunities are only great if you take advantage of chances they were designed to provide. Value others and your community.

Do not judge others by the snapshot of their lives to which you are privy. The woman I was at the FSH and the woman since FSH are the same but different. I would hate for someone to hold me at that place in time or worse, the time before that. I have been privileged to be a stay-at-home mom, an in-school and working mom, a graduate and a professional mom, a married mom, a single mom, and a remarried mom. Negative judgment at any of those stages would not have been fair.

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

Hang in there and be steadfast. Safeguard your relationship with God. It looks difficult right now and feels unfair. Life is just like that sometimes. I promise you it will get better. Take it day by day—the good times ahead will outweigh the negative times, especially what you feel right now. Continue to value yourself and others. You are beautiful and amazing just the way you are. People are going to be drawn to you because of who *you* are ... don't try to be like anyone else. That feeling that you have deep inside that everything is going to be okay and one day your life will be just as you imagined is *real*. Continue to let it push you and guide you. Pursue medical school no matter what.

What are your hopes and dreams for yourself?

To go as far in my career as possible (including the possibility of private practice). I would like that private practice to offer pro bono work to the marginalized in my community. I would like to earn my PhD. In some point in life, if time and energy allow, I'd like to complete medical school. My original desired profession (since I was five) was to be an obstetrician. The desire is still there, though it is more of a farfetched goal.

I want to raise confident and competent daughters who become incredible women in their own rights. I want to raise a son who is secure in who he is and what he has to offer this world. I want to remain happily married to my best friend and have an amazing life growing with him. I want to create something that impacts others in a positive way, offers/restores

hope, and empowers. I'm not exactly sure what that is at this time in life, but I know it's in me and I know it will come to fruition. I want to reproduce myself in others so that I leave a footprint in this world that outlives and outperforms me.

What hopes and dreams do you have for your children?

First and foremost, to have spiritual integrity. It will take them further than I can teach them and build their character even when no one is watching. I want them to learn and grow from the many mistakes they will make and not get stuck at any one disappointment in life. I want them to walk to the beat of their own drum and know that their uniqueness, idiosyncrasies, personality, strengths, and weaknesses are all a part of who they are: Embrace it and be great at being you. Love hard. Allow yourself to be loved. Forgive others even when it's difficult; you'll need grace from others. Be flexible. Be happy and be successful ... you can have both.

Reflection

What does Keneysha'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 it forward?



CHAPTER THREE

Determination

Terenca's Story

Bright afternoon sun spills like joy through the windows alongside one wall of the office where Terenca works throughout the week. Shades can't keep the light out—slivers steal through the slats—and a string of decorative, clear beads pays forward sparks and sparkles in a room that already brims with the warmth of its owner's heart.

What a heart it is.

In the minutes that follow, Terenca—pronounced TERENS-ah—will tell stories about her life before she arrived at this moment in which she presides in a room of beauty and order and purpose and light, and she will share times that left her broken, but not permanently.

She will share times that tested her, almost killed her, but did not defeat her.

She will share times when she didn't know how she would or could go on, but she did ... with her own strength and with the help of folks she says she will never forget and doesn't.

The bountiful artwork that punctuates the space where she serves as an office manager for Habitat for Humanity, a

job she loves, speaks to those times, too. She made almost all of this art, some of it in therapy, some of it not. Much of it is mixed media and collage. “I’m a texture person,” she says. There also are some contributions from her 12-year-old daughter, whose African-inspired name means “successful.”

Butterflies are important to Terenca and how she sees and tells her own story, and they show up as a recurring theme in colorful panels and panes crafted by her hands, imagination, and experience. She notes, in talking about the art, that some butterflies feed and fly with 70 percent of their wing surfaces missing. The lesson: something fragile, that goes through challenging stages to live, is also something strong.

That is her story, too, and it is why Terenca summons an unusual word in a room that fairly brims with its meaning.

Kintsukuroi.

Known as “the art of precious scars,” kintsukuroi (keen-tsoo-koo-roy) refers to an art technique in which pieces from a broken whole are put back together and mended with gold. The beauty of the new object is in the repair and reconstruction. The scars are part of the found beauty. And that also is part of Terenca’s story: the broken, the repaired, the gold.

Born and raised in Louisville 44 years ago, the early life she recounts is not one of nurturing and protection that all children deserve. She was named for the father she said beat her with his hands, berated her with words, betrayed her with deeds, and sexually molested her.

It is a measure of her character that she never changed her name and kept it as one of the pieces that make her who she is now. “I’m unique because of my name. It’s part of who I am,” she said. The human being she is today, one for whom reconciliation is part of her golden mending, also allows that her father could be a nice person when he didn’t drink.

But he did drink, and he did take drugs, and his daughter said he died of both.

He almost killed who she was, too: the years of physical, verbal, emotional, and sexual abuse robbed her of innocence, hope, and self-worth, she said, and they set her on a path to self-destructive decisions and behaviors.

This is what she shares of her childhood: He told the little girl she was that he was in love with her to justify his sexual abuse of her. He beat her for rinsing the dishes in cold water. She would shake around him, and he would get angry at her for shaking. He abused her mother, too, and her mother would have to run for her life. Terenca stepped in and tried to take care of the younger children in the house. “I knew I had to be older than I was,” she said.

There is more brokenness to speak of, more pieces to consider, before getting to the repairs that have dominated her life since her daughter was born.

A crack from what she calls “living sideways” came when she was 17. She hated herself. She avoided looking in mirrors, believing what she’d been told, that she was stupid and ugly and would never amount to anything.

She found a new beginning after an attempted suicide landed her in a mental hospital where a therapist told her, for the first time, that she wasn’t the one with a problem.

That message offered a glimmer of hope, and Terenca felt as if God had intervened in keeping her alive. For the moment, that was enough. The burden of her secrets dropped away. An escape valve had opened. It was a start.

The pieces in her artwork overlap, and so do the pieces of her life. Like collage and kintsukuroi, recovery is a process of finding pieces and fitting them together. It doesn’t happen overnight.

She had a lot of pieces to pick up and to mend, and it would be years before all would be better, if not altogether well, with Terenca and her soul.

There would be another crash and other therapists. There would be serious and scary diagnoses, first of depressive disorder then bipolar disorder, but there also would be answers and treatments. There would be kind strangers, scholarships she pursued and landed, and lifesaving programs that guided her to a way ahead. And, most importantly, not too far into a future she wanted, a beloved daughter.

To get there, Terenca must go here first:

Unlike her father, Terenca never had issues with drugs or alcohol, but sex was her relief and her release from self-loathing. Taught to equate abuse with love, and before her diagnoses and her own determination set her on a different path to recovery, her encounters and relationships were degrading and often harmful. She said she was raped and beaten, and she was attracted to the type of men she had promised herself she would never be with.

It culminated with a marriage to a man she said was just like her father. He terrorized her mentally and made her feel a prisoner in her own body and their otherwise materially comfortable home. The abuse intensified when she was pregnant and was prescribed bed rest for five months.

Isolated from family, dependent upon her abuser, the love she had for a daughter yet to be born became the biggest thing in Terenca's life. That love grew along with her pregnancy. She sang, read, and told stories to her daughter in utero, forging a bond that ultimately would give Terenca the inspiration and strength to resolve that her daughter would not have the childhood she did. Abuse would no longer play a role in her life and would never play a role in her daughter's. Giving up was not an option.

Someone once said that there is nothing in a caterpillar that tells you it is going to be a butterfly. Certainly there was little about Terenca’s flight into the rest of her life that would have projected the person she is now—a confident woman who loves her daughter, her job, her art, and her life, who can fairly beam with it all.

She escaped her past in the middle of the night, taking only the clothes on her back ... and her toddler daughter. She drove from her home in a distant state back to Louisville, arriving homeless, jobless, and, in her words, “mentally defeated.” She was a woman in her 30s with a young child, but she was lucky enough to land in a community where she found people who believed in her and where she could start to believe in herself.

A number of organizations and programs helped Terenca get her footing, and it was a staffer at Seven Counties Services, with whom she addressed her mental health issues, who told her about Family Scholar House.

She wasn’t in any shape to work when she arrived, and she also knew education would be her ticket to a better, brighter future, so she decided to pursue a four-year college degree. A big part of the solution was this: FSH would be the place she and her daughter could call home while she was in school.

When she was accepted to the program, Terenca said she would have been happy with a dorm room for the two of them. Instead, they moved into a beautiful place where they felt safe, where a network of services, activities, and support programs were available to parents and children. Importantly, all of it motivated her to stay on track mentally, as a single parent, and as a student. It also gave her daughter room and time to be a child. “Every sacrifice I made, my daughter made, too,” Terenca said.

They stayed for three years.

Terenca took advantage of self-esteem and financial literacy classes offered by FSH, and she and her daughter also gravitated toward the art therapy. So began the healing, the mending, in a form that can be seen today in the bearing of the woman in the office and in the striking art that dominates her workspace. “This frees my soul,” she said.

An individualized college major which combined three areas of study—business, communication, and American Sign Language interpretation—led her to the job she has today. “I get to do everything I love,” she said of a position that puts her organizing, tech, and business skills to the use of an organization that helps put people in homes. She also notes, proudly, that she has not had any government assistance for a year.

“This is my dream,” Terenca said. “I wanted peace of mind.”

The peace of mind extends even further these days: the mended woman who works for an agency that provides other people with affordable housing closed on her own home in recent months.

For Terenca, the most special aspect of that momentous event was that her daughter was with her. She said, “I remember thinking she was by my side when I had to run away from our last home and now she was by my side as we walked into our new home.”

She also felt, in that moment, the support of people she had met along the way, when she was struggling to fly with much of her own wing surface missing. She cried, “realizing I could finally see and live the moment that the people who got to know me on this journey, and walked with me, saw way before I ever could.”

An eight-paned window in her office tells a lot of this story. Butterflies and flowers made by her and her daughter dominate,

and words cut from magazines—such as WARRIOR, Finding balance, UNBREAKABLE, Mother, Winner, Memory, Family, and Survival—underscore the life Terenca has finally claimed.

“We shine and we strive to light up the lives of those we meet every day,” she said.

She is a breathing example of the beautiful art of precious scars. And the gold is positively dazzling.

Terenca ... in Her Own Words

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

I moved into the Family Scholar House Stoddard Johnston campus when I was 38 years old with my six-year-old daughter. By seizing the opportunities provided to me through FSH, I gained an education and self-confidence. It was a safe space to get healthy—mentally, physically, and spiritually.

I often liken my life to that of the metamorphosis of a butterfly.

When a butterfly is in the chrysalis, the change is slow and gradual; the old body is broken down, liquified. It is in that rich fluid that the cells grow and form a new body.

FSH was the chrysalis in which I transformed my life. That transformation included redefining and sometimes letting go of non-supportive relationships.

The first relationship I redefined was the one I had with myself. I broke the cycle of abuse, not just by freeing myself and my child from an abusive relationship. I broke the cycle of self-abuse I was inflicting upon myself because, penetrated deep within my psyche, were all the abusive, negative thoughts and words inflicted upon me throughout my life.

Equally important was to watch my daughter thrive in a healthy and safe environment. I made it a point for me and my daughter to participate in the activities FSH provided, especially ones that were provided by people throughout the community. It was important for me to show my daughter how

to engage herself with different people and to be appreciative of the sacrifices others made on our behalf.

We learned to use our time and talents productively—not only to help ourselves, but those we came in contact with.

Because of our experience at FSH, my daughter has never experienced abuse. She knows to stand up for herself and others that are weak. She is confident, yet compassionate. We shine and we strive to light up the lives of those we meet every day.

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

Remember you are not stuck. FSH is only a stop along your journey. Use it to restore your mind, body, and soul. Celebrate your successes and learn from your mistakes. Take the tools you gain and use them on your journey beyond FSH and never give up.

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

I would impress upon myself that the abuses inflicted upon me are not my fault. I would tell her lovingly, but firmly, “You were created in God’s image and everything he does is good. You are good and your life is worth living. Hold on, baby girl, look beyond this moment and know that your future is abuse-free, bright, and filled with love.”

What are your hopes and dreams for yourself?

I am living my dream now. I have a job I love, an amazing support system—and most of all, I am loved. I hope that I continue to pay it forward by using my story, talents, and time to make a difference in someone else's life.

What hopes and dreams do you have for your child?

My hopes and dreams are that she lives healthy, mentally and physically. I know that when you live healthy you make good decisions, and you learn from your mistakes how to do and be better.

I hope and dream the sacrifices I made to free my life from abuse allow her to want to hope and dream.

Knowing that she has a chance because she grew up in a healthy and positive environment overwhelms me with joy. She has a solid platform from which she can leap into life, and the possibilities are endless.

Reflection

What does Terenca'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 it forward?



CHAPTER FOUR

Purpose

Laurel's Story

At 41 years of age, Laurel Robinson earned her doctor of nursing practice degree, the ultimate academic milestone in the career field she loves.

It was a huge deal to more people than Laurel.

She comes from a matriarchal line of nurses so, yes, family members were on hand to see her commencement. Her Family Scholar House family was there, too. And, yes, those who weren't able to attend watched her and the ceremony online.

A month or so later, Laurel took her board exams and passed. She is on track to move from operating room nurse to nurse practitioner. And, yes, her proud family is still glowing, and talking, about all this.

As for Laurel, she said the achievement of her longtime goal hasn't sunk in yet, that it's still a little overwhelming, but the part she has been able to talk about has had little to do with her own achievement.

Typically, she isn't making the accomplishment all about her. Instead, she draws from an episode in her personal past to explain the kind of impact she wants to make in her professional future.

For someone who deals day in and day out with life-and-death situations at work, Laurel projects compassion and competence in the way she talks and the words she chooses. It's no surprise when she notes she's calm in crisis. She's that way over a cup of coffee, too. She enjoys *Grey's Anatomy*, but she's not *Grey's Anatomy*.

Her no-drama presentation as a human being has what is perhaps an unexpected effect on a listener: the reasoned, low-key, even way she shares the facts of her life ends up underscoring her messages instead of underselling them.

The story she shares, one in which past also is prologue, resonates.

When asked about what kind of nurse practitioner she wants to be, and who her patients might be, she circles back to an earlier time in her life when a nurse practitioner made a difference not only in her immediate health, but also in her long-term vision.

Laurel was in a tough spot, one that millions of American find themselves in—sick with no health insurance, and at a job and in a place where she couldn't call in sick and couldn't go to the doctor. Fortunately she found a free community clinic with a nurse practitioner who saw her and treated her—medically and humanely. Laurel said the nurse practitioner made her, one of the underserved population without health insurance, feel like a person, feel as if she mattered.

This memory is one of the drivers for Laurel to go as far as she has in nursing. She said she will base her approach in the new chapter of her career on the way the clinic's nurse practitioner approached her. Laurel plans to give back to the underserved population, of which she once was a member.

This is an essential part of understanding Laurel.

She is about paying back as well as paying forward. And this is as much a part of her family heritage as is nursing. She

followed her mother and grandmother into nursing, and into how she values family and community.

In reaching her own goals it is a point of pride that Laurel notes her grandmother was one of Louisville's first African American nurses and that she followed her mother's footsteps, too, in more than career.

Part of a tight-knit family on her mom's side, Laurel's mother raised her in a single-parent home. Her father was never in the picture, but Laurel's mom never said a word against him. (Out of curiosity, and because it was something she felt she needed to do, Laurel would meet her father when she was an adult. She said it was more of a closing for her; she felt no connection with him.)

When she was growing up, Laurel noticed differences in what she and her mother could afford, and what others could have. She says she never felt bad about what she didn't have, that she always felt fortunate. She was taught to be grateful because others were less fortunate.

She saw how hard her mother worked to provide for them and describes her as strong and determined to better Laurel's life. Beyond home life, her mother exposed Laurel to free or inexpensive cultural, educational, and entertainment opportunities the city offered. She did not feel deprived.

Laurel would repeat this example of hard work and broadening horizons when she did the same as a single parent to her daughter and son.

She was always whip smart and was on track to choose between two college scholarships—one for architecture, one for civil engineering—when she got pregnant in high school. Laurel had her daughter at age 17 and continued her studies at the Teenage Parenting Program (TAPP) school, which she attended with other girls from all walks of life who were in the

same situation. They had day care for the children of students.

As Laurel said, she was fortunate. Teenage pregnancy was not what her mother had envisioned for her, but her mom's support never waned. She wanted Laurel to continue on to college, as did Laurel, to improve her prospects for the future.

Laurel took advantage of one of the scholarships, the one closer to home, and as a young single mother with one child, stayed with university courses for a year. Over time, she felt unprepared for some of the classes in her difficult curriculum and decided to stop going to school. She thought she'd sit out a year, work, earn some money, and then go back.

She pauses now to observe that when you're young, you think everything is temporary and that you'll always be young.

Time has a way of turning that notion on its head, and so it happened with Laurel.

One year out of school stretched to two years and then three years. She didn't stay at any job for very long ... customer service, fast food, cashier. If she was paying her bills late, she picked up more hours at work.

When she was in her mid-20s, her grandfather asked her point-blank: "What's your five-year goal?"

She figured she would go back to school—people told her she was compassionate and cared for people, so she started thinking she would become part of the family business of nursing—but kept digging herself into a pit. Her self-reflection told her she was in a "cycle of nothing," and that it was starting to become scary.

By the time the real turning point occurred, she had two children and she realized her goal was a three-bedroom apartment. She was working to live and living to work, not building anything for the future. She knew she needed a career, a home, a real tomorrow for her children. "I have a one-year-

old son,” she thought. “I can’t keep doing this.”

The day came when she got sick and had no health insurance, when she visited a community clinic, a nurse practitioner made her feel not only better, but like a human being, too.

Laid off from her job, she was looking at the newspaper when she saw an article about Family Scholar House. She cut out the article, thinking she was supposed to see it, that this was supposed to happen. “I do believe in God,” she said. “I try to live a life that is pleasing to God.”

She called the program the next day. Told her story. Gathered her transcripts, all her academic achievements, did whatever she needed to do, and became part of the pre-residential program. Soon she moved into her Family Scholar House apartment with her son and daughter.

And life changed.

She and her children immediately became part of the FSH community. She said the single mothers she met there were like sisters. Their different stories were coming together, and their common ground was that they shared the same goal: They wanted an education to provide stability for their kids. FSH provided them the ladder to do that.

Their three-bedroom apartment was on the third floor and it had a yellow door. Today, she talks of “the grace of God” that she and her children moved in about a year from the time she wished for such an apartment.

She got more than that: safety, new GE appliances, resources, proximity to schools.

And even more: The apartment, being part of a community where neighbor knows neighbors, where neighbors automatically help each other when and how they can, was the “defining difference” in her life. The isolation of a single working parent was gone, because she was part of a program

of nothing but people like her. Her confidence and self-esteem rose. She dug in. And worked hard.

She didn't want to waste this blessing, she recalled. She was at the 30-year mark in her life: this is it.

Three degrees later—RN, BSN, and DNP—Laurel says she can't imagine being where she is now without having found Family Scholar House first. (Another sign? Her photo, as a new RN graduate, was on the front page of the same newspaper in which she saw the story for FSH several years before.)

Once she could afford it and once something became available, she bought the first house that was for sale in her grandmother's neighborhood. They live six doors from each other, and they walk their dogs together.

She is proud of her high-school-age son and of her daughter, a recent college graduate who is old enough to have seen her mom work at a fast-food restaurant and earn three degrees.

And that part of Laurel that is about paying back and paying forward?

Well, she laughs as she tells stories about her spreading the word about the Family Scholar House program that was a tool in helping her hone her life, sharpen her skills, and nurture and realize her ambitions.

At the barbershop, she has shared information in long conversations about Family Scholar House.

At Mammoth Cave, standing in line, she started talking about the program with someone.

She even has spread the word among her colleagues so they will mention it to people who might need it, who might be interested, and she plans to keep an eye and an ear open in her new job for the same opportunities to share the information.

Laurel said hitting school hard again, in her 30s, could sometimes be difficult. She was surrounded by younger people

and was one of the oldest if not the oldest in her classes.

Ultimately, it did not matter.

The message, she said, was that it's never too late to become what you dream of being.

That being there shows your drive is powerful.

That your testimony to others is: Don't let anyone stop you—not even yourself, when you're young and think you'll be young forever. And maybe the young people needed to see this, too.

Laurel Robinson earned her doctor of nursing practice at age 41. Right on time and in exactly the right way.

Laurel ... in Her Own Words

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

I believe my participation, dedication, and hard work during my time at Family Scholar House impacted me and my children by rekindling our belief in hard work and the positives during the process of rebuilding.

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

The time period that you need to pursue your degree may seem like a long period of time, but it goes by so fast and is such a small segment of your life. It is truly worth the hard work and sleepless nights that being a single parent and a college student will no doubt bring.

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

I would encourage myself to stay focused in school and not to worry about keeping up with what my friends are doing all the time or measuring their accomplishments in order to set a standard for myself.

What are your hopes and dreams for yourself?

My hopes and dreams are to practice as a nurse practitioner and be in a financial position to help my children pursue their hopes and dreams, such as college, marriage, buying a home, etc.

What are your hopes and dreams for your children?

I wish my children would see the value in themselves and not let others define what your value system is in terms of your own self-worth. I want my children to be educated, employed in a career they love, and financially comfortable, and most of all—happy.

Reflection

What does Laurel'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 it forward?



CHAPTER FIVE

Optimism

Angela's Story

Angela is quiet-spoken and reluctant to take praise, but she knows that she and her story—about overcoming poverty, being more than people think you are, being more than maybe you think you are, finding a lasting silver lining in too many now-scattered clouds—make important points, so she pulls few punches in describing her younger years.

She's only 23, so those years aren't that long ago ... but the freshness with which she recalls them probably has more to do with the stark, unforgettable realities that defined her life then than the proximity of that time. Ask her the same questions at age 63, and she probably won't have forgotten the details she shares now.

She was one of five children in a struggling family whose parents divorced when she was very young.

Her mother was the primary custodial parent, and she had what Angela calls “drug issues,” specifically with prescription pain pills. Eventually, her mother overcame those issues.

The children lived with their father for a few years, but eventually went back to live with their mom.

She, her mom, and her siblings lived and moved in rough neighborhoods. Angela described them as “crime-ridden.” She recalls not being able to leave home because of shootings. Her sibs and mother were beaten up. Kids threw eggs at them.

Angela loved school, describing it as her “home away from home.” She mentions she was part of a student technology leadership program, a reflection of her fondness for science.

Her teachers didn’t know what her life was like when she left the place she felt safe and happy.

Like so many teens, hormones kicked in with Angela, too, and she became interested in boys. She admits she made “bad decisions,” going to parties, drinking, and having sex. She still made good grades.

In high school, she also joined the ROTC program, which her boyfriend belonged to, as well. She was so committed to the program, that a month after she had her son she was part of the school drill team that went to the national competition several states away.

The 16-year-old, who also was a young mother, had two competing and compelling drives in her life.

She didn’t want having a baby to get in the way of occasions such as the drill competition, but she also didn’t want her son to live the way she had lived growing up.

In short order, her priorities shifted. A motivation to be better and do better took hold. So did knowing she was going to have to depend on herself for that, and she had seen firsthand that having a child when you were little more than a child was difficult when there was no thought for the future.

She transferred to the Teenage Parenting Program (TAPP) school for her senior year of high school. Her grandmother worked there, and her infant son could be in day care while Angela attended classes. She also got a job in the cafeteria so

she could earn money while she figured out what would come next for her and her young family. Meaningful work, work that paid, was part of the equation she was working on and toward.

She also was on her own and broken-hearted. There would be no future with her boyfriend, who had not been faithful to or exclusive with her, and who left to join the military.

She remembers all this from a summit she has scaled, breathing air beyond the gravity of the situation she escaped.

Even in her own telling, it is possible to imagine a different outcome for Angela. As she says, there were not many success stories where she came from, and from where she started and where she found herself in her teens—no money, in school, unmarried, with a baby.

Angela knew she loved helping people and loved science, and she was in the right place (TAPP) at the right time—“I’ve been an adult since after he was born,” she says of her son—to hear about the right program for her: Family Scholar House.

All of these elements, and her own intelligence and hard work, led to where she is today on that summit: A nurse in the neurological unit of a Louisville hospital.

But that’s getting ahead of Angela’s story.

She pressed on against all odds, digging down and coming up with dreams and drive to achieve, if not for herself then for her son. Angela found more than she was expecting—a place to live, a degree—with the Family Scholar House program.

She found a home, a community. She found support and help. She found the person, the parent, she wanted to be, and perhaps was meant to be.

“I was still very young and my outlook on the world was not very positive. I had little faith in myself,” she said. “Then this program took me and my son in and made us feel like family from day one.”

She also found hope—about who she could be and who other people were.

“We were shown that there are truly good people in the world,” Angela said. “This made a lasting impact on my attitude toward the world and the people in it. I became a more positive and happier person; therefore, was a better mother and role model for my son. We are better people because of the amazing people at Family Scholar House.”

Beyond the resources, support, and help the program offered, it also kept her optimism alive throughout periods in which being positive was practically an act of faith.

It wasn’t always easy, despite the new outlook and resources within the framework of FSH.

Angela always saw the good and the amazing in her son, even when he began “acting out” in day care, behavioral problems that escalated as he got older. He wouldn’t take naps. Defiant, he would run out of classrooms. “I cried a lot,” she said. She walked to class, she went to work in a variety of jobs, knowing in her bones she would get a call about her son. “He was always still so sweet,” she said. “All he wanted was to be with me.”

She never gave herself the option of stopping.

She kept trying to do what was right and best for her son, which was being an advocate for her boy.

She kept trying to do what was right and best for her and ultimately for them, which was going to school.

She also knew she needed to work on how his life was structured and she tried different ways to discipline him.

As she was working as an aide in a psychiatric hospital at the time, she also knew her son had issues that she needed to address with the help of professionals.

It took a year to establish a diagnosis of ADHD. Her son started medication for the condition. She moved so he could

attend a different school system and be a student in a highly structured classroom. He went from not being able to complete work to receiving As and Bs for his assignments.

There were changes at home, too.

Angela had met someone on one of her jobs, and their relationship deepened and became serious; they were engaged. He has been in her son's life since he was two years old. In 2018, Angela and her fiancé married. Her husband has a son from another relationship who is close in age to her son. Beyond that blending of families, they also are expecting their first biological child together, a girl.

About all of this, Angela allows that she just feels as if she did what she was supposed to do.

And that is true, as far as it goes.

But what about not giving up?

Not giving up on love, despite all, with a child, with a potential mate who becomes a husband, with a mother with whom Angela has stayed close, admiring her "big heart," one who tells everyone that her daughter is a nurse and sometimes tells the daughter, "I wish I'd done that."

This goes beyond duty.

When pressed about what she would like other people to know about her and other young women like her, she says, "I'm not just a teen mom. I'm smart. I'm not like the people you see on TV. I made one bad decision that probably everyone makes as a teenager ... I feel like I turned a bad thing into a good thing."

A lot of good things, some of which are just beginning.

When Angela earned her bachelor's degree in the science of nursing, she said she felt that she had made it, that she felt free.

An RN now, she helps people of all ages who have had strokes or dementia. She loves her work and the patients she helps.

She wants her son to love his life and his career, whatever that will be, too. She wants him to know that hard work, a positive attitude, and determination can get him through the toughest of times.

As all those things did for her.

She has come a long way on a long road at such a young age.

At the beginning, she didn't have much hope, she said, and thought she would be like everyone else around her.

It's different today.

She says, "I feel I can do anything now. Everything is overcome-able. Is that a word?" She laughs. "If there's an obstacle," she continues, "I can get over it."

Angela ... in Her Own Words

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

When I was first introduced to Family Scholar House, I was in high school and my son was an infant. I was still very young and my outlook on the world was not very positive. I had little faith in myself. Then this program took me and my son in and made us feel like family from day one.

When you're a single parent, a lot of the time you feel alone, but with FSH we were a part of a community. We were shown that there are truly good people in the world. This made a lasting impact on my attitude toward the world and the people in it. I became a more positive and happier person; therefore, I was a better mother and role model for my son. We are better people because of the influence of the amazing people at FSH.

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

Surround yourself with people who have higher expectations for you than you do, and you will achieve more than you could have ever imagined.

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

Don't define yourself by what others think of you. You have more to offer the world than a body or a pretty face. Spend more time with your friends and family and less time with your boyfriend. Remember, you are a smart and strong woman. It's okay to want to be alone sometimes. Be nice and keep an open mind.

What are your hopes and dreams for yourself?

I hope to grow into a really great nurse, mother, and person, altogether. I want to make a positive influence in the lives of the people around me. I dream that I will get to travel the world, find true happiness, and live a full, happy life with my family and the people I love.

What hopes and dreams do you have for your children?

I hope that my son always remembers hard work, a positive attitude, and determination can get him through the toughest of times. Also that he is always loved and appreciated even when life makes him feel like he isn't. I dream that he grows into a good, self-sufficient, and kind man who loves with all of his heart and follows his own path to happiness.

Reflection

What does Angela'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 it forward?



CHAPTER SIX

Fellowship

Michael's Story

Every school day, the students in Michael's fifth-grade class come together in a circle and check in with each other. He has assigned numbers for them to use, ranging from 1, which means they're doing great, to 5, which means they want to go home and get back in bed. The children share how they're feeling with each other while they're able to see each other.

Similarly, Michael's students also contribute to classroom expectations and have ownership in their education. They even lead the conferences that once were known as parent-teacher conferences; the students are at the heart of those meetings now, in positive ways that are seen and heard. They have agency, in the language of the day.

There is an obvious bottom line at work in what Michael and other educators call such "restorative practices" in the classroom.

Generally, the point is to build healthy relationships between people that reap benefits throughout life.

Specifically in his class, it's the creation of a safe space for the students, where everyone has an equal voice and everyone respects that equal voice, and healthy behaviors develop from such taught and learned expressions and investments.

The bigger-picture dynamic at work is something Michael has been familiar with throughout his 37 years, and it extends beyond and before his four years as a public elementary school teacher.

Truth be told, Michael has been dealing with “restorative practices” throughout his life, whether they’ve served units defined by family, or home, or church, or work, or school, or living at Family Scholar House, all of which have combined to place him as a teacher in his classroom.

He calls it “being in community,” and he fairly brims with intensity and enthusiasm when he talks about how and why such fellowship matters. Indeed, when he speaks of struggles in his life, a listener can infer that a contributing factor to his harder times is the disruption of his sense of community, of a circle being broken.

From his earliest memories, he knows the cost of that brokenness, starting with the first home he talks about.

His father was an ordained pastor and a minister of music, his mother a pianist. They worked as houseparents at a boys’ home for troubled youth. His mom and dad took care of the young men for three weeks out of each month, and then they had a week off from the non-stop work and responsibility. Michael and his brothers lived at the home, too, and he recalls they were like “mascots” to the “16 older brothers” there. “Even though they were juvenile delinquents,” he said of the residents at the group home, “they took care of us.”

That communal living gave way to a different kind, when his parents moved to Louisville and his family moved into a village setting while his father attended seminary. “Watching my sons at Family Scholar House reminded me of seminary living,” Michael said.

They moved again when Michael’s dad got his own church and the family settled into a new community defined by

church life and the participation expected of PKs (preacher's kids): Monday, dart ball; Wednesday, choir; weekends, youth activities; Sunday, all day at church. Though he abandoned, in his early teens, the thought of being a missionary, he stuck with youth group and a fellowship that reassured. All of which ended at age 15, when his parents divorced, his mother was "pushed out" of the church, his father moved down the street, and he had visitation on weekends.

Other communities closed some gaps that had opened for him: Michael finished high school, sticking with chorus and the drama department. He even played lead Danny Zuko in *Grease*.

Suddenly, some terrible turning points, some major breaks in the circle he had known.

With no warnings, his father died of a stroke at age 41. Michael finished high school and started drinking, he said. His college career at that time—he had a partial scholarship for vocal performance—was almost a non-starter; he left after only a short time before moving back to Louisville and entering what he would call his "dark period."

He lived with the wrong people, did the wrong things—"I was all over the place, living life. I didn't care, I had nothing to lose"—and in a tough neighborhood. He hadn't moved home and wouldn't until he was 21. A very close call, including stitches and puncture wounds in a fight with a guy who used a box cutter on him after Michael defended a young woman, helped turn the tide ... and helped turn Michael back toward the family unit headed by his mom. His father, he said, had been the authoritarian in the family. His mother had always been about love, and he returned when he was ready. "I gotta do this," he thought. "I have to get things right."

Michael had worked in food service from the time he was a teenager, but "getting things right" meant he cleaned himself

up, cut his hair, took the rings out, and went on an interview for a job that didn't exist. But a chance meeting between Michael and the owner of that particular restaurant put him on a track that paid dividends and good money, as he lived with his mom and saved money for a car and an apartment. It paid off longer term, too.

What happened next is the subject of a “therapeutic” book Michael is writing for his sons, now 14 and 11.

As he tried to build a new community, a new circle, one of his own, the story he will tell them details the shattering of his relationship with the woman who is their mother, the emergencies fueled by what he describes as her mental illness that led to destructive and threatening behavior on her part. He said he feared more for their children than himself. Eventually criminal justice and legal machinations were necessary, in the form of police reports and emergency protection and domestic violence orders, protracted court procedures and a custody battle. The fracturing of Michael's nascent community started when the children were three years old and 11 weeks old. Resolution—in the form of full parental custody for Michael and a no-contact order for her, he said—came when the boys were five and two.

A new circle, a new community, was born.

From the treacherous shards of that time about 10 years ago, Michael remembers someone saying that 10 years hence he'd be a great catch, but right then he had work to do.

One: Did he ever.

And two: As if.

Try starting over again when you already are 6 feet, 4 inches tall. With no college education. And responsible for two very young children.

Fellowship again: Not only did he have to support his sons in the present, he had to plan to support his family in the

future. He moved back in with his mom, and his brothers were there for him, too.

He worked at the restaurant until it closed. He was able to pay back the lawyers' fees from the legal battle for the children. He took a job selling insurance, but it didn't fit; the work depressed him. The daughter of the restaurant owner who previously had hired him offered him another job serving tables, and he was grateful—but he knew he needed to go back to school. How could he make that work as a single parent?

Michael had heard about Family Scholar House, but for some reason, he thought it was only involved in day care. Wrong. Way wrong. A few contacts set him straight. What he learned not only intrigued him, it offered him a path forward.

He said he always had thought about teaching. The schedule was ideal because it matched that of his children. Family Scholar House would give him a shot at all of that.

He applied for the program and was accepted, and it was déjà vu all over again: the boy who had grown up in group homes, a seminary village, and in church families was “in community” again.

He and his sons moved into the “beautiful” FSH apartment that allowed him to walk to his college classes. They lived on the campus from the end of 2011 to mid-2015. It became what he calls a “surrogate support system” for his family.

This was a safe space, too, one whose essence he would summon for his own classroom, once he earned his college degree: 57 apartments, he recalls, 56 single moms and him, a male role model who fixed bicycles and looked at other fix-it perplexities, and he gleaned as much as he shared.

“This was one of the best decisions I made. Our community was very close, and we depended on each other for many things. We cooked for each other, watched each other's

children, helped each other with assignments and papers, and generally supported each other during an integral part of our lives,” he said.

He graduated. He started teaching.

That sounds easy, but it wasn't. He has had days he would assign a 1, a 5, and everything in between.

Then something off the scale as his life progressed: He thought he was finished with dating, but he met someone who also had a son. Though he said he had never before pursued anyone, he wasn't afraid to trust and love again. They married and are building yet another new community.

Restorative practices at school, at home, in life.

He tells one more story, about karaoke night with friends from Family Scholar House.

It turns out to be one about circles and fellowship, too.

When it's his turn, when it's time for him to share his voice, Michael sings “Come Together.”

Michael ... in His Own Words

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

Family Scholar House has had a tremendous impact on my children and myself.

For my children, they absolutely loved living on a Family Scholar House campus. They had over 100 other similar-aged children to build relationships with; there was a playground for them to play on; and they could go outside and play any time they wanted because of the added security of being in a gated community.

For myself, I don't think there could have been a better place to be while studying to be a teacher. Again, over 100 children in the community, many of them attending public school. I was able to learn about communities of school-aged children while in class, and then I could come home and be immersed in a culture rich with children.

As a teacher, I have been able to use knowledge I gained as part of the Family Scholar House culture in order to relate to students who I would not have been able to relate to in that way without that experience.

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

Allow yourself to be open to those around you—they can teach you a great deal.

At Family Scholar House I was immersed in a culture that I had very little knowledge about before moving in. I decided from the start that I was going to embrace my neighbors and allow space for them in my life.

This was one of the best decisions I made.

Our community was very close, and we depended on each other for many things. We cooked for each other, watched each other's children, helped each other with assignments and papers, and generally supported each other during an integral part of our lives.

I truly believe that my success in the Family Scholar House program was due in large part to the community that I had the privilege of being a part of.

So I guess that is the message: Embrace your community and give as much as you can to it. You won't regret doing so.

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

You don't have to do everything by yourself. Allow those around you in, and things will be a lot easier.

What are your hopes and dreams for yourself?

I hope to continue teaching in the classroom for a few more years while I go back to school for my master's in education. After that I hope to move into administration. My long-term dream is to one day earn my PhD.

What hopes and dreams do you have for your children?

I want my children to be happy in whatever they choose to do. The message that I try to instill in them is that you have to love and be passionate about what you do in order to have true success. I want my children to be compassionate, empathetic, and loving people who have a positive impact on those around them.

Reflection

What does Michael 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 it forward?



CHAPTER SEVEN

Endurance

Stephanie's Story

You think there is more to Stephanie's story, maybe things you didn't ask about or figure out the first time you visited with her and her lovely nine-year-old son. It was perfectly fine, that encounter, and the openness with which she spoke and shared details about her life. Still, there is a feeling: you want to talk to her again.

In that first meeting, you notice the connection between mother and son, and the near-silent but palpable readings that pass between them as she talks and keeps an eye on him, and he plays quietly but pays attention to Mom and what she says—like the team they are. The other strong memory you carry away from that meeting is how proud she is of her college education. Of having earned her degree. Of graduating cum laude. Of the display of cords that signifies honors. Of the golden sash she wore over her shoulders at graduation, the one that still carries two pins representing her membership in societies associated with her major and her job.

“I put in the hard work,” she said.

And you believe that declaration—about school and also about her life.

Especially when she added, in the name of presenting her experience more fully, that her grades bottomed out in her first major before she fought her way back up. That she had her financial aid suspended because for a while her GPA didn't meet or pass muster with the standards to which she had agreed for her stint with Family Scholar House. She dug in, worked hard, and pulled up her grades.

Despite that rebound, and what could have been regarded as a happy ending, Stephanie knew in her bones that she didn't have the luxury of fooling around or missing the mark. The boy sharing her life now underscored and motivated everything she did.

Her son gave her the gift of pragmatism and allowed her to disregard her ego. That led her to ditch and switch her Plan A of becoming a dentist. She had worked as a dental hygienist but wanted to improve upon that position. Even though, after improving her grades, she was wait-listed for dental school (given the competition, "that was huge," she recalled), she focused on her philosophy to keep moving forward. She readjusted her sights to a welcome Plan B in criminal justice, an area that also interested her but might be more amenable to her present and future situation.

She stuck with FSH, and they stuck with her. She kept up her end, and they provided her with home, security, and support for a single parent wanting to ensure a better life for herself and her child via education. She knew it was a means to a better end that she not only imagined but for which she laid everything on the line. She worked hard to get into the program, and she worked hard to stay there. She remembered all too well working as a restaurant hostess and not earning enough to put gas in her car. She wanted more than that for her son.

So, the pins in the sash symbolize both her pragmatism and her renewed commitment: One is for Alpha Phi Sigma, a criminal justice honor society. The other is for Lambda Alpha Epsilon, an organization whose mission is to advance the professionalism of all areas of criminal justice work.

Back on track, Stephanie graduated with a bachelor of science degree in criminal justice with honors (3.7 GPA overall; 4.0 in her major). She started work as a parole and probation officer. The badge she wore against her hip signified everything she worked for and stood for.

Beyond those accomplishments, what seems especially meaningful about the symbols of achievement is that a Family Scholar House official, who knew how much Stephanie's degree meant to her, had the diploma framed for the young woman's home. The official, who had been a single parent when she was young, remembered how she wished she had had her own diploma framed, only she couldn't afford it at the time. The frame, and what it signified, was her graduation gift to Stephanie.

Stephanie told this story in the townhouse in which you originally met and talked, when she took you to the place of honor where all this hung. Then, it was at a landing at the top of her stairs, crowning a summit that represented more than reaching the second floor.

The layout of her new place, where you talk to her again, is different. It's all on one floor.

When you enter to talk with her again, the framed diploma, the cords, the sash with the pins, are the first things you see. You tell her you like her new home. You tell her you appreciate the placement of her graduation display because it is in the heart of her main living area now.

Now the reminder about education—and the struggles she went through for it—is central to everything in her family's space.

She says that before she got serious, before her son came along, before she buckled down, there were so many things that she started but didn't finish.

This—the diploma, all it means—was a turning point. This wasn't one of the things she didn't finish. Neither is the well-behaved boy who sits and plays on the floor in front of his mother's awards as she visits other details of her life.

The military father who raised her, along with a stepmother she calls Mom. How much she adores him, “the smartest person in the world,” her dad, the one who taught her, “you can look back and wish you had or be glad you did.” The one who always had her back even when she left his home to live in another state with the birth mother she hadn't seen for most of her life. And doesn't see again.

How that effort of reconnection, a futile one, lasted only a few years.

She mentions her mistakes, her missteps. Messing up in high school. Typical youthful explorations. A struggle with depression. An unplanned pregnancy. Friction with her birth mother. An offer to move to another state with relatives who appeared to care, who disappeared, she said, just as quickly when Stephanie said she planned to be the parent her pregnancy implied. They dropped her off at a “maternity house,” and she worked up until the day before her son was born.

She married soon after, a doomed match with an unfaithful mate. Stephanie didn't waste time on another mistake.

Her son, and her desire to provide him with the life he deserved and to raise him to be a good man, nudged her toward the realization she needed to go back to school if she was going to give him that. This was it.

“What are you going to do?” she asked herself. “You're the captain of your ship. You can't let it sink.”

Someone she knew at the maternity house had told her about Family Scholar House. She applied. She busted her butt, in her words, to get in, in a short three months, and she and her son were in the program for four years, until she graduated. Cum laude.

Much of this you already knew, had already discussed. Some details were filled in on the second talk with Stephanie. Such as how much her church family, a huge part of her life since her baptism in 2017, has meant to her. They helped her move. They got her settled. They always are there for her.

And there is this, in the follow-up talk: You discuss her chapter title. She immediately latches on to “Endurance.”

It speaks to her. Life isn’t always a sprint, she says. It’s a marathon, with hurdles to jump. And she repeats something you’ve heard her say many times: You can’t quit moving forward. And she adds: Not even when you feel as if you are trying to run up a down escalator with boxes being thrown at you as you try.

And you still are in for a surprise, even after the second good-bye.

Before the day is out, Stephanie sends an email. Beautiful, heartbreaking, and ultimately true to everything you know and have learned about her.

She starts by sharing that she was too embarrassed to tell you this in person. She hasn’t told too many people, but she believes it is as critical to her story as anything else she has shared.

Blindsided, and with no reason given, she lost her job as a parole and probation officer just short of her one-year anniversary in the position. There is some solace that her direct supervisors back her effort to be reinstated, but that outcome remains to be seen when you speak. And she and her son had to move from the place she truly loved, the first place you met

and talked with her, the one where she kept her prizes atop the landing on the second floor.

This is Stephanie:

“After I lost my job, I wanted to give up more than ever. This is why I think that word ‘endurance’ is really fitting. I wanted to crawl in a hole and never come out, but I didn’t have that option. I freaked out, cried, and then said, ‘Okay, how am I going to fix this?’”

She filed an appeal, with the support and encouragement of her former bosses, and then she did more.

That pragmatism as an undergraduate, moving from Plan A to Plan B? She found it works both ways. Plan B gave way to Plan A this time.

“Also, I picked myself up by my bootstraps and within a month’s time I found a job back in dental as an expanded duties dental assistant. I filled out one application, had one interview, and was hired. I will continue working [there] and in the meantime just wait to hear what happens with probation and parole [her former position].”

She drew on inner reserves and resources. Her faith helped. So did her church family. As he always has, her dad backed her up, reminding her she had been through worse and she would get through this, too.

“Two months ago, I really just wanted to stop. I wanted to give up. I thought there was no hope and no point ... During those initial moments, I did not think I would make it through all this. However, God once again showed his love for me and provided and once again, I made it through. I endured.”

Telling this is not easy, she says, but she must.

“I think it’s an important part of my story and important to show that no matter how often you get set back or knocked down, you can always endure, and you can always keep

moving forward and make something of yourself.”

As you close the email, your mind flashes to an image earlier in the day, when you met mother and son in their new place but didn't yet know why they had moved. You made notes so you would remember, that in the room with the diploma, the cords, the sash, the pins, the mother, not yet 30, talked about the need to keep moving forward, and the son, not yet “double digits,” as he said, immediately chimed in with a line he loved from a movie: “Just keep swimming, just keep swimming.”

It was such a moment, that you told Stephanie what a sweet boy she has. She said, “God knew what I needed and sent him to me.”

You hope she knows that, like her Plans A and B, that works both ways, too.

That maybe God knew what her son needed, and sent her to him, as well.

Stephanie ... in Her Own Words

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

My participation at Family Scholar House has completely changed the lives of my son and me. If not for Family Scholar House, going to school as a single parent with no family or support in the state of Kentucky would have been absolutely impossible. Through FSH, I was not only able to go to school, but also to graduate with honors.

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

Never give up. Even when it seems impossible and you just want to cry, go ahead and cry, but then wipe your face off and keep pushing. There is always a way.

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

Do not take high school for granted. Education is important. And listen to your father. He knows best and only wants the best for you. Things might seem tough right now, but you are strong, and you will make it through. Stop trying to fit in with the “cool” kids, because they really aren’t cool. And being

smart is one of the coolest things you can be, so stop being such a dummy when it comes to your schooling and the path you are currently on.

What are your hopes and dreams for yourself?

I had a job as a probation and parole officer for the state of Kentucky. Unfortunately and unexpectedly, those dreams were stripped away, and I have had to deal with and overcome that.

I am now an expanded duties dental assistant. My hopes and dreams are twofold. Either A: to move up in the dental field as either a hygienist or a dentist. Or B: to find a lasting career in the criminal justice field that allows me to utilize my degree and the flexibility to work around my family obligations.

I have worked hard to make myself financially stable and hope to always stay that way.

I dream of one day being married and maybe having a couple more children.

I also dream of furthering my education to a master's degree and possibly even a PhD.

What hopes and dreams do you have for your child?

My hopes and dreams for my child are that he will listen when I give him advice. That way, he does not have to learn life the hard way like I did. I hope he never has to go through what I went through, all the struggles and hardships. I dream for him to go to college and get a good job and be whatever he wants to be in life.

Reflection

What does Stephanie'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 it forward?



CHAPTER EIGHT

Devotion

Christine's Story

Born and raised in Louisville, Kentucky, Christine's emotional and familial topography is both deeper and more vast than living in one place would suggest. A "life map" she created for college scopes out the peaks and valleys of the territory. In all, 40 globes of bright colors belie the serious messages and transitions burned into them, much in the way that staying where she was born underplays the continents of her experience displayed on them.

The first globe is orange, announcing her birth 32 years ago to parents still in their teens.

The second one is yellow, marking her first move at three months old, from living with her biological parents to living with her grandmother and her husband, who become "Mom and Dad."

When Christine speaks of "Mom," this is who she means. She calls her biological mother, who always has been in her life even if not in her home, by another name. Later, Christine will fill in some blanks between more splashes of color on the map, one of them being this: Her biological mother was physically and sexually abused by the man who fathered their

baby. That's why she moved Christine at three months in with her own mother—to protect the baby.

Arrows on the life map guide the eye to which globe, which milestone, comes next.

Birth, death, abandonment, trauma, homelessness, first love, graduations, triumphs, they're all represented.

If the globes were on a gaming screen, instead of static PowerPoint slides, the wonka-wonka Pac-Man soundtrack wouldn't be out of place.

Only, guess what?

Unlike the game with the soundtrack in which globes are obliterated, Christine amassed her points by reaching each globe, each transition, and passing them, learning, prevailing, and moving on to the next step toward a future different from her past. For instance:

Orange: "16-17 years old. Homeless. Stayed pillar to post."

Arrow to ...

Yellow: "17 years old. Moved to Jeffersonville, Ind., got my first job, dropped out of school."

Arrow to ...

Green: "18 years old. Mom made me go back to high school and I graduated in four months."

Christine said that one of her favorite song lyrics is about knowing that where you end depends on where you start.

She kept starting over.

She moved 18 times after she turned 12 years old. Admittedly, she didn't give a lot of thought to her own future. As she recalled, she always saw women raise children. Christine would soon join the family fold that way but in other ways ... not.

It doesn't just happen, becoming the first woman in one's family to earn a high school diploma. Then being the first to earn a bachelor's degree. Then being the first to earn a

master's degree. And to do all that earning in a flurry of about four years, in which your life also welcomes a husband and several stepchildren. Which is where Christine is now, on the continuation of her life map. Another milestone beckons: She may want to go for her doctorate in the future.

“Pride is big for me,” she said.

So was bucking the family trend.

She didn't do it alone.

There is hard work. There are people who believe. There are teachers who go the extra mile. There are programs like Family Scholar House that provide the support and guidance just in time, when needed. There is a child who learns by watching, who needs more than words: an example. Most of all, there are the interior values that are the spark for the engine that could. And has.

Christine is in touch with every bit of what it took her to achieve what she has achieved.

She shares that her mom earned her GED at age 54. That her mom had always depended on a man, but she didn't want those who came after her to make the same mistake.

Christine went to four different high schools, missed a lot of classes along the way, started working early and thought that was more important than studying and staying in school, once upon a time. Fortunately, she met a teacher who believed in her and met with her on weekends so she could get her writing portfolio in shape and graduate. She cleared that hurdle, advanced to the next colorful globe.

In college, she met two others who would similarly help her out.

She was working and going to school, alone on the job at a cell phone outlet one day when two men came in and robbed the store. They grabbed her arm and sprayed a liquid

in her eyes. Beyond being roughed up and present when they stole money from the store, the impact registered on her soul. “I lost faith in everything,” she said. She mentioned this to a teacher, who put the other students in class on work that would occupy them, and he spent time with Christine talking about her loss of faith. He showed her, she said, the compassion of the stranger, and she never forgot it. When she ran into this teacher years later at a restaurant, she told him what he had done for her that day.

Around the same time, Christine, a new, single mother, was facing homelessness again, living at home for the moment and working the minimum-wage job where she had been robbed. She told another teacher that she loved school but probably would have to drop out to find a job that would better support her and her child. The woman Christine calls “my angel,” personally drove her to Family Scholar House. “She changed my life that day,” Christine said.

The globes on Christine’s life map are deceptively linear, but in reality there are back-and-forths and overlaps.

She was 19 when she met the man who was the father of her daughter. She was 20 when she gave birth to their child. Christine wanted her to have more than she had had as a child, so she wasn’t going to put up for long with relationship instability. A few years into motherhood, she struck out on her own and started going to college. Finding FSH made all the difference. “I do not know where I would be right now,” she said. “I would most likely be working as a laborer or in the food industry getting paid minimum pay for maximum labor.”

She stuck with it, not wanting to let her family down, not wanting to disappoint anyone. It helped that the women she met in the program were close-knit, several of them making pinky-promises to graduate together. “It was up to me at

that point,” Christine said. “It was in my hands. No one else determined it.”

Meanwhile, one of those overlaps, which show up in a series of globes and arrows on her life map:

After she left Family Scholar House’s residential program and before she graduated, Christine gave her relationship with her daughter’s father another chance. They moved in together. Then five of his children moved in with them. Then she finished her undergraduate work, then her master’s degree, then she started working as a substance abuse counselor, and then she was married. A year later, her young husband had a stroke, and he has undergone rehabilitation to cope with the effects of the event.

Her bachelor’s degree is in human services and counseling. The lesson of the compassion of the stranger had never left her. Nor had the feeling that she had something to offer to others, given her own life map and the fact that her mom brought her up to be empathetic. Christine had the desire to help other people in dire situations because “you’ve been in that place, you can explain the light at the end of the tunnel, you can show people, ‘you can do it.’”

Little surprise, then, that the final page of Christine’s life map (so far) is a page listing her goals in life. They all are other-directed, which speaks volumes about the quality Christine prizes above all others.

When she hears that her chapter will be called “Devotion,” she says she loves the word, that loyalty is the strongest word and character trait she knows. It affects everything she does, and everyone she loves. From the patients for whom she is an untiring advocate, sometimes the only person in the world with whom they can talk, to the family members she loves unconditionally and without regard to biological ties, intent

on providing all of them the security, home, and belonging she didn't have when she was younger.

This central value makes everything clear. She knows what her priorities are.

Being a good wife. Being kind. Helping her children succeed. Being proud parents. Being a good daughter and daughter-in-law.

The one personal goal she lists is about traveling the world.

It is true that Christine has stayed in the city in which she was born and raised, but that doesn't mean she hasn't been anywhere.

The globes on her map and the compassion those events have planted in her heart give truth to these words she says to those who need to hear them:

“I've been where you are.”

Christine ... in Her Own Words

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

My participation changed the entire course of my life. I do not know where I would be right now. I would most likely be working as laborer or in the food industry getting paid minimum pay for maximum labor. I would have been able to push education at my daughter but would not be able to promote education as a role model. Because of Family Scholar House, I was able to continue my education as a single mother and have a stable home environment to raise my daughter. With their help, I was able to continue my education to reach a master's degree.

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

[Christine notes that one of her favorite song lyrics is about knowing that where you end depends on where you start.] I love this because it rings true in most situations, until someone comes along and truly helps. Family Scholar House not only said, "You and your child deserve better, and you should go get it"—they motivated me to believe it, showed me how to do it, offered assistance, and helped me believe I deserved the changes happening in my life.

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

The best guidance I would give myself is to work harder in school and take it more seriously. I would encourage myself to love myself and to know the love I have for me I cannot mask with the possible love I would receive from someone else. I would mostly want me to know my value and I am worthy of all the good things in life.

What are your hopes and dreams for yourself?

My hopes and dreams are that I am happily employed until I can successfully retire. I hope to continue my long journey of life with my husband and that we may someday get to travel, and to watch our children meet their own measure of success.

What hopes and dreams do you have for your children?

I hope they are happy in whatever they do. I hope if their goals are continuing higher education, they strive for that; if they choose a life raising a family, I hope I raised them to be able to fulfill that. I want them to find success—how they view it and not by my measures or the measures of their father. I wish for them a life of stability and love, and that is different to each person.

Reflection

What does Christine'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 it forward?



CHAPTER NINE

Perseverance

Starr's Story

Somewhere in the middle of conversation, after Starr already has made a luminous impression, she tells of when she was born, and how her mother named her one thing and how her father went back to the baby's birth certificate, erased it, and entered "Starr" with two Rs as her first name.

Truth be told, she hated the name growing up. It wouldn't be until she was in her 30s, when others didn't poke fun at it and when she was ostensibly past a lot of the rough stuff of her younger years, that she felt the name fit her and what she was doing with her life. It certainly fits the engaging 41-year-old woman who sits at the table and talks about that eventful life.

The site for the conversation is rustic, a tiny restaurant whose pores exude every minute of past smoke that has made great barbecue for decades.

The room seems to sit a little straighter after Starr arrives. She very much reflects her name in how she presents herself. If such a thing is possible, she lifts and enhances the environment just by being there. It is as if things grow a little brighter. And maybe they do. Her smile is genuine. Her demeanor is confident. Her words are sure, even when what they describe is difficult.

It does not require a lot of imagination to believe she creates the same bright wake at her workplace, too. Most recently, she has been a nurse in a psychiatric unit populated with profoundly hurting and troubled teenagers. “I love my babies,” she says.

She is Mama Starr in there, she said, and compares herself to Madea, Tyler Perry’s tough, strong, plain-spoken, and comical movie character.

Maybe the most notable aspect of Madea is that even though she is a character, she is real in what she says and how she says it.

That comes across in Starr, as well. The part about being real.

There are switchbacks in the conversation, but she covers the ground she needs to cover in sharing who she is, and how she got here.

She doesn’t regret the hard parts of her life because they have shown her the way to these children in need, the ones she helps with her work. In some regards, she was one of them once, and she draws on that part of her—as well as her prized education—to do her job and to do right by the teens.

“Everything led me to where I am now,” she said.

That simple but packed statement is also key to who she is, and the even way with which she describes her path to today.

She was born in Louisville, the daughter of a social-worker mother who lauded education and instilled its value in Starr, who was a star student, always earning good grades. Her father had struggles with substance abuse; Starr would later privately and successfully grapple with dependency, too.

“I didn’t come from a bad family,” she says. “My mom is religious, and she was involved and engaged. I saw kids who didn’t have that.”

After her parents divorced, Starr also saw, up close, the difficulties of being a single parent and never thought she would do that.

But she did.

“Life happened,” Starr says.

She had her sons four years apart—her older son now is 24 and her younger son is 20. Her declaration of devotion to them is characteristic: “Love my sons to pieces!”

She fills out “life happened” with some details in one of the switchbacks.

Married once, she always struggled with relationships. She said the difficulty grew out of childhood molestation by a family member that lasted for many years. She did not tell her mother about it until she was in her teens, a revelation that tore at her family. She said some relatives still don’t and won’t speak about it.

Starr doesn’t have that luxury. She has had to acknowledge it to move forward in her life, she said. It took a while.

The molester and the abuse robbed her of her options, she said. There would be no puppy love for her. The effects of the sexual abuse expressed themselves in Starr’s past promiscuity. She didn’t know what she was looking for, and it was easier to seek out the unhealthiest relationship because she was already accustomed to that. “I wouldn’t know what to do with a healthy relationship,” she said of those years.

More than that, it left her afraid to be touched. She doesn’t speak of loneliness, but she does mention hopelessness and depression.

Still, despite untreated and unaddressed issues stemming from that abuse as well as going about the difficult business of single parenting two small children, she managed some success in the corporate world—until her job was sent overseas—and Starr became very ill with an infection that led to numerous hospitalizations. Overall, she would end up spending about nine months in hospital rooms, she said. (Additionally, the

hospitalizations led to her entanglement with pain medications and she worked to free herself of them in an outpatient setting. She has been clean since 2007, she said.)

As the professionals worked to right her precarious physical health, Starr recalls feeling sandwiched by the realities of her situation. She wanted to go back to school to improve her and her sons' lot in life, and she knew she had to go back to work for the same reason. She was in danger of losing their home because of the job and her extended illness and had to ask her family for help to pay her rent and utilities.

Two other big things happened during those hospital stays.

She was inspired by a nurse who took care of her and made her feel less isolated in her circumstances. "I want to be that person for someone else," Starr told herself.

And she heard about Family Scholar House.

This is when things changed.

In Starr's life, there is before Family Scholar House and after Family Scholar House. As she said, everything led her to where she is now. The "village" that an FSH campus is for its residents and participants is crucial in her personal geography and in the story of a life she still is writing.

She called. They answered. She applied, and applied herself. She was in.

Starr said she stepped out on faith when she signed up and signed on for the experience and the nurturing the program offers. She was afraid because she was older than other participants she met. She did it anyway.

She grew into her name and more.

Starr is a self-assured woman now, but the vulnerability in her voice is real as she recounts, almost with wonder, how she discovered she was starting at a place of low self-esteem. How the supports of FSH, in resources, in education, in staff,

in the sorority of other parents she met (Niah and Laurel, also profiled in this book, are among her lasting relationships from those days), taught her how to be a friend and a mentor, gave her the courage to be a parent, gave her the courage to love her sons, and to love without being scared, she said.

“FSH required us to be pillars in the community, mentors to our children and new participants in the program, speakers of our own stories to leaders within our communities, and, lastly, the best time-managed parents in the world,” she said. “All of the pieces gave you a sense of self and pushed you to want better because we had a small group cheering for your success, celebrating every accomplishment, crying with you when you were weary and scared, and building a family structure of safety.”

She recognized leadership skills in FSH staff that she admired and adapted those for her own personality.

She threw herself into classes, earning three nursing degrees with honors (one magna, two summa), which eventually placed her in a financial position to buy her children a home.

Perhaps as importantly, one of her classes involved journaling, and that put Starr in a personal position to confront important issues in herself that had been sidelined by the urgency of bettering her family.

Cut to today.

Her sons are adults now. She wants them to enjoy everything life has to offer and know that she is always there for them.

She wanted to help people, and that’s what she does for a living. “I’m enjoying my moment,” she says with a smile.

And then, a real Starr-ism: “I have suitors ... but I’d rather have a Pepsi.”

Funny thing about that.

Starr says she has volumes in her life, and she already is busy working on the next.

Catching up with her after the conversation in the restaurant, Starr has news and almost turbo-charged changes in her life. She's going to need several volumes for what's coming.

She met someone through a friend. He asked her to marry him. She said yes.

“Yes, I have the Pepsi and the suitor,” she said with a laugh.

She is working for a different company now and has landed her “dream job” with it. Still helping people, she will be a nurse case manager. This is good news for her rheumatoid arthritis, as she won't have to be on her feet so much. She and her fiancé soon will relocate to another state and marry.

“I'm living my life and career,” she said.

She said that her new job came with a new business card.

On the front is her name: Starr.

On the back is a word for a value and a quality she brings to that job, her life, and this book: Perseverance.

“Whatever you throw at me,” says Starr with two Rs, “I'm ready.”

Starr ... in Her Own Words

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

Our participation with FSH allowed us to meet acquaintances that would've been difficult to reach in normal circumstances. We learned the true meaning of faith as a family and have been able to use all the tools that were sharpened in our lives today!

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

I truly believe if you can successfully complete this program, you can achieve above and beyond your wildest dreams. It wasn't just the education component. FSH required us to be pillars in the community, mentors to our children and new participants in the programs, speakers of our own stories to leaders within our communities, and, lastly, the best time-managed parents in the world. All of the pieces mentioned gave you a sense of self and pushed you to want better because we had a small group cheering for your success, celebrating every accomplishment, crying with you when you were weary and scared, and building a family structure of safety. I love my FSH family!

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

It's very simple: You can do anything! It's hard work, but so worth investing in yourself.

Believe in the progress. Believe in you!

What are your hopes and dreams for yourself?

Honestly, I've reached a few of my goals and realized that my goals changed as I got older.

After completion of FSH, I had the big beautiful house, six-figure-a-year career ...

Today's self: Sold my home and remembered to be humble, went into the psychiatric adolescent field to be a blueprint for teenagers that are aggressive, no families, scared, and hopeless ... (I am able to give back what FSH taught me by giving them hope and a different way to view the world.) I am more fulfilled and know that when I leave work or even this Earth, that I finally made a difference in someone's life. That was always my goal, I just got caught up in status ... but I remembered :)

What hopes and dreams do you have for your children?

My children are adults now. They were on the same journey. They, too, learned the same ethics. I am proud of them both but also realize that they must follow their own path. I am there every step of the way! I want them to enjoy everything life has to offer :)

Love my sons to pieces!

Reflection

What does Starr'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 it forward?



CHAPTER TEN

Promise

Niah's Story

“Niah” is a slight twist on the name of one of this woman’s mother’s friends and is a slight variation on the Swahili word for “purpose.” And those are the last two times “slight” will be used in association with a young woman who made a big promise never to give up on herself, and never has in her almost 30 years.

That’s part of her ethic as a human being.

And it is important for Niah—pronounced NEE-ah—to demonstrate this, too, as a single parent for her tween daughter. They even have carried matching backpacks that read, “I can do anything.”

And it is important for her to show, with herself as an example, that yes, she can, and yes, she does, and, yes, she is, as an African American woman professional, in her case a charge nurse on the neuroscience floor of her hospital. There are still too many people for whom Niah and her capabilities are not a given.

And she shares the same never-give-up spirit with patients who face tremendous challenges, some of whom cannot walk or talk after strokes, and celebrates their progress with them.

“I love to see progression,” she says.

She is speaking of her patients and their heroic will and efforts to improve, but the same is true for her own life.

Born in Ohio and raised in Louisville, she had a supportive family and a mother who worked hard to make sure Niah didn't feel she was missing out on anything. When one of her grade-school friends asked her if she was poor, Niah didn't understand. But as she got older, she was aware of the limitations a life without money and education put on people she knew and saw. How they struggled to pay bills, she said, how they had nothing to eat but pot pie. "I knew a certain way I didn't want to live," she said.

That meant school. That meant applying herself and working hard for her goals.

She was smart. She made and kept good grades.

Yes, there were bumps in the road, including a short stint in middle school when she left home and stayed with her older sister for a bit before moving out of state to live with her father to finish out a school year. There she encountered a very different environment: fights among students and metal detectors were wake-up calls for her and emphasized how important education, real education, was.

"It was more motivation to keep going forward," she recalled of that time.

Going forward meant coming home and resuming school here; she was intent on not being a "statistic" and set her sights on attending a historically black college or university after graduation. She was in National Honor Society, Beta Club.

Then, the biggest challenge of her young life thus far: She got pregnant when she was 16 and had her daughter when she was 17.

In the telling of it now, in no-nonsense tones you imagine she uses in her life-or-death work on the neuroscience floor,

Niah relates that everything changed and nothing changed for her then. Yes, her little girl became the center of this young mother's life, as she still is; and the fact of her daughter's life underscored and multiplied every motivation for betterment Niah ever knew or felt.

She was, and is, aiming high for two now.

She stayed on track as a teen mother, striving to remain a good student, and as a fast-food worker who woke early and toiled late, before and after school. Her family helped. Her daughter did, too, sleeping through the night early on. Niah said she lucked out in the baby department; her daughter was a joy from the get-go.

She left high school as a mom and a valedictorian.

Given her drive and despite the pressures of her life, Niah did not relinquish her college dream, her goal of not being a statistic.

Help was on the way, and she continued to help herself.

The approaching fork in the road and some wrinkles at home had sent Niah to her high school counselor, who told her about the program that became Family Scholar House.

It seemed to be exactly what Niah wanted and needed at exactly the right time: A place of her and her daughter's own. A way to go to college. A program that offered childcare for her infant as well as classes for young single parents like herself who could benefit in schooling about things other than biology, which was Niah's first major. When she realized she wanted to spend time with patients, she switched to nursing in her sophomore year.

She moved into her FSH apartment two months after she graduated from high school. She would live there for five years.

Today, Niah says that time laid a valuable foundation in her and her daughter's life.

“Family Scholar House gave me the tools I needed to be successful as a nontraditional college student,” she said. “While going to school, I was able to provide a home for my daughter and take classes that helped me be a better parent.”

She also mentions FSH classes that were particularly helpful for participants: budgeting, cooking, and how to cope with stress, as well as interviewing skills and how to write a resume.

There was much more to the program, too.

Early in college, she experienced domestic violence, and she remembers that FSH staff went with her to the police to file a protective order. He never tried anything again.

Other kinds of support extended throughout the village that was the FSH campus where she lived.

“I had it good,” she said. “It was such a family community.”

She and other participants would get together, cook dinner, split \$10 pizzas, have fun. She also found mentors, like Starr, who also is profiled in this book. They knew each other’s realities and had each other’s backs.

All the people and the experiences in FSH were touchstones to a common message—you can do it; you can get through it—that fed Niah’s own promise to herself—never to give up.

College graduation was shared by Niah’s family, whom she describes as “close-knit” and a support system she is “blessed” to have. Her mom had hurt her foot and couldn’t make it to the ceremony, so everyone flocked to her afterward for pictures and to share in the celebration.

That commencement was, as the word suggests, a beginning, not an ending, to something: The rest of Niah’s life.

Her night-shift hours as a charge nurse sound grueling in many respects, not least for dovetailing with what’s otherwise a daytime world that includes a daughter, newly in middle school, and supporting her interests.

That is central to Niah, who says bringing a child into the world means you are responsible for the way they're brought up, how they live their life, the choices they make, the prayers they have. "I only have one family," she said. "I can replace every job I have. My daughter comes first."

This means if her daughter is interested in doing nails, Niah and her daughter put together a nail station at home. If her daughter's public school isn't meeting her needs or is falling short, Niah enrolls her daughter in Catholic school. And on days off, they have dinner together, play UNO, go for ice cream.

She says her daughter is lovable and happy, and friends with everyone. "It almost scares me," Niah said.

So as the mother of a free spirit, Niah tries to introduce real-world advice—"Not everyone is going to be your best friend or love you"—that informs but doesn't squash that spirit. It comes with doses of Niah's own resolve, which has seen her through so much. She gave her daughter a backpack that matches her own. Both are emblazoned with "I Can Do Anything." It may not be cool for middle school, but Niah still carries hers and still glances at it occasionally for her own affirmation.

Niah knows she is modeling for her daughter that every best foot she puts forward is for her. She also knows she is an example for people who deal with her professionally. In the latter, she said, in being a black nurse, you have to go higher and push a little bit to get recognition. It's her choice whether to let that affect her. It doesn't. She still aims higher.

Her goal-orientation, her reach for the next level, comes from a positive place and seems organic to her very being. And it is. But she had a little help at a young age from a family friend who was a travel agent and who loved to read. She sent

Niah postcards from where she traveled and introduced Niah in grade school to black literature and the bigger world of what is possible.

Niah is a citizen of that world.

Her immediate professional goal is to earn a doctor of nursing practice degree, which will make her a nurse practitioner. She has her white coat in the program and has one year left to go in it.

She has just started a new business of selling scrubs and other medical apparel.

The idea is to position herself in a place where she can be flexible, see new vistas, and attain them, too.

She wants to get a passport for the time she will be able to explore even further.

With or without the document, she is already on her way. And she wants the same freedom for her daughter.

“The more I achieve,” Niah said, “the more I want to go to the next level. Now what?”

Niah ... in Her Own Words

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

Family Scholar House gave me the tools I needed to be successful as a nontraditional college student. While going to school, I was able to provide a home for my daughter and take classes that helped me be a better parent. I was able to participate in budgeting classes, cooking classes, and classes that taught me how to cope with stress.

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

Never give up on your dreams and just because you become a teen parent does not mean you have to stop working on your goals.

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

Don't start working unless you absolutely have to.

What are your hopes and dreams for yourself?

I want to be happy. I want a job I love doing. I want to graduate with my DNP [doctor of nursing practice] and be able to provide for family. I would also love to get my passport so I can travel around the world.

What hopes and dreams do you have for your children?

I want my child to be happy and be able to be successful in life. I want her to learn how important an education can be and how many people do not have the opportunity to obtain an education. I want her to be able to travel and learn that there is more to life than just Louisville, Kentucky.

Reflection

What does Niah'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 it forward?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pam Platt capped a 38-year journalism career as the editorial director of the *Courier-Journal* in Louisville, Kentucky. She also is a single mother and currently works as a freelance writer and editor. This is her second volume of *Stories That Define Us* for Family Scholar House.

HOW TO HELP

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Family Scholar House
403 Reg Smith Circle
Louisville, KY 40208
www.FamilyScholarHouse.org

UPDATES ON PARTICIPANTS IN FSH'S

Stories That Define Us, Volume Two, *as of August 2022:*

RICKI: Since the last interview, Ricki passed her board exam to be independently licensed for clinical counseling. Additionally, she accepted a position as a supervisor at a local substance abuse treatment center. Her oldest daughter just got her driver's license and will be a senior in high school in the fall 2022. She participated in the SummerWorks 2022 program by working at Family Scholar House. She plans to co-op at UPS and apply to the Metro College program there. Her youngest daughter will be entering middle school and is doing gymnastics.

KENEYSHA: Keneysa moved to Atlanta in May of 2019. She began working as a therapist at a hospital shortly thereafter. She welcomed her second son, Micah, in November 2019. During the Covid 19 pandemic, she started a part-time private practice, Hope Journey Therapy and Wellness Services. It officially became a business on the two-year anniversary of

her mother's death, which made the date a time of reflection and celebration. In November 2020, she began working for the US Department of Veterans Affairs. Her daughter Kennedy graduated from high school in June 2021 and made the decision to join the US Army shortly thereafter. She completed her basic training and AIT (advanced individual training) at Fort Jackson, SC in communications and IT and is currently stationed in Korea. In January 2022, she moved to Fort Worth, TX. Her husband was called to ministry and now pastors a church called Life Church Watauga. In June 2022, Nadia graduated from high school and is expected to leave for basic training in the US Army in late summer 2022. In August 2022, she welcomed her third son. Her hope is to transition to full-time private practice in the future to focus more on her family, the ministry, and her clients.

TERENCA: Since the release of the book, Terenca has been in her home for over four years. She states that "her home is full of peace." It is a safe and a healthy environment for her, her daughter, and her family and friends. She has a career that she loves doing every day. It also allows her to give back to the Family Scholar House like so many caring people did for her and her daughter. Nailah is headed to the 11th grade. She is doing well and is working and driving. Terenca is working for Humana and thanks God that they are doing well.

LAUREL: Laurel has her doctorate in nursing practice (DNP) and is a board-certified Family Nurse Practitioner (APRN, FNP-C). Laurel is working with the Norton Infectious Diseases Institute, where she is part of an interdisciplinary team that conducts research within healthcare settings to further develop healthcare initiatives. Laurel has an affinity for working with

the underserved populations of Louisville, and is currently working on the development of a refugee health clinic under Norton Healthcare. Her daughter Erica is celebrating her second year with Family Scholar House, where she has come full circle from her days as a child of a residential participant in the program. She has her bachelor's degree from IUS, and is planning on furthering her education with a master's degree in the very near future. Charlie has graduated from high school and is enrolled to enter Spalding University in the fall 2022, where he will be a collegiate student-athlete, continuing his passion of playing basketball. He earned credits for English 101 and 102 in high school and took an additional college credit class in the summer, so he will start off with a foot ahead when he enters college as a freshman officially this fall. Charlie's interests include psychology, counseling, athletic training, and physical therapy. He is currently undecided on his major. He also worked at Family Scholar House through the SummerWorks program.

ANGELA: Angela and her husband David are still happily married going on four years, and they have a two-year-old daughter Haley, along with their two 11-year-old boys. She is an assistant nurse manager at Norton Brownsboro hospital on a Neuro Oncology Telemetry Unit. She is also doing some outpatient nurse work for The Brook psychiatric hospital because, as she states, "to me, truly helping heal the world begins with mental health." Angela is enjoying life with her family and soaking in her children's childhoods. The boys are starting middle school in the fall 2022. Her plan and goal for now is just to focus on raising her kids, paying her bills, going on trips, and having a happy life!

MICHAEL: Michael is currently teaching second grade at Klondike Lane Elementary. He and his wife bought a house in 2019. They also had a little girl, Elena, in 2019. Michael David graduated high school in 2022 and is entering the work force during a gap year. Isaac was just selected as a drum major for Louisville Male High School's marching band and is super excited about that. He also plays the bassoon for symphonic band. Both of these are big accomplishments for a rising sophomore.

STEPHANIE: Since the last book, Stephanie has moved to Connecticut and works for an oral surgeon. She states that her word in Volume 2, *Endurance*, is "truer now than ever before." Her son is beginning seventh grade and is active in Boy Scouts and is beginning to play baseball.

CHRISTINE: Since the last book, Christine has persevered through some of the hardest challenges of her life, learning to navigate life after her husband's stroke. They have fought through the loss of her mother, father, father-in-law, and her oldest son. She is grandmother to a wonderful two-year-old boy. Her family has learned to continue to lean on each other and support each other. Her oldest daughter is finishing her last semester at U of L in the fall and will graduate with a bachelor's degree in psychology; she minors in film and plans to pursue this career. A film she worked on was recently nominated for an award at a film festival. Her son is in his senior year of high school, maintains a job at a grocery store, and plays football for his school. Her daughter Nevaeh is beginning her junior year and has colleges writing her for consideration. She is preparing for her ACT and is taking classes to get college credits as well. Her son is a sophomore in

high school and wants to work on a career with video games. Her youngest daughter is entering her 7th grade year. She does great in school and loves art and creative outlets.

Starr: Starr has hung up her bedside nursing and currently works from home as a Behavioral Health Clinical Nurse Advisor for a prestigious insurance company. Instead of making changes for quality care in the facility setting, she does it from a different viewpoint by promoting quality care and advising facilities of treatment interventions and milestones that should be met for the members. She is the only nurse on the team and serves as a subject matter expert in Medical Comorbidities that could affect the progression of treatment and outcomes. Her sons, Sean and Jordan, are doing very well. Sean just bought his third home and has two daughters with his wonderful wife Michelle (owner of a clothing boutique, Not Delilah). He owns a company (BISI) and is a district manager for a renowned packaging company. Jordan has two beautiful children and is co-owner of a business in Louisville. He also travels, doing music in various venues across the country. Collectively, they are all successful in their own right and continue to credit learning many tools for success from the many years they spent in FSH. Starr states, “We love our FSH family and try to continue to be a part of that village.”

NIAH: Since the release of Volume 2, Niah states that she has been blessed along her journey. She graduated with her DNP on August 7, 2020. Sadly, she lost the family friend that exposed her to literature and traveling due to her battle with Lupus. Shortly after, she became certified as an Adult Gerontology Acute Care Nurse Practitioner. She was able to do some travel nursing across the county in the middle of the

COVID pandemic. As of July 2022, she is completing one year of being a Neuro-Vascular Nurse Practitioner. Her daughter is a sophomore in high school, and is running track and practicing driving. She has purchased her second home and will soon be growing her family as she is now engaged (no wedding date set).



FAMILY SCHOLAR HOUSE

Stories That Define Us

“Cities exist as platforms for human potential to flourish. Nowhere in Louisville does that light shine brighter than at Family Scholar House. My heart grows a little bigger when I am with the scholars and see their determination to overcome all obstacles. Family Scholar House builds this spirit, and the outcomes are truly world-class—a combination of education achievement, family restoration, and unlimited optimism for what is possible that makes our city and country a better place.”

—The Honorable Greg Fischer, Mayor of Louisville, Kentucky

“The inspiring stories from Family Scholar House graduates offer important insight into the challenges faced by student parents and a call to action to be part of the solution. I am someone whose life was changed by higher education, transformed by higher education. So, to me, it’s a gift to be able to leverage the power of higher education to help students succeed and their families thrive.”

—Dr. Neeli Bendapudi, President, University of Louisville

“The Family Scholar House model demonstrates the importance of affordable, stable housing for families. Because the scholars are secure in the knowledge that they have a place to call home, they are able to thrive in all aspects of their lives. This includes raising their children, who benefit enormously from the stability provided. The comprehensive services that FSH provides are second to none and the program’s results are extraordinary!”

—Sally McCrady, Executive Vice President and Director,
Community Affairs Chair and President, the PNC Foundation



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