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DAUGHTERS *of* SARAH

TALES OF MOTHERS & DAUGHTERS



EUGENIA J. S. CAWLEY

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL COMPLETION OF THE
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CONTENTS

Introduction-----ii

TALES:

- A Mount Everest Kind of Job----- 1
- A Dynasty of Daughters -----13
- Growing Together ----- 26
- A Daughter’s Dreams ----- 43
- Mended Relationships ----- 52
- Mutual Respect----- 64
- Strong People, Strong Women ----- 77
- Two Happy Women----- 88
- Duck’s Pond: My Mother’s Dream----- 99



Growing up in Sierra Leone, West Africa, I did not have a close relationship with my mother. Though she was around for the first few years of my life, she lived for most of my young and teenage life she lived abroad in London and the US. So I never truly knew what it felt like to have a close relationship with one's mother. I closely observed the bond between my cousin, Victoria, and her mother. And, from a distance, I admired and fantasied over the close mother-daughter relationships that a few of my friends in primary and secondary schools had with their mothers. I envied them and longed for the day when I would be reunited with my mother, whose voice I still remembered but whose face was fading in my mind. To remember how she looked, I used to stare at my baby pictures and held on closely to the pictures that she would send back home to us.

The time I lived with my parents when I was little, I was much closer to my dad. I liked and loved him even more. I was his first of three daughters, and I loved that. I remember many fun times together with him, but not with my mom. My memory of my mom has, to this day, been very cloudy, confusing at times.

When I reunited with my mom in New York City in 1993, I knew of her and remembered her childlike voice, but I didn't know much about her and neither did she know much about me. During the first few years, while I finished my last two years of high school, our interactions were stormy more times than I could have possibly imagined. When I was in Africa, I wanted our relationship to change but I didn't know how. I knew that I blamed her for things that had happened and even continued to happen when I came to the States. But I never expressed them to her.

When I was young and could read, I either found or someone gave me a children's Bible, *My Book of Bible Stories*. I remember reading it from cover to cover. As heavy as the book was, I

carried it around with me on my hip as though it were my most precious gift. I was completely fascinated with the women in the Old Testament. They captured my young mind and never let go. When I made the decision to study the Bible and have a relationship with God, to become a disciple of Christ, I began to reread the scriptures, especially the Old Testament. As I continued my study of the Word, I recalled my admiration for the matriarchs like Sarah, Hannah, Ruth and Naomi, and Abigail. The hopes and dreams that were created from reading about those women came rushing back. Again, I began to wonder, “Maybe my mom and I can have the same relationship Ruth and Naomi had.”

My relationship with my mom was not mended overnight because I found God, but we started to respect each other. I was in college and trying to establish my life as a growing adult, and she was restructuring her life after divorcing my step-father. We did not spend much time together, but neither of us complained or acknowledged the distance between us. We just tolerated each other.

Once again, the relationships between my campus friends at church and friends from college and their mothers captivated me. The relationships between older and younger girls with their mothers - - even between people I knew at a distance - - inspired me. I would smile when I noticed the loving interactions between them. Since my relationship with my mother was slowly being rekindled, I began wondering about my own daughter: How would our relationship be? I was afraid because all my life I’ve heard the saying, “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.” In appearance, I look like my mom and people commented and still do comment upon the fact. I always disagree with them but, deep down, I can feel how similar I am to my mother. My fear was that I didn’t want to treat my daughter the same way my mother treated me. So I began questioning whether or not I was equipped to have a closer relationship with my daughter.

Though I still haven't given birth to my daughter, I nevertheless long to see through the veils that cover the relationships between mothers and daughters.

As a way to confront and even overcome my fears, I decided to sit down and talk to a few women in my life. Some of the women I spoke with are mothers while others are daughters. Some of the women in these pages I've known for quite a while; others I just started building friendships with. But in any case, I've learned so much from observing the mothers with their daughters and/or hearing about the daughters' relationships with their mothers. All the women I sat down with talked about how their relationships have prepared or even motivated them to be the mothers that they've become. Overall, their relationships with God are the ultimate guiding force in how they develop a relationship with their daughters and even their mothers. I asked them many questions, but I found the most important was the question about them writing a story with their daughters or mothers: What would the story be about and what title would they give it?

As a daughter who is still working on a closer relationship with her mother and hoping to be a mother soon, I have learned a lot about myself. I was honored that these women opened their lives and hearts to me. They were very honest about their relationships with their daughters and/or mothers. By sharing these tales of mothers and daughters, I hope that more women such as me, who are probably afraid, because we do not know how we will be with our own flesh and blood, will learn from the women who have shared their lives in these pages. My desire is that as I continue to be inspired by many women, they too will continue to tell me their stories. And more Daughters of Sarah will desire to participate and this will become a much larger work than I can possibly expect or imagine.

My meeting with Darri Anne took place in her 2001 BMW. She didn't trust that she wouldn't be ticketed for parking in the wrong place, so we sat in the car a few feet away from my apartment building and talked. Darri Anne is a stay-at-home mom and has been married for over a decade. Kendall, her eighteen-month-old daughter, was with her. Throughout our conversation, Kendall wouldn't keep still. After sucking her strawberry flavored Chobani yogurt for toddlers, from a tube, she would crawl underneath the steering wheel and cry when she couldn't stand up. When her mom freed her from the wheel, Kendall wanted more yogurt and she sucked more ferociously at it.

But throughout all of that, Darri Anne kept the pace. She didn't lose focus and told her tales as a mom who desires to reveal what she knows, what she has learned and what she hopes to learn about herself and her three young daughters. Nothing distracted her, not even the sun beaming upon us and warming up the car too much or even the people and cars passing by. She was deliberately focused on the task at hand.

Mount Everest Kind of Job



Each relationship has its own flavor. With Morgan, my eldest, who is seven years old, my relationship is very interesting. She is certainly different from me, but as she is growing, I'm learning to understand her. We have very different personalities - - some similarities of course - - but different in a lot of ways. She likes her individual time with me. We enjoy thinking about things, discussing things and reading books, talking about them. She is very intellectual, so am I. She is a nature child. She goes from one thing to the next, flitting like a butterfly because she is always thinking. The good parts are that we do a lot of reading together, talking about things, talking about life, her dreams, stuff that she sees in me because she is also the child who would tell me about myself. Morgan is very expressive. And so I'll ask her to pray for me or I'll talk to her about areas that she thinks I should be growing on. She is also my conversationalist, my sounding board. She is a very compassionate, sweet, kind little girl, and I love that about her. I got that from my mom and she gets it partly from our way of being. My mom and I share that in common, too. My relationship

with Morgan is a mellow kind of relationship. I'm also harder on her because she is also the child that takes a little while to focus because she is always thinking, jumping from one thing to the next. It's hard for her to focus on whatever it is that she is doing. I also like Morgan a lot. Morgan has a little of me scattered in there but more of her dad's personality.

Then there is Avery; she is my middle child. She is feisty, very strong-willed. She has a mind of her own. She is my diva child, very diva. She is also territorial in a sense. She likes to have her own things her way, she doesn't like them to be bothered, touched or disturbed by anyone. She wants to make up her own mind about everything in her life, from what she wears, to what she eats, to the conversations she has. She likes to be in control, which is another part of my personality. She is more me than she is her father. When she was younger, we got along very well. But now, because she is strong-willed and I'm strong-willed, we butt heads quite a bit. I've learned that getting along with Avery means learning how to communicate with her. She is similar to me so I know what her fight is about. She doesn't like to be ordered around. I don't like to be ordered around. I like to be communicated with, spoken to, not at. I've had to learn as a parent - - in parenting Avery - - that I need to remember to speak to her, communicate with her, not at her. I won't get anything out of her if I talk at her. She especially loves her alone time. She also likes to do expensive, diva things in her alone time. I'm not a diva, so I'm learning that from her. She likes her nails done and likes to go to nice restaurants to eat. She is also very expressive. She takes me to task on the things that I say I'm doing or need to do. She is the one who keeps me to my word. With Avery, I can't say something unless I'm really going to do it.

Avery is also very responsible. I can ask her to do anything or go anywhere and get something done, and she will do it. She is a reliable child. She can be a little inflexible and doesn't like things done outside of her idea, but she is very reliable, very responsible. She is the boss in the house, well, she thinks she is. She likes to boss everyone around, especially her older

and younger sisters. She tries being bossy with her dad and me, but we don't let her get away with it. But she does try. I like Avery too but in a different way. But liking your children and loving them are two different things. I love all of them dearly. For now, I like all three of my girls.

Kendall now is the baby and I'm still trying to figure her out. I'm still learning her personality. I know that she is determined, very smart, very connected. She can mimic a lot of things quickly. She doesn't take a long time to understand things. Of course, since she is the baby, she wants to be all grown up, so she tries to do all the grown up things that she sees everybody doing. Right now, what I see is that she is very temperamental, very short tempered, does not like to have to wait too long on anything, is not very tolerant, temperamental-wise, of things. She wants things done and she wants them done now. And she'll have an attitude about it. So far, Kendall is very interesting. She is sweet, kind and loving at times like Morgan, then other times, she is very strong-willed, aggressive about whatever she wants, which is more Avery. And then at times, she just has her own little way of figuring things out and doing them. Of course, she is spoiled because she is so cute. She is the baby and everybody spoils her. So far, I haven't gotten a full grasp on Kendall's personality. Everything hasn't come out yet.

With Morgan and Avery, I learned from when they were babies, younger than Kendall's age, their personality traits. The one thing I do know is that Kendall loves her food. She is very different from the other two. They were picky, but she wants to eat everything and she's been that way since I was pregnant with her. Since she was in the womb, I would always have to eat and eat all kinds of different foods or else I would be sick. That was the only time I'd be sick, when I didn't eat, whereas with the other two, I would get sick from food aversions and I couldn't eat certain foods. But Kendall loves to eat. As soon as Kendall opens her eyes, food. I suspect that she is going to be my eating buddy because I love food. I'm going to have to start

her exercising from a very early age because she is going to be the one that would want to go out to eat at different restaurants and would also want to have desserts.

So far, all three of them love their dad a lot. Morgan was always for her father when she was younger. She was her father's child. As she is getting older now, we are getting closer than her and her dad. Avery and I have always been close, but she is trying to find her place in the family and her place with each of us. Even though we are close, she also wants to be close to her dad. She wants to be close to her sister but also wants her own space. I find that she is the child who is always trying to figure out where she fits in all of this. What is it that's going to make her feel okay or happy? So we have to learn with her when to give her space, when she wants to be with us and spend time with us. I'm always trying to figure out when is the time that she needs to be with just me alone by herself. At this same time, she is a very family-oriented child. Her favorite thing is having the whole family, including our extended family, in a big old place, eating and laughing together. That's what makes Avery feel secure. Morgan is fine with Mom and Dad and her little unit. Kendall seems to be fine with just me for now. She is a baby, and I'm home with her. She loves it when her father comes home. She gets really excited about that. She is not a talker per se. She does a lot of expressing through actions and she communicates mostly with her body language. But she is not a talker. And I was like her a lot. I was very socially inclined. So they all have little traits of their dad and me.

In Morgan, I admire her ability to be compassionate and kind and forgiving. There is a certain amount of humility in her that's just natural. Avery, I admire her strength of will, her purpose, and her wit. If she uses it well, she would be the woman who knows herself. She is very secure in who she is. Kendall, right now, I admire her determination. She is so determined that I think if we learn how to guide her in the right direction, there is nothing that would stop her

from achieving whatever goals and dreams she sets for herself. I just pray that they'll be good ones.

It's definitely challenging with three. There is always something to do, always a need for me, always some place to go. I'm up at the crack of dawn and I go back to bed at the crack of dawn. There is just so much to do all the time. In addition to the physical work that's required, there is the mental - - always thinking about what they need, how to meet their needs, how to help them, how to train them, what to train them in. And then there is the emotional need that they have, the need for connection that we all have. For me to connect with them, them to connect with me. Then there are the spiritual needs, trying to make sure that I raise them with moral integrity and godly characters. "Oh yeah, it's just all around." It's a Mount Everest kind of job.

The biggest challenge is time management. I'm always trying to figure out when and how much time to allot to each thing and each person, to make sure that everything gets done. There is time that needs to be spent with my husband, time with all three of them together, then time to be spent with them individually. And the challenge with having a baby is figuring out how do I spend time with the older ones individually without the baby because sometimes I can take her along while spending time with Morgan. But that's not really Morgan's time because Kendall is there, too. The same thing happens when I'm trying to spend time with Avery. The challenge I'm finding now is to one instill character and discipline in them and finding the time to spend individually with each of them. Right now, it's a very difficult task.

There are many joys. There is the joy of waking up with them in the morning, the love, the hugging, the family connection, and the bonding. The most amazing thing for me right now is seeing them, literally watching a flower unfold, seeing a rosebud start from the very beginning and watching it mature and the petals unfold. That is what it's like to watch them grow up. At

every age and at every stage, they are different. They are growing. And you can see and hear and acknowledge the difference in the growth. A six-year-old communication is so vastly different from a seven-year-old. Now I'm so amazed at how cognitive Morgan is, at how much her understanding is and how deep. I mean from six to seven is a huge difference. But it's like that with each of them. I'm seeing Kendall approach two years old and it's such a big difference from the baby that I took home. She understands so much more than she did a month ago. It's amazing. And for Avery, it was the same - - discovering that my little Avery can read. Wow! Compared to Morgan, Avery is the child, so far, that has given me the hardest time to read. Morgan read easily, 1, 2, 3. (I know I shouldn't compare them). But seeing Avery discover the power in words and understanding them was truly amazing. Sometimes when they independently communicate something that I've taught them, that I wasn't sure that they heard or understood, that is powerful. Also, seeing them demonstrate kindness that I've taught them on their own is equally amazing. There are just so many joys. Eating together at the dinner table has also been one of my favorite things to do with them. We get to talk about their day and I get to hear how they are viewing the world, and their life in general. I get to hear it from their perspective. I'm realizing that they are very smart, they are very cognizant of the things around them, more than we give them credit for. I look forward to so many, many more joys with them.

I wish I had known before having Morgan that there is no way to plan for children. You can't really prepare for them. I wish I had known that what you do, if you are in a relationship before the children arrive, is you first prepare your relationship with your significant other for children. You can't plan life for your children. What you have to do instead is strengthen the relationship that you already have with your spouse, the person you are having children with, so that together, you both learn how to parent. Because a lot of times, the children come and you are on different wavelengths with each other. Since you were so busy preparing for the arrival of

the child, you didn't realize that you're going to need to be on the same page with each other to parent this child. Raising kids is a discovery process, it's a trial and error, it's a learn-as-you-go kind of thing. Nothing really prepares you for it because the child who comes out may not be who or what you expected. There is just no preparing for it. I wish I had known that, then I would have been more relaxed when Morgan came. I wish I had known that whatever God gave me was enough. That I was enough! I learned that after I had Morgan.

Many insecurities come with having your first child. Anything someone says, you take it personally because you are insecure about your ability to be a mom. And that affected my relationship with my mom. I wish I had understood that God gives you exactly what you need for wherever you are or have in life. Whatever child comes, whatever situation, you are enough. I'm glad that I learned that lesson but I wish I had known it before. I also wish I had known that everything was going to be okay, no matter what, from the very smallest need of just food, clothing and shelter to the biggest need for time, love and attention. That it's all going to be okay. Because we learned that before Kendall came along, parenting her has been so much more fun, much more of a joy than the other two. By the time she came along, we realized that it's not really about the kids and what they need, it's about us being together, being one, united and strong together. That's what gives the children the most security. That's what they need the most regardless of the clothing, food and shelter.

In the past, my relationship with my mom had been a turbulent one. It has gotten better though. Growing up, we were very close. My mother was my best friend. When I was a teenager, we were still best friends. We started having problems in our relationship when I became an adult, partly because I expected so much of her and she expected so much of me. And she did not know how to parent an adult child. I guess that is something I have to learn, too. Me becoming as adult was challenging for my mom because she had to adjust to the fact that I was

no longer her baby girl. I was an adult, and I had to fight to make her understand that. We've since transitioned into a more understanding place, where I understand her struggle to accept that we've grown up - - my brothers and I - - and for her to let go. Her life was about us, so it was very difficult now for her to let us go. I understand now where she was coming from, so I have a lot more grace, compassion and patience when she says and does things that would annoy any adult child. She has learned to step back and accept more that we are adults. We can make our own decisions and so she has learned to be more supportive in whatever decisions we've made and continue making. Our relationship is transitioning into an adult relationship, which is pretty nice. We've fought a lot, hurt each other a lot just to get to that place of understanding, but thank God, we are getting there. It didn't help that we lived together: Adult children and their parents, if it can be avoided, should not live together, not a good idea, not unless your parents have fully accepted your status as an adult and you have fully accepted that responsibility, too.

My girls love their Nana and have a very, very good relationship with her. They see my mom at least a couple of times a week because I see her very often. If the week goes by and I don't see my mom, I get very uncomfortable, and by the weekend, I have to go see her. And I usually take them with me. She loves them, she wants to see them all the time. So they have a very good relationship with her. She told me that it's not her job to raise them and discipline them. It's my job as their mom. She has raised her own children already and is now free to spoil the ones who are coming into her family, her life, namely her grandchildren.

Now that I'm getting older, all the Jamaican sayings and ways of doing things that my mom taught me are just coming out. I didn't even know that they were there. Oh my goodness! You are really what your parents have instilled in you. When you start having children and you start getting older, you start becoming so much more conscious of how your parents have

affected you. You are a lot of who they are, and who they parent you to be. I'm a lot like my mom in a lot of ways. I'm finally able to accept that, to say it and to say, "That is true." My mom raised us to have integrity, to be honest people who look out for the good of other people and not just ourselves. She raised us to be selfless in our way of being and in our interaction with other people. And I find that I'm trying to raise my girls to be that way. I'm very heavy on them being fair, honest and kind to others. And that's how I was raised.

My mom used to make us all these different foods, naturally, from scratch, and I find myself now doing the same thing. My mom even reminded me of the times she used to do that for us, but we didn't let her get the credit. I had forgotten about how she used to do that for us. All along, I thought it was my own brilliant idea creating foods from scratch for my own children. I find that I do a lot of things like my mom. A lot of sayings I share with my children I learned from her: "Do unto others as you'll have them do unto you." "Labor for learning before you grow old, for learning is better than silver and gold." I started teaching them this one: "Silver and gold will vanish away, but a good education will never decay." All these little things are coming back. She used to always tell me: "Speak the truth and speak it ever. Cost it what it will, for he who hides the wrong he does, does the wrong thing still." I teach them that now all the time because of what it did for my brother and I. No matter what we were doing, even as teenagers, we were never able to tell a lie or be dishonest without it showing on us. Because my mom developed in us such a conscience about telling the truth, our whole being would show that we were lying. And I find that I'm doing that with my girls. I remind them to tell the truth always, no matter how bad it is. The truth is important because it's the only way we can work through whatever it is, to fix it. If you lie then we are only fixing half the problem. With the girls, I tell them that I can only fix what they tell me, or I can only work on it to the extent of the truth that they tell me.

I have said, “Thank you” to my mom many times. Sometimes in the middle of the night, I’ll wake up and I’ll call and tell her, “Thank you so much, Mom.” She did a really good job with me. There is so much that she’s given me that I now can use, and I didn’t know they were there to begin with. But she gave me so many tools that are really good, so I tell her all the time. “Mom, you did such a great job. Thank you so much. I do like a lot of things that you’ve taught me.” I ask my mom for a lot of advice, too, especially when I’m stumped with the girls or not sure how to approach a situation. Nowadays, she reminds me not to get so stressed out about everything, for me to try to enjoy the journey because they’re going to grow up fast. “You want to be in the moment enough to remember them and to remember the emotions enough to enjoy it.” She keeps telling me, “It’s gonna be fine. I did the same worrying and you guys are fine.” She does give me a lot of input still.

Sometimes my mom would like for me to be a lot less strong in my discipline of them. She says I should go a little bit easier on them. But that’s because she is Nana. I remind her that she wasn’t easy on me. She agrees and says, “Because I was your parent.” So she understands sometimes and says for me to do what I think is best. She has also communicated that she felt that my husband and I were doing a good job in raising the girls. Her saying that made me feel good. It made me feel somewhat validated in the sense because I used to think my mom was the hardest person on me ever, that I couldn’t do anything perfect enough for my mom, so when she says things like that, it makes me feel, “Okay, I’m doing something right, good.” She has the hindsight that’s 20/20 now that her own children have grown, so if she see that we are doing something right, then maybe we are doing some good with the girls.

Expressing my disapproval about their behavior is one of the things I’m working on. Sometimes I don’t always express my disapproval in a good way. I shout. And then there are time when I’ll say, “It’s okay, let’s talk about what happened and why. And let’s figure it out.”

The one thing I do is that I always try to go back and talk through whatever it is that I got angry about or why I responded in such an explosive way. Or I become extremely quiet and thoughtful. Either way, we always go back and talk about it: what happened, why Mommy feels upset about what happened, how we can work on it? When I respond in a wrong way, I always let them know that it was wrong of me to have responded the way I did. And I'm working on it. I also ask them to help me work on it. It takes a lot of humility on my part to admit that to them and open myself up to them like that. But I do my best. The other day, I asked them to pray for me to be patient and gentle in my spirit because I can be very harsh and aggressive when I respond to things. It's the Jamaican way. They were very sweet about it: "Yes, Mommy, we'll pray for you. Definitely, we'll pray for you." That was good.

Gosh, I have so many dreams for them. My biggest dream for each of them is that they will love God and trust him to lead them. If they do that, all of life would fall into place. I used to think that I wanted them to be successful in terms of education and money, but what I really want them to do is find real love - - not some idea of love. I want their lives to be filled with love and joy with whomever and with God. I've come to realize that all the education in the world, all the money in the world, all the things in the world don't matter unless your life is full of love, the deep, connecting, enduring, and fulfilling kind of love that comes first with God and then with whomever they spend their lives with. I think that's the most meaningful life they can have.

My mom is definitely a great role model for me in how I'm raising my daughters. I'm amazed at how she raised three children, two boys and one girl. My brothers are men of integrity. Now that I'm raising my children, I'm realizing that it's hard work. Raising your children in a world where there are so many voices, so that they can be adults who can make

their own decisions and not be swayed by all the things around them and stand for what's right - no matter what - - is amazing. I now know how difficult that job is.

My advice to new moms or moms-to-be is this: if you are married or with a partner, I would say 70 percent of your worry in raising your children lies in the strength of your relationship. So make the relationship the best that you can because 70 percent of parenting is taken care of by the strength and unity of your relationship with your spouse or partner you are having children with. The other part is for you to trust in the ability that God gives and the instinct that God gives to do what you need to do for your children. Don't worry so much. Be in the moment, and enjoy raising them. And trust in yourself. Trust that God has given you all that you need to take care of your children. And trust that it's all going to work out fine. In other words, trust your gut. But God is the one who moves your gut, really.

Our story would most likely be a fairytale about us – a fairytale about our family. Those are the stories they love best. They love when I make up stories about our family and tell them to them at night. Like all fairytales, their story, for now, is ongoing; their journey is ongoing. So much already, yet they are still young.

Natalie, her girls, and I met at the McDonald's on Hillside in Jamaica, Queens. During the conversation that easily turned into almost two and a half hours, we shared lots of laughter. The girls revealed secrets about their mischiefs. Throughout our conversation, Natalie would sometimes address her daughters directly as "you" and often times the girls would interject. Sometimes they bickered or got sidetracked, and Mom would call on them to focus.

Natalie is a mother of three young girls, two of whom are only a year apart. The last is much younger. Two of the girls are now teens and the last is a preteen. She home schools them, and you can tell that she and her husband have done and continue to do excellent work with their daughters. The girls, like their mom, are always serving members of the church in whatever capacities they are needed, be it setting up for a party or volunteering with the local Red Cross during the Dr. King Day of Service. And they do it with lots of smiles. Also, like Mom, they are friendly and outgoing.

When they arrived at the McDonald's, the girls, subconsciously, sat in the order of their birth. They all, including Mom, have their hair put up in a bun. From their heads to their toes, the girls appeared to have on the same style of clothing and Ugg boots but in different colors. In their responses and interactions, there was nothing the four of them held back from each other. They knew everything about each other and they share, not only a similar taste in clothing and hair styles, but a similar style of life as well.

A Dynasty of Daughters



As you can see, I have three girls: Emily, Elisha and Erin. When Ed and I were pregnant with Emily, we were thinking about names. Since Ed's name starts with an E, he said, "You know, my mom always said if I were a girl, she would call me Edna. What do you think of Edna for a girl's name?" I said, "OK, anything else?"

He then mentioned "Edwina," and a couple more E names that scared me. So I came up with a compromise: "How about we give our child your initials, boy or girl, and I choose the names, how about that?" That was a good compromise because he agreed. His initials are E-B-F, so each of them has the same initials E-B-F, but I chose the names. I chose Emily, which means "Industrious, hard worker for God," Elisha, which means "Blessed by God or favored of God," and Erin, "Bringer of peace from God."

I love and admire their camaraderie, their togetherness and their closeness. That's one of the things that I was a little fearful of with home schooling them. They're going to get sick of each other. Though that happens sometimes, for the most part, they're there for each other. But individually, their physical traits, their characteristics, personality traits, I admire so many different things about them. One thing I admire the most about Emily is that she is an amazing reader. She can read and read, her quest for knowledge is inspiring. It's scary. Once, I told one of the home school moms a while back that as punishment for something Emily had done, I literally told her, "You know what? No reading today!" The other mother looked and said, "You told your daughter 'No reading today'? I would die for my daughter to pick up a book." Emily loves her quest for knowledge. I'm happy that she not only uses it academically, but also for God. She's always reading books about God. And I love that about her.

With Elisha, she takes pride in herself. I always try to tell her, "Hey, you're beautiful in God's eyes. You may have a little pimple here or whatever, but you're beautiful in God's eyes." If you look at all three of them, whose hair is combed? You know what I mean? The pride she takes in herself. I love that about her. It's beautiful to see. With Erin, where do I start? I love the fact that you don't step away, you don't step back. How can I phrase this? You're fearless...fearless. I look at you sometimes, in certain situations, and you're like, "Well, we'll just do such and such." If I were her age at this moment, I'd be cowering. Your courage gives me courage sometimes.

The challenges of them being so close in age, for Emily and Elisha, and all three of them being home schooled are that they all like the same things and sometimes borrow each other's stuff without permission. The problem is that they don't give it back. ("Emily is especially guilty of that. She doesn't like it when people take her stuff but she does it to me all the time.") One of the challenges of being so close, a lot of the time, is that there's no separation when it comes to

activities. (“We’d all be in the same class in karate. We’d all be in the same class if we went to take chorus. Because Emily and I are really close in age, people think we’re twins.”) There’s no division, there’s no differentiation between them. Emily is only a year older than Elisha, so when they break up the children’s classes at church, every other year they’d be in the same class. (“I was never alone for longer than a year. When I went off to camp, it was the best week of my life. I was finally free of the bindings of the ‘terrible trios.’”) I got to say that, if I can interject here, I didn’t help at all. From when they were little, I would dress them alike - - Identically. (“Mom wouldn’t buy clothes unless she could find three of them in each of our sizes. She used to have us in those little red, patent leather shoes, and little skirts like Russian nesting dolls - - the ones that fit inside each other.” “Elisha is the biggest, Emily’s in the middle and I’m the smallest. Literally, there was never a moment of peace. We always did everything together. My friends wanted to hang out with my sisters because they were cooler than me and older. They still do.”) Emily and Elisha share each other’s friends because they’re so close in age, their friends are the same age.

And that’s another downside to home schooling. Their dad has a crazy schedule, so it’s usually just me and them. If I have to drop this one, one place, this one, another place, that one, one place, I’d be a wreck. So, I’ll ask all three of them, “Do all three of you like karate?” If they blink, then it’s “Okay, we’ll go to karate.” I did the same for Girls Scouts. (“She takes blinking as confirmation of consent - - Blink if you want to go.”) At some point, they have to blink! Honestly, we talk about it and come to a decision, and I would let them know what would be easier for me. Also, I do the same with the shopping. If I see something, I say, “Oh, this is nice. It’s on sale; they have three sizes. Okay, grab it!” It helped me to parent better with choosing their clothes and activities.

With conflict or disagreement we settle it the best way we can. (“Usually, if Elisha or Erin annoyed me, I would try to ignore them, but then they always get up in my face and I’d end up smiling and they’d take that as, ‘OK, we’re cool now.’ I’m like, ‘No, I’m still angry,’ but we’d end up going on.”) When they were younger, I would pull them together and we’d literally talk about whatever it was that was going on. (“It was so annoying.”) I know it was annoying. Every time something went wrong, I’d say, “Alright guys, come here, let’s talk this out.” (“No mom! I want to be angry! Leave me alone! She forced us to let go of our feelings of anger. It was annoying because we wanted to be angry; it was better that way. We wanted Mom to just let us go through our problems with each other in our own way, on our own schedule. Let us steam it out!”) I would pull them together and say, “Let me hear your side of the story.” Then I’d say, “Okay, now let me hear your side of the story.” And I would be there as the judge or the mediator. (“We call it the Ford Court.”) I would let them know there are three sides to every story: your side, the other side, and the absolute truth in the middle, which is God. And then, one of the things that I’d always make them do is apologize to each other. (“In my mind, apologies aren’t apologies unless you mean them.”) But, it’s a start - - by saying, “I’m sorry,” verbally, your mind and your heart would get around to believing it at some point. (“Yeah, whenever you make a kid do something they don’t want to do, it’s not helping anyone in the situation. We exacted revenge afterwards.”) From when they were little, I started that with them, getting them together, where they talked about their issues, whether they wanted to or not. (“And most times we didn’t.”) Most times you didn’t, and I forced it upon you. We’d get together and we’d talk about it:

The joys and challenges of being a mom, first of all, let me say that I enjoy being a mom. One of the challenges is that I know my shortcomings, and I try my best not to have my girls mimic or imitate my shortcomings. That’s a challenge. Another challenge is being there for

them. Sometimes, I don't have time for myself. The joys are countless, endless. Even though it's supposed to be a mom-daughter relationship, on many occasions, we have a mom-friend or friend-friend relationship. And I love that about my relationship with each of you. I feel like somewhere in there you're also my daughter, but you're also my friend, too. ("Friends don't make friends go to bed early." "Friends let friends eat dessert first.") I appreciate the friend I have in each of you. The other joys are being able to pass on a lot that I've been taught and know, like belief and faith. Being able to pass on that is a joy. Sometimes, I feel like asking God, "God, are you sure?" Here are three young women of God that I'm raising, you know, and he entrusts me for that. Wow. Me? I can't raise myself. And here He is, asking me to raise three children. It's scary, but it's a joy.

Also, the joys are the activities that we do together, especially since they are being home schooled. Usually, we do home schooling Monday through Thursday, and every other Friday is Fun Friday. So, Fun Friday is like a Friday when we'll go to museum, the Hall of Science and different places. Some of the things that we do, I'm like, "Jeez, I never got to do that," so they think it's fun for them. But while I'm there, I'd say, "Forget that, this is fun for me!"

My biological mom had me when she was a teenager. They had two kids, my older brother, Mike (he is three years older than me), and myself. My mom had to be about 19 or 20 at the time, with two kids. She decided that being a mom was too much for her at the time. The good thing that she did was she gave us up for, not necessarily adoption, but a little better life. My mom, who raised me, was actually my aunt. We call her Mom Pearl. She went away to school for nursing in England. When she came back to Trinidad and heard that her younger sister had two kids and wanted to give them up, she took on the responsibility to raise us. I grew up feeling that my own mom didn't want me. Who's going to want me? I'm not wanted, I'm not loved. For a little while, that was my focus. But when you're little, you think one way. As you get older, you

think more maturely. My focus, as I got older, became, Hey! Look what a great Mom I have here in Mom Pearl!

I did not meet my biological mother until I was fourteen years old. I met my dad when I was nineteen. Needless to say, my mom and I did not have a relationship, let alone a good or bad one. There was nothing to judge because there was no relationship. At fourteen, when I met her, it was on my initiative. My brother had a newspaper route, and we saved up the money for the trip from that. Then Mom Pearl added the rest. She spoke to my biological mom and asked her, "Would it be okay if I send the kids to you in New York for two weeks? That way, they can get a chance to know you." And that's what we did, that's how we met her.

But our relationship has changed drastically, though. At nineteen, I moved to the United States. I lived with her for a few months and I got a chance to know her on a different level. And since then, we've gotten closer. Our relationship is more like sister-sister, and less so mother-daughter, and I welcome that. It's great now and I think that we've gotten closer after Mom Pearl passed away 7-8 years ago. Ever since then, my relationship with my biological mom has gotten better. As soon as Mom Pearl passed, I noticed that my biological mom has become more like a grandma to the kids. She would send them packages, she would call more often. For the past eight years or so, the girls look forward to their birthdays! That's when grandma's package would arrive.

With Mom Pearl, it was always a very loving relationship. As a child, I did not focus on her love for me. Instead, I fixated more on me having a mom in the States who didn't love me enough to want me with her. As I matured, I saw things differently. As opposed to, "I have a mom in the States who doesn't want me," I focused on "Hey, I have a mom here who loves me." Mom Pearl never had any other kids of her own; it was just my brother Mike and myself. As I got a lot older, I picked up on this: Mom Pearl would send me, when I moved here, cards

for my birthdays, Christmas, Easter, any occasion that we celebrate in the States. They didn't even sell St. Patrick's Day cards in Trinidad, but she would get a card and write "St. Patrick's" because she knew it was a holiday in New York and I'm in New York. I would get a card from her that said: "To my wonderful Niece" in print, but she'd scratch off "Niece" and write "Daughter." Initially, you'd think, "Oh Mom Pearl, that's so tacky!" But, as I've gotten older, I realized, as I looked at the cards, those were the exact words that she wanted to express. So no matter to whom it was intended for, on the front and inside, she would buy the card, scratch off cousin, write "Daughter." And I would sit back and I think, "Geez. That meant she must have gone through a lot of cards to find the one with the words that she wanted to express." Her actions made me realize, Wow. The love! I was deeply loved! I appreciate Mom Pearl even more now. We had a wonderful relationship.

My biological mom was in New York in January. When she came, I was sick, so I had to stay home for maybe a week. She was supposed to fly back, but her flight got cancelled because of one of the snow storms we had. So we all just stayed home, all snuggled on the couch in the basement, and ended up watching the season premiere of *Empire* together. My daughters think grandma is hip. "She's dresses so cool. She works at a Macy's in the make-up department. So she works with all these young people." ("Grandma knows all the stuff that is in style because Macy's doesn't have five-year-old styles in their stores, they have the up-to-date stuff. When she sends stuff, she sends things like Polo and Prada! These different color Ugg boots that all three of us have on now, she sent them. Yeah, she's very hip. Mom is so jealous of her style.") She's very, very hip, any new styles she'll text them. But I'm happier that they have their own relationship with her. ("Her hair is blonde. She cut her hair short and colored it blonde, like Miley Cyrus, and she wears all the big earrings. And her nails always have to be done.")

It's fun seeing them read and then watch the movie afterwards. In both, they are still thinking. It's a skill they're going to need when they get to college. ("Most people don't like books. Some children think that books are bad! But Mom read to us even before we were born." "She would always, 'And Oliver Twist said, 'Please sir, I want some more!'"") I read to them from that book. I have a list of Children's Classics and all the Newbery Honors, and I would select one book per month from those: *Pygmalion*, *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farms*, *Oliver Twist*, *Anne of Green Gables*, the list goes on. ("There's one book in the illustrated classics that I always avoided reading, *The Wind in the Willows*. I hated that book! It was so boring. It was just about these talking animals.")

Every night I read to them. I had all the books memorized, so that on any night, where I don't have time to find a book, I would just come and say, "Okay, we're gonna do Miss Lucy Had a Baby: "Miss Lucy had a baby / His name was Tiny Tim / She put him in the bathtub / To see if he could swim...Miss Lucy called the doctor / Miss Lucy called the nurse / Miss Lucy called the lady / With the alligator purse!" And I'd do it with each of them. "In came the doctor / In comes the nurse / In comes the lady / With the alligator purse!" I memorized that poem from *The Lady with the Alligator Purse* and a couple of others for those nights when I didn't have the energy to open a book.

Currently, I'm teaching them about perseverance, kindness, patience and self-control. ("It takes us a long time to get things done.") Emily wants to be a doctor; Elisha wants to be a lawyer. Erin, maybe something where she can be very creative. My main hope for them is that each would have a relationship with God. That's given, right? So that each of you would have a relationship with God and that you would live a life that's pleasing to him, so that you can get to heaven and be with him. You guys know that is first and foremost. I also want that each of you, in whatever field you've chosen, will excel and be your best at it. I tell you guys, based on your

gifts and your talents and your strengths, choose a field that you know would be fun. It doesn't become a job if you're doing the work that you love. Emmy loves kids, they love her. When she gets around kids, she becomes like a two-year-old, lying on the floor with them, helping them and reading to them. So maybe, she'd be a doctor who works with kids, a pediatrician of some sort.

From a young age, Elisha showed that she would always win all her fights. ("I'm so manipulative.") That's not usually a good thing, but it's a strength in Elisha's case. Something that confirmed it - - I think you were eight, Erin was five and Emmy was nine, and Erin took a cookie that Emily had on her dresser. The thing is, Emily was saying, "You took it!" and Erin had a look of guilt on her face but kept saying, "No, I didn't take it." But then Elisha swooped in because they kept going back and forth. Elisha cross-examined Erin: "You know you took the cookie. You went in there and took the cookie from Emily's dresser. I was right there when you did it." Elisha went through this whole thing: "Where were you when Emily put the cookie down? How did you...?" At the end, Elisha said, "You took it. I saw you, I was right there when you took it," and Erin jumped in and said, "No you weren't, you were downstairs!" Elisha turned around and said, "I rest my case," and walked away. Erin walked herself right into admitting her guilt. Over the years, I've watched how she is and I've said, "We've got a lawyer on our hands here." ("I love to be right.") Now, with Erin, she has an amazing artistic talent. She's very creative. She has the voice of an angel. I don't know where she would go with that, but for now, I tell her: "Look to where your talents are so that when you do use them, they come naturally and you're enjoying whatever you're doing."

I do try to teach them to be frugal. ("So if we were writing a story together, the book would be about saving money, because that's what Mom likes to teach us. 'Yes, she's very frugal.'") They had asked me for vintage jeans or something like that that was \$60 in the Gap. I saw

them at a vintage store for \$5.00 a pair. (“She always tell us, ‘to find good deals, we have to go to thrift shops in the wealthy areas because the people there donate their good stuff.’”) (“Currently, we are learning about fashion from grandma. But she is also teaching us about being honest. She’s also teaching us how to build relationships because she’s building a lot of relationships and strengthening relationships with the family because she wasn’t there when we were younger.”)

With regards to who is more similar and who is the most different, Emily would be the left side of your brain, the one who’s strict and practical. Elisha would be the right side of the brain: free flowing, like one of those ball point pens. (“I’m taking it. Ballpoint pens are really good; especially if they’re good quality.” “I’d be a colored pencil, Emily would be a feathered quill pen with blue ink, Elisha would be a pink ballpoint pen.”) In each of them I see a little piece of my personality. Physically, when they were little, they all looked like their dad, and I thought, “Gosh, Lord I’m just an incubator.”

To a new mom, who is raising girls, I’d tell her to be honest with them. Don’t hide anything from them - - even the struggles. If maybe they struggle one day and they see you overcome it, then they can learn from it. It’s never too young to teach them about the birds and the bees. (“I only recently understood that analogy.”) They will hear it from other people. Nowadays, kids on the playground, as young as three and four years old are talking. You as the mom, you want to make sure you set that foundation and they get it the right way from you. That way, when they hear other things, they can rethink and make better choices and decisions. Other people are going to approach them with all kinds of information, so you make sure that the foundation is there. A couple years ago, a mom asked me about her daughter, who was twelve at the time, “When do you think would be a good time for me to start talking to her about her body?” I said, “Listen, there are nine year olds having their menstrual cycles. You should have already started that talk.”

When they are having difficult challenges, I hope I'm the one of the first persons they would reach out to. But it depends I guess. ("It depends on what it is. Mom always says, 'You can come to me for everything.' But when we go to her, she's like, 'What? What?' Whenever she's angry or irritated, the Trinidadian accent comes out and that's the scary part. It's not that she's angry, she's still calm, but with a twang. It's like you're in the eye of the storm and you never know what could come flying out." "For example, I would talk to Mom about changes and even friendship difficulties, more serious matters like those. But for menial issues, I'd probably talk to Elisha first, get a peer's perspective. Usually she can help me resolve them." "I think I give good advice.")

Why home school? One of my main reasons is that Emily was harassed at school. The other is their academic needs weren't being met. Emily's been very bright from when she was small. I always tell her she got it from me, my side of the family, while their dad would say she got it from him, his side of the family. We still have that ongoing debate.

I had them in public school for one year. They were in a private school before, which was a very nice school, but they didn't have a science program or a library. And Emily was into science even when she was younger. As a member of the PTA, I asked the school to provide a little room, even a closet, that I could turn into a library. I could clean it out and get shelves and make it into a little library. Even if it could only sit four or five kids at a time, they could go in and choose their books. But nothing was decided. Instead, the school referred me to the public school that was a few blocks away from our house. For one year, I enrolled both Emily and Elisha in the public high school. The only reason why I kept them there for the year was because I didn't want to break their academic year. ("During that year, I was in a fight like every week. Some weeks, I felt like I fought every day.")

When they came home, there would be something they heard or learned in school that I needed to undo. I remember one time, one of them came home and we were at the dinner table and she asked, “Mommy, what does ‘gay’ mean?” I sat there and answered, “Gay means jovial, happy,” and I was trying to think of synonymous words. Her face still looked puzzled and her father said, “It’s going over your head. It means something else.” I asked, “In what sense or context was it used?” She explained to me that the boys called her gay because she only hung out with girls. That’s when I had to explain to her that gay is a terminology that they used. “When God made man and woman, he made Adam and he made Eve. He didn’t make Adam and Steve. He didn’t make Eve and another girls, he made a man and a woman. Now, some people like to go against what God did and a man wants to be with a man and a woman wants to be with a woman. That’s called homosexuality and God doesn’t like that. Well, people give it the name gay to make it sound nice.” I had to explain it in a way that she would understand. That was a conversation that I didn’t plan on having that early at all. By the age of six, I had had the birds and the bees talk with them, but we didn’t talk about homosexuality or being gay until that fateful night.

There was another time Elisha came home and said, “Mommy, the kids they call me ‘why go.’” I ask, “Why go? Who’s why go? What’s why go? What does ‘why go’ mean?” “They called me a ‘why go, and Mommy, I don’t think I want to associate with those people anymore because I don’t like name calling.” I said, “Okay, in what context was it said?” “Well, the girl said, ‘Why you be talking like a why go?’” And when Elisha said the context with which the girl called her that, I said, “You know what sweetie, if you can go into any environment and be understood, that’s a plus. Don’t let anybody put that down. When you speak, you use your words, use your vocabulary.” It seemed like every day there was something else to deal with.

I also had to think about how much time I was spending with my girls. In the morning, I'd drop them off at school by 8 o'clock in the morning, they were there all day. With after school programs, I'd pick them up and bring them home by six, then they had to finish their homework. I'd get a chance maybe at 8 o'clock to spend an hour with them, and then 9 o'clock they were in bed. How much time did I actually spend with them during the week? Who's really raising them? They're raising themselves. Or who's impacting them? With home schooling, I have the opportunity to impact them, to teach them, and have more time with them, not just on weekends. I get to see them grow into beautiful, thoughtful, intelligent young ladies.

I show the girls love by hugging and kissing them all the time. ("We show Mom that we love her by doing the dishes. She usually likes it when we do work around the house and stuff, public displays of affection. She likes when we don't push her away. She likes it when we talk to her. We let her hug us.")

Boy, do I remember the best advice I was given when I was first pregnant with Emily. Initially, I wished that I was given that advice before I even became pregnant. It was given by a woman by the name of Dionne Davis. She told me, "Nat, only you can take care of that child. Only you!" That seems like, "Oh, I already know that," but when I really took that to heart, it was the best advice ever. When you're pregnant, you're doing a lot in preparation for the new arrival. But she said, "Cleaning the house, anybody else can do that. Going to work, anybody else can do that job, but only you have the power to take care of that baby so make sure that you're doing it with all of you." You see a lot of pregnant moms get frustrated thinking, I got to do this, I got to do that before the baby comes. No, their focus needs to be on taking care of the baby growing inside of them. Once that's taken care of, then they take care of everything else or delegate. And I pass on the same advice to other women all the time.

The Flushing Public Library seemed like the ideal place for Peggy and I to meet since we've spent some time hanging out in Flushing before, but never at the library. On the day we met, I arrived early, in search of a place for us to sit down and talk. When Peggy finally arrived, we managed to find a space in the lobby, by the windows, next to the popular circulation books. On the right of us was the area for the kids and in front of us were the checkout and information desks. Since there were many, many people coming in and out, we became an attraction for some. They passed by just to see if they could hear what was happening.

Peggy arrived late after a quick stop at Macy's on Main Street. She was delayed because, as she put it, a lady in front of her, on the checkout line, thought she was smart and didn't know how to use the coupons. She thought that it would be better if she paid separately for each item. I just laughed.

Peggy is a married woman. She and her husband live in the same house with his parents. She works as a surgical nurse in Queens and seems to come from a family of nurses. She and her daughter, Deanna, are so similar in the way they interact with each other, they are very soft spoken and well-mannered, so I was pleasantly surprised at the way she responded to some of my questions and even those that I didn't ask. Peggy has always been straight forward with me, but she was delightfully open.

Growing Together!



My name is Peggy and my daughter is Deanna. I would describe my relationship with her as her seeing me as a caring and loving mother, who is there whenever she needs me. Deanna tells me that I am the best mom she could ever hope for. My daughter knows that I allow her to be independent because she's earned my trust. I know that she has great friends from childhood who are still good friends to her and have good characters. Right now, she attends college in Boston, so I don't really see her as much. But before she went to college and was going through the teenage years that were probably our hardest times because that was when she was trying to be an adult in a way. Yet she was still a child, so those were the times when she was in high school. For the most part growing up, she was a pretty good kid. I didn't really have too many problems as far as her behavior. I didn't really have any problems with her friends. Most of our early fights were probably when I had to have her practice playing the piano.

I grew up playing piano as a kid, and I just felt that it was something good for me to pass down. I started her with piano lessons when she was about three years old. We also got her interested in dancing because socially she was very shy. If I took her to a social gathering, she would sit or hide behind me for the first couple of hours. By the time she warmed up to the children around her, it was time for us to leave. This went on for a few years, so I was a little concerned. I even had a social worker evaluate her while she was in preschool. The social worker spent a couple of hours observing her and felt that my daughter was doing well socially. She suggested that I take her out to more social settings, group activities, to have her interact with more kids. Because she was an only child, maybe that's why she was so shy and quiet. Her preschool teacher was also a dance instructor, and she suggested that maybe having her take dancing lessons would help build her self-esteem and confidence. That was why I put her into dance classes. I believe that did do it. She eventually made so many friends that I no longer worried about her. Now, she is a social butterfly.

As far as the dancing, that's something that she still enjoys. That is an art most Asian parents don't have their kids get involved in; I try not to be a typical Asian parent where the children have to have just piano or music lessons and no fun. Because she loved dancing, I tried to let her grow in that area. At some point she wanted to quit piano when she was about nine years old. I just felt she had already put in so much time and I had taken her through lessons every week for years, and a lot of money for the lessons, I didn't really want her to drop it at that point and lose it because I was afraid that maybe when she grew up she was going to regret that I didn't encourage her to continue. I was afraid she was going to say, "I wish I knew how to play and you should've kept it up." So I said, "Why don't we continue until you're a little bit further along, and that way when you stop your lessons you can still go back to it." But in any case, we continued with the piano lessons until the end of junior high school. She tried out for LaGuardia

High School; she tried out for two studios, piano and dancing. She was able to get into both studios. I was very happy for her. Of course, she decided to choose the dance studio. Ever since she got into the dance studio at LaGuardia, she never touched the piano again. So I learned my lesson that she really did not want to pursue piano. Sometimes I regret that I made her continue her piano lessons up until junior high school. But I guess it's hard to say. I'm not so sure if I had to do it over again, I would've. In retrospect, another kid might have appreciated it. But I didn't listen to her enough. Now I tell other people who ask me, "Listen to your children. Listen to their opinions, suggestions, and allow them to choose what activities they'll prefer to participate in." Once a lady asked me the same question about her daughter, who wanted to quit piano. She wanted to know whether she should let her quit. I told her about my daughter, I told her our story. Sometimes I feel as though I wasted our time, me with my trips to and from the lessons, spending the money, and then forcing her to practice. The thing is she was so talented in it. She played well but I guess she didn't enjoy it. Part of me thought that if she didn't enjoy it she wouldn't be so good at it. That is probably one thing I would reconsider if I had to do it over again.

You see that a lot of Asian parents want their kids to play the piano or the violin. It's kind of ingrained in our middle-class culture for those of us who can afford it to provide extra-curricular activities. Instead of having them involved in sports like American families, most Chinese kids take music lessons. I wanted to at least allow my child to be able to explore the arts, and I felt that it was helpful for her to build confidence. She loves the stage and she really enjoyed dancing, so along with the piano lessons I wanted her to do something that she had a passion for.

I was trying to give her what my biological family couldn't afford because my parents were immigrants. They came here when they were, I guess, in their 30s. They were trying to

make a living here. Back then I lived in the Lower East Side. There wasn't any YMCA close by so I never was able to learn how to swim. That was one thing that I felt was very important. And that's one thing that I regret I didn't learn as a child. I don't blame my parents because they didn't have time or the money to take me to swimming lessons. When I went away on my honeymoon or away with my friends, one thing I felt I would have enjoyed would have been going into the ocean or the swimming pool, but I couldn't because I didn't know how. So I made sure that my daughter learned how to swim. Even though she didn't want to go to her lessons a couple of times, I told her that she would thank me for it when she grew up. She learned how to be safe around the pool and not be afraid of water. That was one thing in which she didn't really have a choice in the matter. I knew that that was something she was going to thank me for. And she did thank me, though not in words. She has gone to Jamaica and has been away on vacations, and she loves to swim in the pools. I knew she would appreciate it.

The second thing I never learned was how to ride a bike because we never really had time to go to the park because my parents work really late. My brother learned somehow. I also tried to let her learn how to ride a bike. She was still a bit timid and she never really got a handle on that skill, so she never learned how to ride a bike. But she doesn't have any regrets about it and neither do I. At least she knew that I provided her with the opportunity to learn.

After I had my child, it was like allowing her to have the childhood I wasn't able to have. But at the same time, I didn't want to spoil her because I wanted her to appreciate things that a lot of people don't have. I wanted her to learn that we were able to provide her with material things because we work hard. I reminded her of that and still do every once in a while. We have most of our good talks in the car when we are going to places. That's the one time I feel like we have a lot of good talks. I sometimes tell her about my past, but I try not to overdo it because

my mother used to do offload all of her life struggles onto us, all the time. I didn't want to be a broken record like my mother, but sometimes it's unavoidable.

I had a tough childhood because my mother brought me and my brother up as a single mom. My daughter appreciates me sharing with her because she also has some friends in school who have single parents. She appreciates that her mom and dad are together and that we can provide more for her. I'm always trying to remind her to be grateful for what she has and to share what she has. We all try to raise our kids up to be good moral people. That's the best any parent can do for their children.

Deanna making the decision to follow God while a teenager was tough. She started studying the Bible when she was a freshman in high school. There were a couple of girls her age who studied and became disciples. She probably felt that she should also study. After a few studies, she felt pressured so she stopped. I didn't want to pressure her. I just wanted her to come on her own, to resume her study when she wanted to. I figured that it would be better when she was ready to do it on her own. One thing I didn't want was for her to become a disciple and then feel pressure in doing so for the wrong reason. That would probably be more detrimental for her as a young Christian. As parents, it's better for us to just quietly pray about them making the decision to follow God on their own without any pressure from us. And just let them decide when the right time is for them. Everyone's reason for getting baptized is different and everyone's timing is different as well. One thing that impacted her a lot was a young friend she looked up to who got baptized. The girl was around her age. Her friend met a boy, who became her boyfriend, and she left the church. I'm not sure how but I believe that that had a lot to do with Deanna making sure that she was making the decision for all the right reasons. She wanted to be ready before she was baptized. From that, Deanna saw how challenging it was to be a teen disciple, and how different your life would be from a regular

teenager, who doesn't know the Word and doesn't have the same standards. All these were things she had to take into consideration before she made her choice. It's a good lesson. Everyone should really think about whether they are truly ready to get baptized.

When Deanna was baptized, it was like a really strange feeling because part of me felt like I needed someone to pinch me: is this for real? And another part of me was very happy. And then part of me was also scared in a way because this is when I had to even pray more, now that she has been baptized. Now, I'm praying that Satan doesn't try to draw her away. One of my prayers was for her to become a disciple before she went away to college. God only knows what happens when they go away to college. I was afraid that she might go with the wrong crowd and never become a disciple. That was one of my fears. When she finally got baptized, then I started praying that she remain rooted and in a strong group, in hopes that she still won't get drawn away because independence for young people can bring its own trouble.

I was glad that she had input from different people and she did a lot of research to make sure that the college she chose had a strong campus group. She found a college which offers co-op programs and she wanted to experience living in a different state and meeting new people. I thought that was a good idea for her. Sometimes when you grow up in one place, you tend to wonder what life would have been like, especially if you had gone away to college. That was the other part of me giving her the chance to do something I didn't do. I made it into Rutgers University in New Jersey, but I couldn't afford to quit my job and go to college. Also, I couldn't afford to move away from home for college, so I ended up staying in the city. Letting her go to another state for college was a way for me to allow her to have a little taste of life away from home, away from the city. Going away for college is not always good or possible for every person, but I believe that has helped Deanna to grow in many ways.

My daughter going away for college is a good experience for the both of us. I'm learning to find my own life without Deanna. When you are a parent, your life revolves around your child; your schedule revolves around them, but now it revolves around my and my husband's schedules. Now I find that I have more time for myself. When you're a parent, obviously, you are like a chauffeur, taking them to and bringing them back from one event to the other. Now I can focus on myself and not take days off because of my daughter, who might have needed me at home. I'm growing spiritually; I'm able to spend more time in the Word and in developing relationships with disciples and non-disciples. I'm happy that she is in a good campus group; I know her roommates, and I know some of the people in the church she goes to in Boston. Right now, we are at a good place. She is not that far a way that I can't drop by, drive a few hours to spend time with her, so it's good. But I do miss her.

Her studying nursing in college was another thing that I didn't really expect from her. I definitely didn't want to push her into becoming a nurse. I myself, sometimes, feel like nursing hasn't really evolved as a profession. It is a good profession to be in if it's really what you feel you want to do. But it's not for everyone. I never thought my daughter would want to be a nurse because as much as it is a profession, you do get your hands dirty. To me, I never see it like that; I see it more like it's part of being a human being. We all eat and put out. So I never see my duties as something dirty to do. Although I know my mother-in-law wasn't too fond about nursing. My sister-in-law went into nursing and she wasn't too excited about her daughter getting into that profession. Instead, she wanted her daughter to have an office job. I knew from that that she didn't think too highly about me being a nurse. The other thing is nurses still don't really have the respect from doctors. Also nurses have been known to eat their young. The older ones don't really help or stand up for the younger ones. We as professionals haven't helped ourselves to grow as a profession. I wanted my daughter to make sure that she was happy with

her choice of career path. Basically what I said to her was, “When you’re thinking about a career, first of all you have to ask yourself: do you want an office job or do you like dealing with people? If you are a social person, then you’re going to have to look for careers with that aspect, but if you don’t like dealing with people, you want to look into another type of career.”

Then I told her that she needs to pick three to five careers that she was interested in and then do her research. And when you’re doing your homework and researching your careers, you also want to look and see whether you’ll be able to find a job after you graduate college and are you going to be happy going into work every day. Not everybody that has a job likes their work. The other thing is you also have to be realistic. You can’t just pick a career because it’s the easiest major or the most interesting because in the end you have to put bread on the table and you also have to see what kind of lifestyle you want. Can your chosen career pay for the kind of lifestyle that you want?

I try, I guess, to give her different angles to look at and not just look at one side and say, “Hey, I want to be a teacher or a computer scientist,” but to think about a lot of other factors. She said she liked children, so I asked her, “What are some of the jobs where you work with children?” So she said teaching, social work, speech pathology, and then I tried to give her the pros and cons. For example, teaching is not just what you do in the classroom. You have to think about your lesson plan. And when you give a test, you have to create it and grade it. If you give an essay, you have to come up with a prompt that the kids can understand and then read their essays or reports when they turn them in. Then, there are much higher standards now. It’s more than just being a teacher. It’s preparing them for standardized tests, which are required by the state. You have to make sure your lesson plans meet those requirements as well. It’s all of that, I remind her.

For speech pathology, she saw how many science courses she had to take. She decided that if she was going to be taking so many sciences, she might as well go into nursing. I also remind her that she can be a nurse and still work with kids. She used to always say that she hated the hospital and didn't want to work in a hospital, but I told her that nurses don't have to work in a hospital. There are so many places nurses can work. When she found out that she could be a nurse and work with children, it's like a light bulb lit up in her head. So that's how she ended up choosing nursing. We'll have to see when she finishes her co-ops (paid nursing internships) if she still wants to become a nurse after the co-op experience. We'll just have to see because a lot of people change their minds in college, right? But at least she won't waste four years.

My advice to a new mom or a mom-to-be is that when they are in the trenches of changing diapers, feeding them, washing baby bottles, it might seem mundane, like every day is the same, but try not to forget those moments. Always try to take advantage of the little moments to build your relationship, have talks, have laughs. The time goes so fast and before you know it they are off on their own. Build those moments while you're in the car, on the train, going from place to place.

When they are young, you'll be surprised. When she was a toddler and elementary school age, we did a lot of things together. We did homework together. I would have her do her work and I would check on it. She had a really good second grade teacher, who helped us to choose a lot of really good books. Every night, she had to read a book. As a parent, I had to write the moral of the story, so we learned from her second grade teacher how to pick many books with quality lessons. From there on, she and I developed a love of reading. Also, I shared a lot of my life experiences with her. Sometimes you don't realize that they absorb a lot of the things you say to them as parents, but they do. She appreciates me sharing with her a lot of what I went through as a child.

Before she left for college, we sometimes went to the movies and saw many plays/shows together. When she was young, I used to take her to the library and let her pick her own books. When she got older, in junior high and high school, her life was much busier. She was on a competition dance team, so she was dancing quite a lot. After school, she would come home, eat a snack, go to dance for about three hours, come home, eat dinner, then do homework, so that all cut into our time as well. Of course, on the weekends, she wanted to hang out with her friends, so we didn't do as much together. I chauffeured her to all of these places, so we had a lot of our talks in the car.

Most of our quality time was when we went away as a family. We made sure that we took at least two vacations during the year. When we went away, that's when we really got to do a lot together. A lot of our quality time before she left for college was spent in the car, going shopping together and having lunch and/or dinner together. Her favorite restaurant now is Chipotle. So we go there when she comes home on breaks. It was good therapy for both of us. We learned each other's likes and dislikes, taste and style, during those times. I found that having a child kind of keeps you young because you listen to the same music that they listen to. Now when I'm at work and the younger nurses and co-workers are playing these songs, I sing along with them. Because I know the words, they think I'm very hip.

One thing that I would like for Deanna to take with her into her own adult life is for her to really appreciate life. Every day has its surprises. I just want her to live life to its fullest. Coming from a background like mine and people similar to me, I knew of families who came from being rich to being very poor because of Communism and I told her these stories. I'm hoping that she will build her own life based on the history of her family and friends that have gone through life differently from her. And I'm hoping that she will be a happy person. Sometimes I still remember a lot of the sad stories growing up with my mother, and I'm glad

that she hasn't had to go through them. But I'm hoping that she doesn't forget a lot of the stories we shared so that she can be a good moral person, always thinking about the good in other people. I tell her what makes me happy. I try to look for the good in people because you can always find the bad if you're looking for the bad. As the situation calls for them, I'll share more stories with her.

Both of her grandmothers are still alive. But my own mother, she never really took an interest in her grandchildren. She is more concerned about herself. Also with her dementia, at times she even forgets that she has grandchildren. I don't think Deanna blames her for it but she is definitely much closer to her paternal grandparents. She understands that her father's mother has a lot of cultural beliefs and sometimes those beliefs can make a person very unhappy. Her paternal grandmother was the one who took care of her while I went to work. For the first three years of her life, Grandma was taking care of her most of the time. A lot of those times, her grandma would tell Deanna to "be careful," to the point where one day I saw Deanna backing into the chair to sit down like an old lady. She was so careful. Then I thought, "Okay, I need her to start going to preschool because she isn't acting like a kid, she's acting like an old lady."

She grew up with a grandmother who is an atheist. One vivid memory that I have about Grandma and Deanna was when Deanna just turned three years old. She got a Teddy Ruxpin, a teddy bear that can be plugged into a computer. It's a talking teddy bear: its eyes and mouth would move while reading stories, which were played on an audiotape cassette deck built into its back. It freaked Deanna out that the teddy bear could talk. One night, she had a nightmare and got up in the middle of the night. She started running around the coffee table, just screaming and crying, and she woke up the whole family. I tried to tell Deanna that she was having a nightmare, but she wouldn't wake up, she just kept running around the table. So I took down the Teddy Ruxpin, not knowing that that was why she was screaming and having a nightmare. I

was trying to calm her, but she started screaming even more. So then when she tired herself out and fell asleep, her grandma said to me, “You know why she is scared, it’s because you take her to church and you’re scaring her with all these spooky stories about spirits and all that.” And I just said to her, “I teach the toddlers, we don’t teach them anything scary. All we are teaching them is the sun, moon and stars at that age. How God created the earth.” Then I said, “I understand that you didn’t grow up learning about God. I don’t believe everything you believe in, but I respect what you believe in. and I would like for you to respect my belief in the way I want to bring up my daughter.” Ever since that talk, she never really said anything about my belief. She’ll still make faces, and continues to hope that I don’t go to church, but that was the last that we ever had to deal with that issue.

Chinese New Year is another big event in our family. My mother-in-law has a lot of these Chinese beliefs: You don’t sweep the floor during the New Year because you’ll sweep your luck away. Don’t break anything, otherwise you’ll get bad luck. It’s like breaking a mirror and getting seven years of bad luck. But I kind of feel like she took the fun out of Chinese New Year for me when I started living with her because it’s all about tiptoeing and being afraid to do this or that because you might jinx yourself or give yourself bad luck. I remember telling Deanna that that’s the difference between what we believe in and what they believe in. I said what we believe in is what makes us happy. What they believe in is how to avoid getting bad luck. They are living in a life of constant fear, feeling trapped all the time. And I told her that it was not the type of life that God wants for us.

The New Year runs for the whole week. I remember one Chinese New Year day; it was a Sunday and I got up early to make myself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Of all days, I dropped the jar of jam. At that time, I was living on the same floor with my mother-in-law, and so I picked up the broken glass and put it in a plastic bag, and I put the bag right by the door to

take out later. Of course my mother-in-law found out. You are not supposed to yell or say anything bad during the New Year, so she brought the bag inside and left it in the kitchen. Because she could not yell at me, she just said, "Oh, you don't know what you just did." I was trying to get pregnant as well during that time, and she thought that I might have just jinxed myself by dropping the jar. But I also didn't know that I wasn't supposed to dump garbage during the New Year. I'm sure she probably thought that I jinxed myself and might never get pregnant after that. We didn't take the bag out until a week later. I didn't get pregnant that year and had to wait another two years or so. But that's probably what she thought. I'm sure breaking the jar and sweeping weren't the reasons I didn't get pregnant then.

I had only one child, though not by choice. I had to actually take a fertility pill to have Deanna. I got married at twenty seven and kept changing jobs. I was exposed to a lot of chemo and radiation at Sloan Kettering Hospital and I didn't want to be working with chemo and radiation while I was pregnant, so we waited until I changed jobs. When I got to my second job, I was in the recovery room and I was waking up patients and they were exhaling all the anesthetic and I sometimes had to be behind the patients to maintain their airway. I didn't feel comfortable being pregnant and working in that department. So then I waited another couple of years. By the time I got to the fourth hospital, I worked in the operating room, and I didn't want to be pregnant the first year I was there. I was in my 30s by the time I was really ready. After we couldn't conceive the first couple of tries, I took Clomid, a fertility pill, and I finally got pregnant and had Deanna.

After the first baby, I figured that we would have no problem conceiving the second baby, so I waited a couple more years. But then nothing happened again, so I did IVF twice. Back then the insurance only paid for one try. I took out a loan and spent about ten thousand dollars for the second try. When that didn't work, I made the decision that at least I had one kid

and I didn't want to overstimulate myself and end up getting cancer from all the drugs. I decided that it was time to stop trying. I had to talk to my daughter because at the time she wanted a baby brother or sister. She used to pray every night and ask God for a baby sister, her preference. The hardest thing was how she was going to take it. So I had a nice talk with her. She was actually all right with it. She was in second or third grade and all her friends were having baby brothers and sisters. But then I made sure that I had her friends over and she stayed over at sleepovers also. As she got older, she had many good friends and didn't need to feel alone.

For the most part, girls when they're young, they are easier to raise. The hardest time was when she was a teenager. That's a rough time for any kid. When she was a teen, one of the things was that she never wanted to fall asleep. She was like this even when she was younger. So as a teen, I'd tell her to go to sleep, especially on school nights, and she would refuse. Her social life was preventing her from going to sleep earlier. It was hard getting her to sleep earlier. We had many disputes over this issue.

Deanna was born in Flushing and raised in Whitestone. She grew up with mostly kids that were not like her. It was very different for me because I grew up in the Lower East Side. Most of my friends were Chinese. When we moved to Queens when I was around nine, my friends were from all different nationalities. But my one best friend was still Chinese. We met in the 6th grade, and she exposed me to a lot of Chinese culture that I was not familiar with because I was born in New York, so I didn't really grow up the way she did. She was the one who taught me a lot of cultural things. My Chinese improved also because of her. But Deanna gradually lost her Chinese. She went to Chinese school for two years, but because my husband and I don't really speak Chinese at home, when she started watching TV, she ended up losing her Chinese. All her friends were non-Chinese, Hispanics, Koreans, and African Americans. It's not until now while in college that she's rooming with Asian girls. One of her roommates is a

girl she knew from junior high, who is also in the nursing program, but they weren't really good friends then. Now she is starting to get more Asian friends as a college student.

Deanna's grandma speaks to her in Chinese but sometimes she'll speak to her in English. She understands some of Grandma's Chinese but not too detailed. It's hard to teach kids Chinese if they don't use it in school or at home. Plus there are different dialects, too. That was the reason why she stopped going to Chinese school because I speak Cantonese, but most of China and the Chinese in Flushing speak Mandarin. I didn't want to get her schedule so packed up for something she might not even find useful. The written language is the same, but the spoken is very different.

My role models in raising my daughter were women from church. I didn't really grow up with my mother, I grew up with my aunt's family. But my aunt worked until late and it was my cousin who helped raise my brother and me. My cousin, who was maybe five or six years older than I was, she was the one who took care of us. She was in high school then, and she was the one who was home when we came home from school. We chipped in to do the chores. I did the dishes and my brother would take out the garbage. My cousin cooked the dinner and we all went shopping together. My brother and I did the laundry over the weekend as well. That's how life was. I also think a lot of what I learned about being a parent was through reading books. I read a lot. I used to go to the library and get the *Queens Parent* magazine. I read a lot of articles. I listened to speakers talk about good parenting. I read Geri and Sam Laing's book *Raising Awesome Kids*. The Porters and other elders in the church would give parenting classes. I also talked to other people, and watched people. I got a lot of input wherever I could find it and get my hands on it.

One of the things I didn't like about my mother was that every time we got into a disagreement or she was unhappy, she would always blame my brother and me and say we were

the reason why she couldn't remarry because who would want to marry a woman with two kids. I would always be so upset because it wasn't our fault that her marriage didn't work out. That's why we never really felt loved by her. She was always blaming us, so we never got close to her. My mother never really knew how to show love either. In a lot of Chinese families, we never really hug like Americans. We show love for each other by our actions, showing that you care means that you love them.

My father left because he used to gamble by betting on horses. He became addicted to it here in New York, though his habit started back in China. He would lose money and my mother and father used to fight all the time over money. One day he just left and never came back. My mother tried looking for him but couldn't find him, so she filed a missing person report and got a divorce. She had to work, so she got my aunt's family to come over to take care of us. That's why I was living with them. My mother lived in the Lower East Side since she was working in Manhattan. And my aunt's family, she managed to have a friend allow us to live in a house in Queens. We used to go visit my mother on the weekends, but I was never really close to her.

What I admire the most about my daughter is that she is pretty strong willed. She won't do something because somebody else is doing it. She has her own standards and beliefs. She doesn't feel like she has to curse because other people curse or dress a certain way because it's in style. She doesn't just do things just because it's the thing to do. I like that about her. The other thing is she doesn't just have one friend that she can call her best friend. She has maybe five great friends. She tries to see the good in people, too. And I know that she doesn't just make friends with people because they are of a certain nationality. She makes friends with those she clicks with, their personalities. Sometimes when I'm teaching, I see groups of kids hanging out because they are from the same culture, and I don't see that in her and I'm happy about that. I don't want her to have a narrow view of the world that only these people can be her friends. She

has learned a lot because she wasn't just brought up in an Asian neighborhood or church. She knows all types of people and isn't judgmental.

Deanna got me to start going on these HOPE Youth Corps trips¹. We've gone a couple of times together and separately. Together, we are both learning to serve people in different parts of the world who don't have much materialistically. Those experiences were very eye opening for us. She had also mentioned that one day that she would like to serve alongside me as a professional. That puts a smile on my face. One of our dreams is to serve as nurses together. We enjoy traveling. We'd like to travel the world as we serve people, something we've learned from Ok Sassone (a single mother in the church family), who also takes her family on vacations. But she takes time for them all to serve when they are there. That's a great way to raise kids, in this day in age, who will remain grateful.

¹ HOPE Youth Corps (HYC) established in 1994 by HOPE worldwide, is a faith-based, service-learning program designed for high school and college students. While in the Corps, these students work with HOPE worldwide programs in developing countries and within the United States to serve lower-income communities through various outreach efforts and community programs.

In between her classes, I sat down with Stephanie, a daughter to a Guyanese mom and a Dominican father. Stephanie is one of the first students I began to support when I was the writing facilitator for her developmental English course. That was exactly five years ago. So we met at the place we began our student-tutor-mentor relationship, the Academic Support Center at John Jay College, the place where she worked hard so she could not only pass the university's writing exam but also go from a student on probation to a student who is about to graduate.

The center was a bit noisy but we managed to talk for almost an hour. At times, Stephanie became very emotional, especially when she spoke about her mother's lack of support in her life and how she needed and still needs her mother to support her or when she talked about the passing of her loving grandfather whom she was very close to. When she became sad and teary, I allowed the tape to run but didn't offer any words of comfort. I know the issues she would bring up in answers to my questions would be very difficult, but I wanted her to be free to express herself fully even with the pain of rehashing the past: "Thinking and talking about all these things is bringing up a lot of emotions for me." There were subjects she didn't want to fully elaborate on, so we didn't dwell on them.

There were times when Stephanie answered each question as though she was at a job interview and other times she was more relaxed, especially when she talked about her relationship with her "Lady Aunt Loretta," one of her mother's sisters, who is very close to her.

A Daughter's Dreams



At times, my relation with my mom can be very difficult. She comes from a West Indian background, which is challenging for me because I'm from a different generation, so I see things differently from her. Our relationship is getting better but it tends to be rocky. If I could change the way we relate to and interact with each other, I would but, at this point, there isn't much that can be done to change things.

What makes it difficult is that it's hard for her to see me grow up. I'm a college student who is about to graduate. I have a good head on my shoulders, but sometimes my mom acts as though she doesn't believe that girls should be educated beyond high school. Mostly, she believes in meritocracy: "You work hard and you'll have a successful life." When she came to this country at a young age, from Guyana, she went to beauty school for two years and started

working as a beautician. My generation is different. I'm currently working towards obtaining my four-year college degree to become a police officer. As we all know, college work is intense, and the field I want to go into is even more challenging. Her seeing me growing up differently from how she grew up maybe makes her feel as though she has failed me. She believes that I should follow in her footsteps. She left Guyana when she was twenty, so she's been independent since then. But I always try to remind her that things are different now. I don't need to follow the same path she took in order for me to become successful. Though I try to engage her in my life, my work and college experience, she tends to disengage.

We argue a lot about me coming home at different times or me working too much. And the way we try to handle our differences, most times, is us not talking to each other for a little while. We just allow those issues to die down on their own. If we ignore them, they go away. There is no concrete way for us to resolve our conflicts. It angers me when I feel like I can't talk to my Mom because I believe a mother is supposed to be very supportive of her daughter, especially since I'm her only daughter. I don't get that support from her. Instead, most of my support and encouragement comes from my academic advisor at my college, the people from the SEEK Department at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, my best friends, and even my own self. Right now, I have a lot on my shoulders, so I need a strong support system. Since I don't have it from my mom, I have to support myself or get it where I can.

I believe that my mom secretly has goals and dreams for me, but she wants me to have them done her way. So it's difficult for me to imagine what she truly wishes for me. From the things she says, I see that she wants me to have a good job, but not in the police department; she wants me to make sure that I have a great marriage, kids and so forth. Idealistically, I too want to get married and have children but much later on in life. My mother has two children, my older

brother from her first marriage and me. My father has five kids from his first marriage. I'm their only child together and the only one living at home with them.

The best advice I've gotten from my mom is for me to work hard, so that I too can live a successful life. As a much older woman, even though she can retire, my mom is still working. So I honor her in that aspect. She works hard, she pays off two cars, she owns her apartment. I believe that she is a very successful woman. She is living her American dream. I definitely do work hard, too. In that regard, she is leading me by her example.

For fun, we like to talk and cook together when I have free time from work or school. With regards to my cooking, I learn visually by watching my mom cook, or I'll ask her if I'm missing something in the beans or the rice. My mom is the better cook because she has been doing it longer. She learned from my grandmother as well as from my father. Her mother taught her how to cook Guyanese food and my father taught her how to cook Dominican food. He loves when my mom cooks Dominican food, so she only cooks that food. Now, only my grandmother cooks Guyanese food for us.

My grandmother lives across the hall from us but we are not that close. After my grandfather passed away, I've detached myself from the family. I just believe that everyone has an expiration date, so I try not to get too close to people. I'm afraid that if I get too attached, I'm just going to have that hurtful feeling again, the way I felt when I lost my grandfather. I was very close to my grandfather. Obviously, after my grandfather passed away, she's noticed that I've detached myself from her. She feels sad because she is alone. But my mom goes there every day. She cooks for her mom and they spend a lot of time together.

I don't like the fact that my mom doesn't support my education and my career aspirations. If there is something that I could share with her, knowing that she is listening and won't judge me, I would tell her that the past four years of college have been the most difficult

times in my life. I've put in a lot of work to get where I am. Whatever I become because of it, I want her to understand that it's because of the hard work I put into it. I didn't breeze through to obtain my degree.

What I remember from my childhood was really good. My mom treated me like a princess. I think our story would focus on our adventures, where we went, trips to Florida, Boston. She used to dress me up like a little doll and take me places. Since she was a hair stylist, she loved the fact that I had long hair. She was infatuated with my hair. She used to do my hair nicely, with pigtails, ponytails. I guess, I was her "Growing up Barbie." At that time, she had her own business. I remember going up to my mom and saying to her that she was hardly home. After a while, she sold her business and started working for someone else.

I show my mom that I love her by playing around with her, joking with her, hugging her - - being goofy with her. She'll say, "Stephanie stop!" And I'm like, "Mom! Come here," just so I can annoy her. Sometimes, I'll just be a goof ball, dance around her or sing to her. My mom doesn't do much, she works and goes to church - - She is a practicing Lutheran. That's about it. I tell her that she needs to go out and find some friends, be social, but she doesn't listen. Sundays and Mondays are her days off, so I avoid staying home on Sundays because during those times I'm home, we tend to argue more than actually have fun together. I used to go to church with her but now I work on Sundays, so she could have a day for herself.

When I become a mom, my way of raising my child would have some strengths of my mother, but there will definitely be some differences in how I raise my child. I believe I would be more supportive, build a friendship with my child. The relationship I have with my mom is more of mother-daughter, parent-child type relationship. We don't have the kind of relationship where I can sit down and talk to her about my boyfriend or school problems. Instead, I get more lectures from her when I try to be that open with her. She is at an age where she doesn't seem to

understand very well; everything I or anyone else tells her that goes against her beliefs becomes a verbal disagreement. And she tends to lash out without really considering the other side. At this point in our relationship, I can't really change her because she is at an age when change is impossible.

For mothers to be able to build that type of relationship with their children, they have to start them at an early age, not when they are preteens or even teens. By that time, it would be very difficult for them and their child to adjust. Also, growing and deepening your relationship with each other depends on the mother and even the child's schedules. For instance, if the mother, like my mom, works all the time, then how much time is she going to invest into her daughter? I would make sure that my child is very engaged in school. And I would support him or her in his or her life decisions. Of course, if given the chance, I'd share my ideas and give suggestions, but I'd try to make sure that I allow him or her to be an independent, confident thinker. I also would share my childhood with them, share a story or two. I'd assure them that though their grandma might say things that they disagree with, she still loves them. Because I would raise them differently, I would always remind them when they are with grandma, they need to be respectful of her and where she is coming from. They don't need to create strife with her.

My mom tends not to talk much about her childhood in Guyana. Instead, she talks more about the time when she came to America. When she came, she was naïve. When she was a child in Guyana, my mom used to be the mischievous one. Because she was mischievous, she got whapped, a lot. That's the West Indian culture. I don't know much about her past with her mother. But now, what I see between her and her mom is that they love each other. They are amazing together - - like yin and yang. My mom cooks for her mother every day, goes over to

her mom's place every day and spends time with her. I'm scared that the day grandma passes away, my mom's world is going to end.

I've never asked my mom this question, "Mom you and grandma are so close, how come you and I aren't so close?" I'd love to hear her response, but I don't think she would say anything that I want to hear at this time. Maybe when I'm much older or maybe when I have my own children, I'll bring up the question. I know my mom understands the importance of having a close relationship with her mom. But with us, it's been a different story. Maybe she is close to her mom because her mom doesn't have anyone at this point in her life. But I don't have my mom the way I need her to be. Sometime it's seems as if I'm alone even with my family around.

The most precious gift Mom has given me is life. I can say I was a lucky child. Before she had me, she had two miscarriages. My mom actually being here is also a gift to me. Something I wish that we can build on is a better relationship - - us simply getting to know each other.

I saw my mother cry when my grandfather (her dad) passed away. I've also seen her cry when she is hurt. When things aren't going right, she would cry. She would tell me what's going on, and I'd comfort her. We share those intimate moments sometimes. Talking about all these things is bringing up a lot of emotions that I haven't thought of or talked about. Thinking about the strain in my relationship with my mom brings with it a lot of hurt emotions. Without me even noticing it, my relationship with my mom affects my interactions with people. Though I've been hurt by my mom's lack of support, I've come a long way. However, I still wish that we were on better terms. Once in a while I'd like to share with her how I'm doing in school, so she can experience my happiness and know how her daughter is doing. I'd like my mom to go back and brag about me to her clients.

She did my hair yesterday. But before it happened, my dad had to come into the room and tell us, "No arguing, just do her hair and talk." He told us not to argue because he didn't want to come in the room to separate us. "Be civil for once," he also said. Lately, Mom and I have been civil with each other. Civility in our home is us not arguing and shouting over each other and slamming the doors. Though we speak our minds, we don't communicate as much when we are being civil - - we just say a couple words here and there, we laugh here and there. I'm the one who would initiate a lot of these light interactions, just to reconcile: "Hey, Mom, let's cook or go to the store."

In comparison to me, my mom had very little education. At times, I allow that to creep into our argument, and I'll say, "You didn't go to college. You only went to beautician school. So you don't really know what hard work is. You don't understand the stress I'm going through." I'll usually apologize for belittling her as my mother because she has done a lot with only two years of beautician schooling under her belt. But she seldom accepts my apologies. Instead, she retaliates and holds on to past hurts. I see myself being that way to people as well.

My mom compares me a lot to her younger sister (my aunt) and calls me her name a lot, too. Her name is Loretta. Me and Aunt Loretta have the same attitude, we are blunt, say what we think and feel, and we even know when to hold back our tongues. Honestly, Aunt Loretta is one of my favorite aunts, so when we meet, we act like twins. We are both Geminis as well. Aunt Loretta is my lady! I love her. We have a bond even though she is in her mid-fifties and I'm in my early twenties. She is young at heart. The funny thing is, she isn't this close with her own daughters. She is the same way with her daughters as my mom is with me. She bothers her daughters (who are twenty five and thirty years old) like my mom bothers me. Aunt Loretta is my sweet aunt, sweet like honey.

Mom tends to think that right after I finish college I'm going to land on a job in my field of study. I always tell her that realistically speaking it's not going to happen like that. I'm going to be a college graduate who will be looking for a job. I hope to land on one sooner rather than later but that may not happen as fast as I would hope. I have to make sure I have a realistic perspective at this point. Nothing is going to be given to me. I have to go for what I want and work hard to get it. I also want her to be supportive of that too, not pounding me on the head all the time with: "I thought you're going to be working full time after you graduated with your college degree."

I love my mom a lot, I do. I've been seeing that we've been getting a little closer. She doesn't call or text me as much as she used to. She is not pressing me as much to figure out what I'm doing at certain times of the day. She understands that I'm getting older, not younger. I don't know if one of her clients gave her advice, but it's been working. She's more at ease than before. When I get home at a normal time, she's not attacking me. When I don't go to work on weekends, she gets very happy.

When I'm home, some of the things my mom and I argue about are my room not being cleaned or my grades falling. Her words can be very abusive. They hurt. Those are words that I still hold on to: "You're gonna get pregnant. You work for nothing. Why are you going to college, to be a police officer, why?" Her words messed me up because I value my hard work and my dream of becoming a police officer. I used to ask her, when she would get that way, what she wanted me to do if she didn't want me to work or go to college. She has never answered what she would prefer I do. My grandmother even gets involved in our disagreements and, of course, she listens and sides with my mom. And then she reprimands me, "Why are you disrespecting your mother?" I simply tell my grandma that she doesn't live in our house, so she doesn't fully know what's going on. She only knows what her daughter tells her.

My mother and my grandmother, like most Guyanese people, want me to marry a white man. My boyfriend is black. That was a big issue when they found out. I asked them, "Why can't a black person have the same attributes, the same characteristics as a white person? They are just different in skin color." They mostly say, "It's the culture." I'm very open minded and I'm aware of cultural differences, I've taken a lot of courses on diversity, multiculturalism, and so forth. Their reactions towards me when I talked to them about these issues challenged me because they are very old school and so closed minded even though their own origins are black. I don't understand why they are holding on so tightly to their ignorance.

I am a challenging daughter. I definitely challenge my mom's values and the way she raised me. But that doesn't make me love her less.

In her apartment, in Hollis, Queens, after a long day at work, Maria offered me tea and crackers, for it was very cold and windy outside. We sat in her quaint living room, she tucked one of her legs underneath her and we began. Maria talked not only with her voice but with her hands and her body language - - every part of her spoke as she talked. Nothing seemed uncomfortable for her to reveal. In fact, she asked me several times if she should elaborate for she thought I might not want her to share the information. In the end, she said, "I had a lot of fun doing this."

After we finished talking, Maria was able to reach her daughter, Veronica, on the phone. Veronica spoke as honestly as her mother about their strenuous relationship in the past and how they've grown. We talked only for an hour, but Maria was so precise and forthright. She responded as one who is bold and proud of her journey with her daughter. She admires her daughter's ability to bounce back, and Veronica admires her mother's ability to persevere. They each value the bond that they've been able to cultivate over the years.

Mended Relationships



My daughter, Veronica, is 30 years old. I had her when I was pretty young, when I was fifteen going on sixteen. It was a pregnancy which I tried to keep a secret. I did not want to tell my mother that I was pregnant until it was a little too late. So needless to say, my daughter came into the world under challenging circumstances. It strained my relationship with my mother and I did not really spend a lot of time with my daughter in her early years. Probably from the age of two to about eleven, I was almost MIA in her life. So that created a strain between us as mother and daughter.

When I was pregnant with her, I was in a relationship with someone who was much, much older than me. And I didn't want my mom to know that I was sexually active. So I hid it and I lied when I found out that I was pregnant - - I told her that I had gotten raped as opposed to being truthful and letting her know that I was sexually active. And I held on to this lie for quite some time to the point where my mother, now that I think back on it, was so overwhelmed and so emotionally devastated. She almost had a nervous breakdown assuming that her fifteen-year-old daughter had gotten raped, randomly. And that she was going to have

a child from this rape. You know how they say, hindsight is 20/20. It's again one of the things I regret the most, creating unnecessary pain for my mother. Lo and behold when the truth came out, my relationship with my mother was so strained, to the point where I was placed in a maternity shelter for young unwed mothers. I could not live with my mother. My daughter was born and soon thereafter was placed in a foster home for a period of time. This was a really rough patch both for me becoming a mother while still an adolescent and for my mother and my daughter.

My mother decided that she was going to take my daughter out of the system and raise her because she (my mother) was the next of kin. She was going to have my daughter come and live with her and myself. My mother also got me out of the group home. I came to live with my mother and daughter for a very short period of time. Unfortunately, my choices and decisions led me to the wrong crowd. I moved out of my mother's house and started using drugs and became very neglectful of my then one-and-a-half-year-old child. So again, our relationship became very much tumultuous. My daughter went to live with her grandma, and I was MIA for about five years.

When I came back into both my mother's and my daughter's lives, I decided I was going to get help for my addiction because I had become addicted to many different substances. That was a very slow process of recovery and healing relationships. My daughter was nine or ten at the time, and she had formed a bond and relationship with both her grandmother and her father. I had to begin the process of trying to stabilize myself enough so that I could introduce myself back into my daughter's life. I had to even go through family court to make sure that I didn't lose complete custody of her. In the end, I was able to win full custody because I was stable enough, had a job, an apartment, so the judge gave me full custody.

But by that time, she was twelve years old when she finally came to live with me fulltime and we had to relearn each other. I, with my guilt of the past, but not realizing that I could not make up for the past, made some choices that were not really healthy parental choices: I wanted to be her friend. I wanted her to like me, more than I needed to establish rules and a foundation and consistency, so from twelve to sixteen, we had a very tumultuous relationship while living under the same roof. When she became sixteen, I had to make a choice to kick her out of the apartment and go live with her dad because she was out of control. It was the toughest thing I had to do because of, again, my guilt for not really being there for her. I don't think I was mature enough to process that her trauma and my trauma impacted our behavior toward each other. I didn't get to understand that until later on.

And it actually happened because I pursued a professional career in social work. It was then that I started to realize the unhealthy relationship that I had with my daughter and the healing that needed to happen. She was holding on to lots of anger, lots of bitterness, and lots of questions about Why wasn't she good enough for Mommy to stay around? Was it something she did? Why didn't I love her enough? It wasn't until we had to talk about it, cry about it, and reassure each other about all those feelings that we started the healing process. And then, our relationship turned. We started to communicate and confide. She started to really want my advice, my suggestions, and we became much closer. Now I have what I feel is an amazingly close relationship with my daughter, who is now an adult and who has made as many mistakes and bad choices and wrong decisions as anybody, but who has been able to communicate those with me and sometimes listen to advice and take my suggestions but she always knows that I have her back now, which makes me feel really proud that I am able to do that for her at this stage of my life.

My relationship with my mother was unique. My mother, while she raised five children that were not her own in our native country in the Dominican Republic, she only gave birth to one child and that was me at a late stage in life, at an age where it was detrimental to her. She was close to fifty when she had me. And it was touch and go because of the medical facility in DR was not great medically. But because of that, my mother was very much overprotective of me, to the point where I felt that she smothered me. I felt that I had very little freedom. My mother had a very dominant, very strong-willed character, a single mother who, I now know, did the best she could to try and protect and keep me safe. But when you are a young girl growing up in the United States, you want to be assimilated, you don't want to feel like you are on the apron strings of an over-protective mother. You want to explore and be a little rebellious.

And I did. But I also realize that my mother's priorities were about family. Family was always first. She instilled that in me: "We are all we have and we have to be good for each other, be good to each other." So even with all my trials and tribulations, my mother was there for my daughter. I know that a day didn't go by that she didn't pray for me to be safe, to be cured, to be healed, to return to sanity. And those prayers were answered for her. She got the opportunity to see me get healthy, become established, and have a solid foundation. I know that all of that made her feel so proud. She got the opportunity to spend her last years of her life with me taking care of her, which I felt was a blessing from God. I was allowed the opportunity to give back to my mother in a significant way, the way that she gave to me and my daughter:

In those last years, she and I were able to have a really wonderful relationship. I came to appreciate all of her characteristics, her advice. My mom would always say, "Oh, we have to communicate," but she'll be the only one talking and you have to listen. I came to appreciate all of that, and I understood why. She had wisdom and experience that she was trying really hard to impart because she lived such a hard life. My mother died in my arms as she took her last

breaths. And as hard as that was, there was no sense of regret or unfinished business. I had complete closure with my mother. I did not have the burden of feeling I should have or I wish I could have. We told each other how much we loved each other, which was very special to me.

Unfortunately, my daughter, who also had a very unique relationship with her grandmother, did not get an opportunity to do that. They were always like salt and water. And the older my daughter got, the less she wanted to hear about grandma's advice or suggestions or demands or commands. I know that I talk to my daughter about it a lot now so that she does not have to dwell on it or feel guilty because the last thing my daughter said to her grandmother was something like, "Oh I don't care about you." Now I remind her that my mother, no matter what was said and done, always loved her.

I even think that that experience definitely bonded my daughter and me even closer. We've grown to realize that there is no guarantee. Life is short. We can't live on regret and if you love someone, you show them now, not later. My daughter and I try to do that with each other. I thank my mom for leaving us with that.

Veronica has a great way of bouncing back. She's had a lot of ups and downs. She has turned into a woman who keeps her word even when it's tough, especially when it comes to me. When I need her, she is there. And she's real honest. She tries not to be rude but she is very direct. And I admire that about her. I want her to be happy. I want her to find someone who loves her more than she loves them, someone who is willing to always have her back, no matter what, someone who is willing and desires to make a family with her.

I say that knowing that my daughter is gay. She is homosexual. And as a Christian and a disciple, she and I have talked and I've told her what the Bible says and what I believe, but that my love for her is unconditional. I don't share that with a lot of people because I know that

some people are small minded, and it would sound like a contradiction. She is thirty years old and I want her to find someone who makes her happy.

Oh my goodness! My daughter has a strong-willed nature. She needs to prove her point and does not take the first answer lightly, just like my mom. She is almost like an Inspector Gadget. She is always asking questions: “What about...” Are you sure? How about...?” That is definitely a character trait she got from my mother, her grandmother. But she also learned from my mother that she was a person of the universe, not of the Bronx or Queens or her neighborhood - - that the sky was the limit. My mother used to use that mantra and instill that in her. It shows that she values her dreams, what she wants to be or wants to pursue, by not putting a limit on herself. I can see that she definitely learned that from my mom.

Now, we resolve conflict easier because we’re learning each other. When she shuts down, she is very quick to say to me, “Mom, I don’t want to continue this conversation because I’m gonna be rude and I don’t want to say anything that I’m gonna regret.” And those are really great flags for us. I am more the one who wants to work it out because I’m the mom and I want to make sure that in spite of any disagreements we have, that it’s real clear that the love has not diminished in any way. I also have had to learn that when I’m trying to encourage, make suggestions, or give advice, I don’t sound like I am nagging or nitpicking or coming off as if I’m questioning every decision she makes. And that is tough because I’m like, “But what do you think about this...?” It can start to be like, “Mom, you’re beating me on this.” I’ve had to learn to back away and tell her, “When you’re ready to talk, I’m here,” which is tough.

I am the quickest to forgive, and she would say that for many reasons. One is because that I believe a mother’s love is so much encompassing of forgiveness, unconditional love. And I’m a Christian, a disciple. There is a different level of love that I understand and that God calls

me to have that she doesn't apply to her own daily life as yet. But it'll be interesting to hear what she says.

Veronica shows me love when I ask her for either a favor or when I'm in need. She makes it happen. In spite of it being inconvenient for her or even not being something that she wants to do, she does it. I don't often ask her for things, so when I do, it's easy for her to say, "Yep, Mom, okay, no problem."

She is a different person - - I definitely see that she is different than I am. It's funny because she was there as a support system when I was going through my separation, my divorce, me having to sell the house. And her attitude was like, "Mom you deserve happiness, you need to go out there. Just be free and enjoy." And I love that she was trying to encourage me that way. But I'm a Christian and the kind of enjoying she was saying I won't be doing. For her, it was tough to watch me struggling with trying to hold on to a semblance of my marriage even though it was really clear that things had ended. But I was trying to make every effort. At the time, she was upset at me for trying so hard. She didn't understand how I could even contemplate giving him the time of day, or go through the motions. Again, it had a lot to do with the fact that as a Christian she didn't understand that I'm called to try and make every effort because God hates divorce. But for her, it was like a no brainer, good riddance. Done. Move on. Go to the next one. We were definitely different in how we saw and dealt with that situation. When I was married, we were all living together.

I remember our first vacation together to the Poconos. She was maybe about ten or eleven. And it was the first time I was able to afford a vacation. It was just the two of us for a week. We had the most fun just on the silliest things. And I loved it. She was so happy. And I was happy that she was happy. There was no one else that took her time away or that needed to entertain her. She was so comfortable. It was wonderful because I felt like I was finally growing

up and did something motherly as a parent – providing her our first vacation together. Getting there was horrible: we had to get on a couple of buses; it was hot. It was also a rinky dink place then, but we had the best time. It was hilarious.

My advice to moms-to-be and/or new moms is that communication is so key, and it has to be a two-way communication. You have to be willing to hear what your child is saying; that means really listening in spite of what you may not like hearing. It's the only way that you can learn your child. And you got to pick and choose your battles. You have to. There are certain things that my daughter knows that I have no grey area in. There have been really tough choices I've had to make to be clear to her that that behavior is unacceptable: "Not in front of me, not around me, never." And it's tough because of the fear of losing that bond or that relationship is something every parent has to work through. Communication and being able to learn your child or your children are what I would share with a new mom or mom-to-be because no child is ever the same.

I absolutely wish that my daughter can have a closer relationship with God! And she knows that. I've spoken to her about that. Right now, she is going through a tough time, so I'm trying to pray with her, but she wants me to pray and she listens. But it's something; she is at least saying, "Let's pray, but you do it. I'll listen." On occasion, she has asked me to pray for her. "Mom, please ask God to help me." She's seen what being a disciple has done in my life. She knows where I used to be and where I'm at right now is a much better place.

For fun, we go on vacations, we do mother-daughter dates. We love to go out and eat, go to the movies; we love to see Broadway plays, mostly musicals, but we definitely do a lot of mother-daughter dates. We are getting ready to go on vacation in May together to the Dominican Republic. So that's going to be fun! Although she doesn't want to be with the parental unit, she is still going to have fun with Mom. We are going to have a few activities

where any mothers and daughters can share what inspires them about each other. But for the most part, other than breaking bread together, the girls are going to have their own villas, so they too can have fun on their vacation.

What inspires my daughter is her determination to try and work for the things that she really wants. She is also very loyal; that's very inspiring. I see the way she is with her friends. She has this loyal quality that's beautiful. When she genuinely cares for you, she genuinely cares. And that's just beautiful to see. I love that she has formed bonds with people who admire her in the same way that I see that she admires them. And I am proud that she hasn't given up. Her life hasn't been easy, because she has made choices and decisions that have created a lot more conflict than she wants. Right now, she is at a place where she could be extremely depressed and in a bad, dark place, but she is not. I admire that she is still trying. That she is not giving up, which I'm very happy for.

When I see her cry or hurt, it breaks my heart. That's very common for any mother to hurt when their child is hurting and you always want to find a way to take away the pain. I've had to struggle with the desire to fix all her problems for her, especially when it comes to financial problems. I've had to pray and wrestle with God that I don't throw money at her problems. I have to let her deal and cope with the consequences of decisions she has made. But it's tough. And I know that she is so frustrated with the fact that she is thirty and doesn't feel that she is where she needs to be.

My concern is that has my history with addiction made her more susceptible to depression, to drug use. It freaks me out at times. And that's why I say I admire the fact that she doesn't give up. I don't want my daughter to feel that it's so hopeless that she starts to have thoughts of suicide. I'm always checking in on her and letting her know that it may feel really bad right now, but it'll get better.

If it were up to me, Veronica and I would speak to each other every day. I used to talk to my mother every day even before she lived with me. It was just instilled in me: “I have to get my mother’s blessing every day.” Though she too was raised that way, she is kind of independent. Sometimes, if I don’t call her, she doesn’t call me. Sometimes, I wait to see when she’ll call me when I don’t call her. When she calls, she probably asks for something. Normally, we speak at least two to three times a week. She just started a training program, so she is so exhausted and so tired. I have to do most of the checking to find out how she is doing.

She actually won a scholarship to be a production assistant through the Mayor’s Office of Media. It’s called MADE in New York. And it’s for any of the movies or entertainment that happens in New York. There is a large production assistant organization and she is finishing up with the training. Hopefully, she’ll be getting a paid internship from that.

My daughter knows and hears about my fears for her. Sometimes, she’ll agree with me. She is very candid, very direct. So she is like, “Yeah, I’ve thought about it, but I’m just too chicken. I don’t want to really do that.” Sometimes, she’s agreed that she’s been so frustrated with her life that she wishes she can just end it. I’ve asked her if she wants counseling, but she has said that she’ll let me know. I’m really honest with her about my concerns, my thoughts, my fears, and my hopes for her.

Honestly, my daughter laughs when she smokes weed. When she is really comfortable and we are either discussing a show or something we just experienced, especially something funny, she loves to laugh. She loves to talk too - - she is a talker.

I would hope that she feels that her mom has given her and shown her unconditional love and support in whatever facet that looks like, emotionally, physically, mentally. I have her back. She can count on me. No matter what’s going on, she can let me know.

I would love for her the peace of being content, in spite of her situation, regardless of her situation, whether it's good or bad. To be content with who she is. That doesn't mean she has to stop desiring or being ambitious or motivated. I really want her to be joyful in that and emulate me in that.

I don't call her Veronica; I call her Ron or Ronny. But when I'm upset, she is Veronica.

Veronica's story, given over the phone, follows. I had to start off with easy questions before moving on with the more challenging questions. Although her mother had spoken to her about me and her sitting down talking, Veronica sounded shy and unprepared at first, so there was a lot of nervous laughter, but as we continued, she became more comfortable and opened up even though her mom could hear her responses.

She is so persistent. The things that my mom wants, she gets them without compromising or giving in. I admire that a lot. She is an amazing woman. A lot of people can learn from my mom because she didn't have an easy life. She made her mistakes, and she really just came back from them as if they didn't really happen - - she rose from the ashes like a phoenix. My impression of my mom now is that I don't even see that person who other people used to see. She is so far from the person that she used to be. It's amazing, like a 180. She had points in her life that were just so low, yet she is still standing tall. She is in an even better place than she was before. To see her strength is amazing.

Growing up, some of the best advice came from both my mom and my grandmother. To always do my best, be my best in anything and everything. Don't be a quitter. Make sure you follow through. Though I haven't really followed their advice, I'm learning now that following through is so important to shape and mold the type of person that you are. One of the things I learned from my grandmother that continues to impact me is definitely not to lie. I used to get

in trouble for lying. Not to steal as well. She taught me to always remember where I came from and to give back as much as I can. My grandmother was very much a person who helped any and everybody. And I'm caring like that as well. Even with my friends, like if I have \$5, and they want to borrow \$4, I'll give it to them and keep one. I don't know, I can't help it. I definitely value that from her.

My fondest memory of my mom was when she took me to Disneyland. I remember us singing in the car a lot. When we visited the haunted house, I was kind of freaking out and then I saw my mom's face. She looked even more afraid. I always remember that and I love that vacation.

Now, my relationship with my mom is better than I ever thought it would be. I can talk to her about anything unless if it's something that she is not going to want to hear. She gives me great advice and doesn't judge me. I really appreciate everything that she has done for me. Before, our relationship wasn't too great. I would definitely say that I used to look at it more as a friendship. Only because as a kid, I lived with my grandmother, then I lived with my dad, then I kind of bounced back and forth between my dad and my mom, so I didn't really know her as my mom. Now, with me being an adult, I know her, and our relationship is so much better. I love her.

To express my love for my mom, I tell her I love her. Sometimes I can be a little snippy when I'm moody but I try to make sure I tell her that I love her and that I appreciate everything that she does. I would like for us to hang out more, but I know that with my new job, I'm going to be very busy for like the next six months. I definitely make sure that I contact her often because I love her and say, "Hi mom."

Melody picked me up from my apartment on the rainy Saturday we were scheduled to sit and talk. Though we met at 11AM, Melody seemed as though she had already done much in the short amount of time since she had woken. Her only daughter, Chantel, is expecting her first child, so Melody had spoken to her maybe twice already. Also, her husband is recuperating from a stroke. By the time we arrived, she had taken care of providing him breakfast and making sure he took his prescribed medications. She had different alarms set on her phone just to make sure he didn't miss taking his pills.

When we walked in, she reminded him about my appointment with her and helped him to move to their bedroom, so we could have some privacy. Even as we spoke, there were a few interruptions from the telephone ringing to her husband sounding as though he was in distress. So, we'd stop and she would apologize when she returned. We talked for an hour and a half. With Melody, nothing was off topic. At the end, she told me about the list of things she still had to take care of that day even with the torrential rain. She seemed ready for it, though, with her long knee high boots, dark blue jeans and turtle-neck sweater, she was ready for the coldness and dampness that came with the weather.

Mutual Respect



Chantel is my daughter, and I often call her Chani. My relationship with my daughter is beautiful. I had her at a very young age, eighteen years old. And she was the only child until she was five, at which time I had her brother. And because she was my mother's first grandchild and the first great - - grandchild of my grandmother, she was spoiled. She was spoiled rotten. She was a sweet little girl, but I can remember her personality changed when she got to be around six years old, and it wasn't until she was an adult that she told me why. She said that when she went to first grade, the girls were really mean, and she felt like even at that young age, the only way that she could survive her relationships was to be a mean girl. I mean, she really changed. It could also be at that time I had her brother, and she had to share with someone else. She wasn't as sweet as she used to be, but because I was a single mom, I overcompensated for them not having a dad by giving them even more. So on top of her being spoiled by being the first grandchild, she was spoiled even more by me. Materialistically, I'd buy her things she didn't really need, just because she asked for it. She'd

get her way a lot. Because I had them so young, I was a very at-home mom, very present, which was a big part of their life. I was a workaholic - - I worked hard - - but I lived with my mom and I raised them.

I can remember when they became teenagers. By then I was in my thirties, and I felt like I had this new freedom, so I would go out a lot and date a lot and Chantel had a lot of resentment, a lot of resentment, and she would act out and do things that are typical of teens: She would stay out late, not tell me where she was, get in trouble at school, skip school, and she would be really mean to me because of her resentment for the relationships that I was developing with boyfriends.

I remember at one point in my life I decided I was going to make some changes and so I went back to the Church. I was involved in the Church when they were little, and when I went back to the Church, I started making changes. I remember distinctly in one of our arguments I had decided I wasn't going to let her manipulate me because of my past decisions that made her unhappy. That was a revelation. Now, she was no longer going to be able to use my past decisions to hurt me, she was going to have to do something different. At that point, she realized that she was going to have to start liking Mommy again. There's always been a love, there was never "I don't love you." I mean of course children say, "I hate you" to their parents when they don't get their way, but there was never a "I can't stand... I can't stand you, Mommy" or "I can't stand you, Daughter." There were many times when "I don't like you," "I don't like you right now" or "I don't like what you're doing," on both our parts, but at that point she really started to make some changes in how she was going to respect me. And that started happening when she was about nineteen or twenty.

And Chantel was always very motivated to live her own life, so at fourteen, she started working. I don't think that helped her with her education because when she started making

money, she didn't want to go to school anymore, and she dropped out around her last year of high school, when she was around maybe seventeen. She actually went and got her bartender's license and became a bartender, and she began making a lot of money. And when she was old enough to get her own apartment, she did, had her own car, and did a lot of travelling. I hated the fact that she was a bartender, but I could see that she was becoming her own woman and making her own choices. And she was supporting herself. Things between her and me at that age were complicated because she didn't want to obey the rules, and of course, at that point I had decided that if she wasn't going to obey the rules, then she couldn't just live here and not obey the rules. So that's when she decided to get her own place because she could afford to, and she did. And I've always been the type of mom who respected my children. They had their privacy to some degree, probably less than they wanted, because we were a family of four living in an apartment with two bedrooms, so I shared a bedroom with my children. You can see where that could have been a problem. We were living in such close quarters, and she was getting older and didn't have her privacy the way she wanted it. When she got her own place, I had to learn to respect her for supporting herself, for being her own individual, so our relationship became one of "Okay, you respect me, and I respect you, but when we're not getting along, we can go our own ways. I can go home if I'm at your place or you can go home if you're at my place." And it was a mutual respect.

Except for when we would get into arguments and she would say mean things. They were never disrespectful, but they were mean. A lot of it had to do, you know, with her feelings, her insecurities about her not having her dad, about my choices. About twenty-one, she realized that she was not going to be able to hold those things against me anymore and she wasn't going to hurt me anymore with the mean things she would say. Once that happened, she started to believe that I could give her good advice and that our relationship could be better, because it

grew from a mother-daughter relationship to a friendship relationship, one that was healthy. When they were younger I was always trying to make up for their not having a dad; I tried to make them my friends instead of being a real mom, and that's where some of the spoiled behavior came in. But now, we have a very healthy, respectful relationship. Not to say that we still don't sometimes get into arguments, because we do, but we definitely know how to talk through our hurt feelings and our emotions, and let each other know what hurts, what doesn't hurt. And it took some teaching on my part. I remember having a conversation with her and telling her, "Chantel, you can't allow your hurt to instantly become anger. I need for you to express to me when I hurt your feelings, just say, 'Mommy that hurts,' just so I can know before you get angry, because your anger doesn't help me to learn what it is that I'm doing and saying to hurt you." And she's still learning that, even now, but it helps our relationship; it has helped us to communicate well, to respect each other better, and to know each other. Even if we don't like the things that we're doing, we at least understand each other and that's healthy and good. Now that she's having a baby, and even before that, the last six or seven years, Chantel has learned to call me to ask me for my thoughts and opinions when making decisions. She's since gone back to school, and gotten her degree, and I'm just so proud of her.

What I admire the most about my daughter is her strength. Chantel has a determined strength to get what she wants and to do what she wants. Growing up, I was very much a people pleaser. I never knew the right word to say; I was very shy, a conflict avoider. Although I did very well in school and I knew I was bright, I was always afraid of people who had authority or who I thought had authority over me. I can remember working at NYU, all of the students there were going for their doctoral degrees and the people I worked for all had their degrees. I didn't have a college degree, so I felt inadequate. Although I did really well in school, when I had Chantel, I dropped out. I always felt nervous around people who I thought were smarter than

me. Channi's not like that. She's not intimidated! And if she is, she doesn't show it. She knows how to take charge, she knows how to accomplish things because of the way she thinks through things, and I like that. I admire that a lot about her. She's a great learner. As a matter of fact, I'm trying to teach her about her pulling back a little. She's married now, and has to learn how to let her husband lead and not always take charge, and she's learning well and learning quickly! So, I admire her strength.

I believe one of the biggest things she can teach her child that I believe I've taught her is love: To love her child. I want to say unconditionally, but I know that that's not true because only God can give unconditional love. I know that even with my daughter, no matter how much I love her, there are still some conditions. I'll never stop loving her, but there are times where she hurts me, and I have a strong desire to hurt her back, which indicates that there's condition to my love. There are times where I don't like some of the things that she may do or say, but it doesn't stop me from loving her, and that's what I want her to share with her child, and not only a love that she gives to her child, but that she teaches her child to give back. And I think that's so important with human beings, whether it's my daughter, or my child, or some other human being. Love is important, and love amongst individuals, it's like the Bible says, in First Peter chapter four verse eight, "Love covers over a multitude of sins." It's like, people can hurt you, but if you continue to love them, you can overcome the hurt because we disappoint each other. So, to me, that is the number one thing that I would want for her to teach her child.

Here in America, and I guess in a lot of countries, and I'm sure it's true, too, in Caribbean countries, women take charge. For many years, women of ethnic background have had to raise children without a partner, or, if a partner is present, he's working so much that Mom is left taking care of the children and taking care of the home, and we've learned to be "take charge" people. But I remember telling Chantel to respect her husband. It's so important

for men to feel respected. And I know that because of my relationship with my husband now. The respect that every man needs is different, and you as a woman, like all married women, have to figure out what that is for your husband. I shared with Chantel that she needs to figure out what that is for her man, and she needs to give it to him. A man learns to love and appreciate a woman who can give him respect.

My mom, too, was a single mom; she and my dad separated when I was five, and she too had a son and a daughter. The biggest thing that she taught me that I passed onto Chantel was that no matter what we go through, no matter how hard things get, we're going to love each other. I am a very different person than my mom. I think even though I had a lot of insecurities and I talked about how I felt intimidated, my mom had even more so. She had me at a younger age than I had Chantel; English wasn't her first language; she got married at sixteen, she was just barely a kid herself. And by the time my mother was nineteen, she was a single mom herself. Her dad was present and very strict, so she was sheltered, except for the fact that she ended up getting pregnant.

I remember at a young age, I realized how naïve my mom was about the world. My mom was a smart woman, just naïve, because she was so young and so sheltered for many years. But she loved me and my brother. My mom would work as many jobs as she needed to provide for us; she always made sure that we were in a safe environment. If she was working, we'd usually be with family; her sisters, my aunts, would babysit us. We too were spoiled, but in a different way than my kids were spoiled. My mother didn't give us a lot of gifts, and we couldn't ask for new shoes whenever we wanted them, but if there were two pieces of chicken left, she made sure me and my brother ate before she did. And if there was somebody else there, she made those two pieces of chicken stretch into a whole meal for everybody.

My mother made the decision to work in a school so that she could be off when we were off. She would actually get home from her job before me and my brother got home from school, and she would always have dinner going. And my mother taught me and my brother a lot of structure, which was very different from me raising my kids. When my brother and I got home around 3 o'clock in the afternoon, we would sit at the table, do our homework, and then we would eat dinner. We took our baths, we maybe watched a half-hour or hour of TV, my mother would give us a little snack before we went to bed, and we went to bed at 8 o'clock. Every day, it was the same. That's structure! It's hard to believe that a child can enjoy that much structure, but I loved it. I knew exactly what to expect. When I say structure, I mean, my mother always had routines. Eight o'clock at night, we went to bed, every night. The only night we didn't was maybe Christmas because we were at a family's Christmas party. My mother made us do our chores every day. The daytime chores were at the same time every day, the weekend chores were every weekend at the same time. If I was doing the dishes, my brother was taking out the garbage and sweeping the floors. On the weekends, I cleaned the bedroom while my brother cleaned the bathroom, and every other weekend we would swap. It was routine. I remember being four or five years old and she would put us on the bed and clean our entire rooms every Saturday morning, and we watched, and we learned how to do our chores at a very young age. When I had my kids and was working, they were home with my mom, but by then my mom was tired of raising kids, so she didn't teach them the same structure that she taught us. And so that was missing in my kids' lives. Looking back, I regret it now. My mother taught me and my brother so much about structure, but I didn't teach my children. But there was always the love.

Between Chantel and I, I am the more forgiving because I'm a people pleaser. I don't like staying angry, so I forgive quickly, but I don't always forget. Let me rephrase that: I may forget what you did to hurt me. I won't forget the hurt, because it's there. But I'll quickly forget

what it is you did because I want to make amends. I don't forget because I want to understand your reasoning, understand how you feel, and I want you to understand how I feel. Chantel isn't like that. Her attitude is, "Hey, you don't like me, so what?" or "You don't have to like me." And that doesn't mean she won't love at least me. Anyone else, she probably wouldn't, or many people, she wouldn't care if she never made up with them, but with me, she'll squash it like "Oh, she's my mother, I have to love her," but she doesn't necessarily need to understand. Her desire to forgive may not actually be forgiveness, but a bit more of "Let's just move on."

When we do have a disagreement, I would say it takes us probably not more than a couple hours to try and resolve the issue, especially since we're still in each other's presence, and that probably has to do with the fact that I can't stand more than two hours of not talking and not having a resolution hurts. If we are apart from each other, if we're on a phone call and we say something to hurt one another's feelings, I would say probably the same, not more than two hours, or maybe we might go half a day, let's say, six hours the most. And then I'm ready to make a phone call and say, "Okay, how are we gonna fix this, because Mommy can't stand to be upset anymore." So, I'm usually the one who wants the forgiveness or the resolution.

I would say that probably in a week we may miss one day of not talking to each other. But by then, both of us feel like "Wow, okay I didn't call yesterday" or "We didn't talk yesterday, we need to talk." And one of us will call the other the next day, and we'll both have the same "I missed you. We didn't talk yesterday" kind of feeling.

And it's the same with my mom. I probably speak to my mother every day. When it comes to my mother, I may miss one day out of a month, where I don't speak to her. And I think a lot of that has to do with the fact that we're very dependent on each other. There are things that I need from my mother pretty much every day, and there are things that she needs from me pretty much every day. It could be advice, it could be physical things we need, and it

could be plans that we're making for the next day or the next weekend; we're just so involved in each other's lives.

Chantel and I are becoming very much like me and my mother, and we're actually now planning for all of us to live together: Chantel and her new family, me and my husband, and my mother. We are really considering moving to North Carolina because that's where Chantel's husband wants to live, and my mother and I feel that we need to be there for Chantel to help raise her children. It's funny; we all agree that extended family is the best way to live, especially in these days when finances are so hard and the world is just so ugly. You need to surround a child with a village that's going to be a support. So I'm so grateful that my husband agrees and Chantel's husband agrees that this is probably the best way to raise a family.

What I desire and hope for my daughter is happiness. It's funny, all my life, growing up, and maturing, of course you always want different things at different times. Yes, I want this big house where we're all going to live together, and that would be great, and it would bring happiness, but if it doesn't happen, I still want for her to be happy. I want her to have a happy marriage, I want her to have good children who bring her happiness, for her to have a great job. Chantel will do well wherever she works, so that's not a big concern for me. But I want the people in her life to continue to bring her happiness. When I say "happiness," I mean a sense of peace, a sense of security, whether it be financial security or just the security of knowing that the people in her life are going to be there for her, to help support her, emotionally, physically, spiritually, and financially. And when I say "peace," it doesn't mean that everything is always okay. We can find a sense of peace even amongst chaos, if we feel content.

With all of the strength that Chantel has, I know that she has a lot of insecurities. What makes her cry, probably the most, is when she feels misunderstood. And sometimes it's easy to misunderstand Chantel because of her strength. So she's quick to say things that may be true,

but meanwhile it can be cutting, and in her being so truthful, she can hurt somebody and they immediately in return want to hurt her back, and she feels misunderstood. This is something that we're going through right now; I'm trying to help her understand that she can't have it both ways. She can't be so truthful and honest at the cost of hurting someone and think that they're not going to want to hurt her back. It's just human nature to defend ourselves. So now I'm trying to help her to understand that even though what she's saying may make a lot of sense and be very truthful, she has to think of how people will perceive what she's saying.

On the other side, Chantel is cynical, so what makes Chantel laugh is probably at the expense of other people. But, her honest laugh? Chantel loves things that are cute. For instance, she's pregnant now, so she Google searches for everything. She is monitoring what stage she's supposed to be, the baby's stage in development, and she finds these YouTube videos of babies growing in their mommies' tummies; they're cartoonish and they're cute, but she gets a kick out of knowing "this is the stage where my baby is at inside me." That brings her a lot of joy. I don't know if it's laughter, but it's definitely joy.

There's so many things, so much advice I could give. It's so funny. I remember a woman, maybe about four years ago, asking me, "How do I help my child (who was about three, at the time) to be obedient?" And I remember telling her "a pinch" and do your best to not let your child see you pinch him or her. The child was a boy, a little boy. Because one of the things that people forget a lot of the time is that as human beings, we're animals, and we have learned behavior. And our learned behavior is often times best learned because of consequences. And just like any other animal, when we feel harm, we learn to stop doing things that bring harm. So I was trying to teach her that if you teach a child that if every time he acted out in a certain way he was going to feel this pinch of pain, naturally an instinct within him will teach him that "every time I do this, I'm going to feel this pain." And you know, it's funny because I know a lot of

people might feel like why would you bring this pain to your child, but it's just a natural way to learn, and if you can teach a child not to do certain things under an environment that you're controlling, it's better than he or she learning it later when it's out of your control.

I remember teaching my son the same way not to play with matches. And it may seem really, really cruel, but my son used to play with matches when he was about two. He would find matches and no matter where he found the matches he always wanted to play with them. And I could remember when he was around three years old I took a match and I put it to his finger. Just for an instant, just so he could feel, this is what fire feels like. My son never played with matches again. Ever! I don't think he remembers what Mommy did to him, but it certainly helped him understand that that was something you don't play with.

Of course there are always exceptions, like teaching them how to cross the street. You won't bump them with a car to show that there is a consequence to them not paying attention when they cross the streets. But in situations where you are the one in control, you need to teach them learned behavior. Those kinds of lessons are valuable for little children. And then, there are different lessons for children growing up and becoming young teenagers. One of the things that I probably - - and I can't say that I was good at it - - you give your child privacy and respect until they prove that they don't deserve them: When they start lying or hiding secrets that are not appropriate, you take away those privileges. I never forget telling someone you allow your child to go in their room for hours and you don't know what that child is doing because they've got the door closed. Or when a child slams his or her bedroom door because they don't like your discipline, my first thought about a slammed door is take that door off its hinges and put it in a garage. Now you don't have a door to slam. Now you have no privacy, because this is how you act and behave. My children didn't have the privilege because we all shared one bedroom. Most kids, nowadays, have their bedroom and they do whatever they want, on a computer or on their

phone. The parents have to teach them when they are young, they are not going to run upstairs to slam doors or berate you to their friends. It's important for parents to teach their children, at that age, that respect is earned and privilege is earned.

I love just about anything I do with Chantel. We'll go to the movies, go shopping, go out to eat - - now that she's an adult, have a drink with her - - do just about anything. I love her company. Sometimes she would prefer to be with her friends, her cousins, some of her best friends. But I think she enjoys my company when she's with me.

If Chantel and I were able to write a story about our relationship, it would probably be a sitcom or soap opera, about our family. We have a very large family, on both my mother's side and my father's side of the family. Even though my mom and dad were separated when I was five, our families are still very close, so we have a huge family. On my father's side I might have about a hundred cousins, first, second, and third-generation cousins. And we're close. You can imagine the dynamics of a family that large, with everyone bringing their own opinions, thoughts, and issues, into a room, it can become very interesting. The dynamics are sometimes hilarious. So yeah, I think we would enjoy writing a story about our family.

With her growing up and blaming me, using my past to hurt me, for as long as she did, I never used my kids' father to blame them for anything. I never! It's funny. My father was very abusive to my mother. Before he left, and I can remember - - I have a very good memory of my childhood - - but I cannot remember my mother ever saying anything negative about my dad. Never! I learned about my father's bad behavior because I saw it. And I did the same for my children: I never spoke poorly of their dad. I never said anything negative that he did to hurt their relationship with him or even to hurt them because it wouldn't have been true. First, because I was young, naïve, when I had Chantel and her brother, I didn't know how to be in love with him the way I needed to be, I was very confused about what I wanted. As a matter of

fact I told them both, if I knew how to be more mature back then, I might have still stayed with their dad or made that relationship work. But I was all over the place back then; I didn't know how to love him.

I don't think I ever did anything to intentionally or verbally hurt my kids; there were a lot of times I said things that hurt them because I was not thinking of how they might hurt them. I remember when Chantel was a little girl, she had to be about maybe seven or eight, and I had asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up, and she said, "I want to be a singer like Michael Jackson!" And I remember specifically where she was then; I was giving her a bath and washing her hair. I remember saying to her, "Well, you can't be a singer, you have to think of something else if that doesn't work." And to this day, Chantel says she remembers me saying that she couldn't sing so she never sang. But that's not what I said, nor what I meant, or my intention. I meant if that doesn't work what are you going to do or let's be more practical, but that's not what she heard as a kid. What she heard was "Mommy thinks I can't sing." And she remembers that to this day.

I didn't realize how much I hurt her until she was much older and shared that experience with me, and I was like "Oh my gosh!" It's amazing how we do things and say things to our children and we don't realize how they affect them in a negative way until sometimes it's too late. I squashed a dream of hers when she was eight years old, and I didn't even know it. Now she's carried that with her into her adulthood. So, as moms, we have to be careful with that.

Mabel and I met in her office at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, located at the heart of New York City, steps away from Lincoln Center and Columbus Circle, and many more iconic places in the city. Because the temperature in the room was very hot, she opened the window. And the noise from the vehicles, the voices and construction came flooding in. So we had to speak up much louder than expected. She was honored that I was conversing with her about her relationships with her daughters, and I was nervous.

Mabel has three children, two of whom (older daughter and son) were born in Bangladesh and the last (daughter) was born in the US. Though she mentioned her son a few times, the focus mostly was on her relationships with her daughters. In the beginning, she spoke about them separately and even throughout she seldom talked about them together. She treated each as an individual deserving of her own response.

I met Mabel when I was an undergraduate at John Jay College. But even after all these years, I finally learned things about her life that very few know. In the end, I became honored.

Strong People, Strong Women



I've been blessed with two wonderful girls. The eldest is 38 now - - I had a son in the middle - - my youngest is 27, and both have similarities, but they also have basic differences in terms of personality and how they relate to me.

My oldest daughter's name is Florence, but we call her Flora. We all have Christian names because we are Christians. She was born on the 156th birthday anniversary of Florence Nightingale. I asked my brother-in-law, who was a ship's captain, to come over and give me some names because he had a book of names that he carried with him. He gave me a couple of names, but he said, "Somehow the name Florence keeps coming back." I said, "But Florence is such an old name." But then he reminded me, "It's Florence Nightingale's 156th birth anniversary." I agreed because I believe in those things. So, I named her Florence. My youngest daughter's name is Angelina. I wanted to name her Angelique because of the Angelique series of books - - *Angelique and the King*, *Angelique and the Prince*, the whole series. My sister and I used to read them because my brother-in-law, who travelled to the United States, bought the books for us. But one of my friends told me, "Angelique! People won't be able to pronounce it. Name her

Angelina; that would be better.” I didn’t even know what the name meant, but later I found out that her name means “my little angel.” We call her Angie for short. And so she has been my little angel. She came into my life at a very significant moment.

My personal issues, my personal challenges in life, and the ups and downs in my life, all these rubbed off on my relationships with my daughters. While she was growing up, Flora had a lot of issues, which were mostly with me. With my youngest, I went through a rollercoaster relationship with her father, and it affected her somewhat, but not as much as Flora.

With Florence, there were periods of hatred, even stubbornness on both her side and mine. “You’re not seeing my way,” she would say. And I would say, “You’re not seeing my way.” There was a lot of miscommunication. But over the years, I am really happy that our journey has become very good. We can talk about many things. We have both opened up to each other. We’re sharing our relationship, the lessons we are learning in life, how we let go of past hurts and how we can establish a wonderful relationship.

Unfortunately, because Florence has moved out to Austin, Texas, we don’t have that special time together now as we had before. We call, email each other once a week now or even visit each other when we can. Our relationship has become more of a spiritual journey, of inner healing, for both of us. She’s also going through some issues in her relationship with her husband, and she opens up more with me about how she’s handling it, and what books she’s reading and some tips from shows that she sees. We watch shows on Oprah.com and YouTube’s *SuperSoul Sundays*, and those are the sort of talks - - about certain topics of spiritual healing and mending relationships - - that Florence and I engage in.

The most wonderful conversation I had was when Flora told me that she has moved on to a stage where all the past struggles, the ups and downs we had, didn’t hurt anymore. She told me that I too have to let go of the pain and hurt. She told me once, “Mom I can hear the pain in

you still. You've got to heal and let go." Oh, it makes me feel so good when she's tells me that - - "Mom, your children have forgiven you. Now forgive yourself." It was profound to hear that my children have forgiven me. We were stuck, especially me, but even as they moved on, I was stuck in my guilty past. I was not a good mother then. I couldn't give my best. I was not present, not really emotionally present. Because I was dealing with so much emotional pain myself, I could not be present emotionally for them. Recognizing that is also, I would say, a great part of my opening up to them. I've seen many people who still don't even recognize that they are not emotionally there for their children. That doesn't mean they don't do what's expected like cook, take them to school, but that's all they do.

For three-and-a-half years, I left Florence and my young son, Sam, with my sisters and my father when I came to the United States from Bangladesh in 1982. Florence was six years old and my son was one-and-a-half years old. When I met with them again, I was a stranger to them. I had to be a mom again to them. It was a big struggle for me, a big challenge in fact. At that time, I thought I did my best. But looking back now, I say I don't think I did my best. And that makes me feel guilty and I cry. My children still tell me, "Ma, it's okay. We've forgiven you. Move on." Now, I feel that they see me as a better mom. I used to just be a good cook for them, cooking all the good dishes that they love to eat, but, now, they can come and talk to me about their own pain and their own struggles and challenges. I feel good that they can share their lives with me.

Also, I don't judge them anymore. Before, I was a little judgmental and critical of them. But now, I can step outside of myself as a mother and be more like a counselor, a sounding board for them. And then I can ask them, "Did you look at or think about the issue (you're facing) this way? Maybe you can try this way to have a better communication with your husband or your wife?" I'm not judging now. Me not criticizing helps them open up to me more.

There have been occasions, though, when one would say, “I need my mom, not a counselor right now.” And I listen and make the switch. As soon as I hear that, I’ll step back and become the interviewer, asking them questions. I don’t feel bad when they say, “Mom, okay, enough of your lecturing, no ‘lecture mode’ Mom. I’m talking, so try to listen.” That’s when I’ll catch myself. They are, I would say, my biggest teachers, in helping me to reconnect myself to who I am or should be in their lives. I’m supposed to be a mom, I’m supposed to be a teacher, I’m supposed to be a counselor, I’m supposed to be their friend as well. All of those roles, right? That’s quite a big menu for a mom to have with her children, especially with daughters. Now, when Flora calls and says, “Mom, I want this food.” I find myself traveling to Austin for a week or so to be her mom, “the cook.” When I’m there, I’ll cook all her favorite foods and even babysit my grandkids, so she and her husband can go on a date. There, again, I switch my role as the mother.

One thing that Florence says that she appreciates now is that I never interfere in the way she’s raising her children, a son and daughter. For me, that was an unspoken boundary I drew for myself. She recognizes it now that I didn’t interfere. Once in a while I would also say to her, “I like the way you’re handling your kids.” Daughters want to know that they’re being good moms too, and they want to hear it from their moms. When I notice this about the way she’s handling this or that situation, I tell her, “Oh my God, I’m proud of you. You kept your cool, you didn’t get mad when your daughter was shouting, screaming at the top of her lungs.” Her response to her daughter’s hysteria is, “Okay baby, okay baby, I know you’re hurt, I know you’re tired.” I thought myself, “Oh my God! When I was raising them up I would’ve given them two smacks. Shut up! Stop screaming!”

See, we learn from our mothers too, how we raise our kids, and how not to raise them. My mom was a military dictator. It was her way or no way. She raised the stick on us plenty of

times, and I was the hard-headed one. I got spanked and spanked and the stick was broken on my back. So, with me raising my kids also, I did hit them, I did smack them - - not too much - - but, yes, I did. When I see my eldest daughter not doing the physical disciplining, my reaction is, “Wow, I see how you handle it.” She would tell her son, who is misbehaving, “Go to your room. Once you stop screaming, then you can come outside.” She stood her ground with him. I could feel her tension, her trying to curb her emotions, but in the end it worked. He has learned that nothing will come of his screaming.

Florence once said to me, “You disciplined us, but you were not consistent in your discipline.” She learned from that that she could get around me. I still remember me saying, “You have to clean the bathroom and the kitchen and all that on the weekends.” But she didn’t have to do it every weekend. She would say maybe she has homework. Maybe she didn’t, but she didn’t want to do chores. But the day she wanted to go someplace with her friends, early morning she’s scrubbing and cleaning and everything’s done. “Now it’s done, can I go?”

She, of course, reads a lot of books on how to raise kids smarter. In my days, I didn’t have all that, all I knew was how my mom raised me, how I saw the other moms raising kids, that’s what I did. In the last 15 years, I’ve become more aware and more open as a mom. My younger daughter, Angie, is the beneficiary of my changed, more open and accepting relationship. But Flora got the brunt of it, so that’s the different ways I have handled my two daughters.

Angie is presently in the Dominican Republic doing research. She’s a medical student at Columbia University, in her third year. She took a year off from her medical studies and is doing research on AIDS among low-income people. She enjoys doing the research work. What I have seen in Angie so far are the things I saw when I went to her apartment at Columbia University. In my house, I have all kinds of positive sayings on the walls. When I went to her room, I said,

“Wow! She has a lot of them too!” I could tell that she has been influenced by that, gotten that from me. I have a corner where I have a lot of words and positive affirmations and all of her friends who come over to my house say, “Oh, I love your mom’s affirmation corner, her positive center corner.” Seeing her doing the same shows me I have influenced her already.

I see my oldest daughter now opening up to reading and finding ways to be a better person and find her happiness. She tells me so many things. Christmastime when she was here, I had an argument with my husband over going to somebody’s baby shower. I remember her saying, “Mom, you have only two choices: ‘Do I want to be right or do I want to be happy?’” And see, that’s why I say my kids are my teachers. And I said, “Wow that’s big. Do I want to be right or do I want to be happy?” So then I kept quiet. Sometimes, the things that she tells me, I keep them in the back of my mind. Those words she shared with me have become one of the poster points on my bedroom wall: “Do I want to be right or do I want to be happy?”

Flora and Angie are the best of friends. I’m happy to say that and to feel that. Flora was like a second mom to Angie because they’re eleven years apart. She helped me a lot in raising her, feeding her, changing her Pampers. As parents, we take for granted what we do and don’t show our kids. When Angie was still in diapers, Flora was changing the nappy, but I didn’t tell her how frequently she should do it. One day, we were moving and I was too busy. Flora fed Angie and all that, but she didn’t change her diaper. In the evening or maybe a couple hours later, it dawned on me to check my younger daughter. Angie had done poop and her skin - - she was about six months old at that time - - was all red. The skin had peeled off because it had been in the poop for so long. Flora felt so bad and I felt bad, too. Communication, we can sometimes take it for granted. Even now, they have a good relationship. Sometimes they won’t tell me some things, especially about my younger daughter’s boyfriend, but she shares all with her older sister.

When I shared with her that Angie doesn't tell me about her relationships, Flora told me, "Mom, you can rest assured that's she's fine, don't be scared now, she talks to me."

When Angie was younger, I used to ask her about her life, but my son said to me, "Ma, you shouldn't ask teenagers those types of questions because they're gonna lie." As parents we might as well just believe that we have raised them well, and that they will not really get into real big trouble. I listened to my son and I started trusting her more. Now that she's an adult, all I can tell her is to be safe wherever she goes. "Whatever you do, practice safe."

Life is a journey. You have to be open to the journey. We have learned a lot from Rick Warren, the author of *The Purpose of Your Life* and Eckhart Tolle who wrote *The Power of Now*. We talk about the lessons from them and to be present in the now. My youngest daughter, Angie, went mountain climbing in the Dominican Republic, the highest, tallest mountain there. I remember asking her, "What did you learn from that?" She replied, "I had to be present in the now," because it was very bad, tough terrain and when it rained it became muddy and slippery. She said that she was slipping as she tried to walk and was covered with mud. And I said, "What else did you learn?" she said, "Perseverance." You don't give up, when you have a dream, you want to fulfill it. I have taught them to follow their bliss, what makes them happy. Follow it; if it doesn't turn out to be happy, you can always change.

Life is not a straight line. I have taught them that through my life. I am like a river, which meanders and flows; I do not know what's around the next bend, but still I flow. When you take life as fixed, then you get disappointed. But when you don't take life as fixed, then you can deal with anything. If something unexpected comes, you deal with it now and then go on with the flow. I teach them the path of surrender and acceptance - - "What I cannot change I accept instead of banging my head against it" - - and I see in both of them that that has helped. I

believe there's a higher, divine power, which rules our lives. When you surrender, it is like you're saying, "There's a higher purpose in my life and I just surrender to it and I'll just flow with it."

Angie's biggest struggle is she's still trying to find herself, who she is and what really makes her happy. I still see that. I find that each one has to find their own happiness. I can guide all my children, but in the end they are the ones who will find the "Yes, now I'm at peace, now I'm happy." But happiness is not a constant. Happiness comes and goes.

At this moment, Florence's biggest struggle is she feels she's been a stay-at-home mom for ten years, and she wants to start her career again. She didn't finish her master's degree, in psychology, which she started in Queens College in New York City. She still doesn't know what will really make her happy in this profession. She's working part-time teaching with kids, but she shared with me that she has more potential than just taking care of kids. She wants to go back to an office environment, she wants to pursue her degree, she also wants to be a life coach like her mom. So, that's where she's struggling - - finding where she'll find happiness. She also has a little fear that her marriage with her husband won't work. They're having some problems, they're working on them, but still she's not certain. My heart goes out to her, but I have confidence that she, through the years of struggling with me also, is strong within herself, with her own spiritual growth. And she's still growing.

For my last birthday, they sent me cards. They know that I'm not much into material things. I like the words on the cards, a hug and some flowers. This Christmas, when Florence was here, she took me to the Metropolitan Opera and it was very expensive. She didn't want to show me the ticket stub, but then she had to give me the ticket to go to the bathroom and the other day I was going through some old stuff and found the stub, each was \$225! I didn't say anything to her then because she would have felt really bad. That was her way of saying, "Thank you, Mom." I don't look for the expensive, external gift. I look more for the intrinsic value of

time. My youngest daughter would tell me, “Mom, let’s spend some quality time. Let’s go shopping” So, it’s just the two of us. We’ll do that, sit down, talk and have some coffee. There was a time I had to give them time, now they don’t have time from their lives, so when they give me time, that’s how they show their love to me.

I was also a stay-at-home mom for ten years. I sacrificed getting my Ph.D. for them. Right after I did my second masters at John Jay in 1984, I could have gone right away into New York University for a Ph.D., but that’s when my family came to the US. When they came in 1985, I was a stranger to them. “What should I do? Do I do my Ph.D.? Or do I stay with my kids and give them the time that they didn’t get from me?” Those were the questions I had to ask and answer for myself. I decided to stay home. That’s what I see Florence doing for her kids.

Angie used to walk to her school all by herself when she was in second grade. From second grade on she has been on her own coming home, a latch-key kid. Because I let her do that, she has the confidence that she can go around the world now. I wasn’t over-protective of any of my kids. Florence has learned that as well and was able to send her son to camp and let go. There are mothers who are over-protective and always worrying. I see those kids around me, I see how less confident they are. I am grateful that I brought them up that way, to be self-confident and self-sufficient.

I still remember the positive things I would always tell them: “I don’t want to hear no from you. Try your best.” One day, Florence, who was in sixth grade, didn’t want to go to school that day. I asked her, “Why don’t you want to go to school?” She said, “They’re doing sports, I’m not good at sports.” I said, “No, you’re going to go to school, you’re going to participate in the sports. It’s not about winning. It’s about being in it, participating in it. And you’ll feel good.” She came home with the third medal in running. I said, “See? If you hadn’t gone, you wouldn’t have experienced this.” I remind her once in a while. “You don’t say no to

things, you participate in life.” When they were young, one of my children got me good when I was afraid of driving. One of my children said to me, “Mom, you always told us you can’t say no, so you can’t say no now. You’re gonna drive and pick me up after school.” I forced myself, and I would say, “I know I can, I know I can.” And I drove.

I tell them about reincarnation, I tell them, “You know what, you chose me as your Mom, so you’re stuck with me.” When I do or say things that they don’t approve of, I’ll say, “Sorry, you chose me.” Florence doesn’t believe in reincarnation. Angie believes and so does Sam. Angie used to write on her birthday cards to me: “I chose you as my mom this time, I’ll choose you as my mom next time also. Even though we have our ups and downs, I believe that I didn’t make the wrong decision.” That makes me feel good. I know that there is a reason why we come into each other’s lives. We have been together many times. We have lost each other many times, and we’re back again this time. It’s such a profound feeling. When Angie was younger, I used to have vivid nightmares about losing her. In one of those nightmares, I lost her in a mudslide and in another, she fell into a manhole and I couldn’t reach her. But whenever I’d wake up, she was always there. From both nightmares, I learned that I’ve lost her in other lives, but I’m back again with her now. Knowing and realizing that about my children fills my heart with so much love for each of them. That’s the power of reincarnation.

When I visit Florence in Texas, three generations of us are all there - - me, her and her daughter - - Oh, it is beautiful. I do many things on impulse, or my intuition tells me many things and I just go with it. They moved to Texas two years ago. Their plan was for my son-in-law to drive out there in his car with some of their stuff, and other things they packed and put in boxes and gave them to movers. Later, Florence was supposed to fly there for the first time, alone with her two kids. Something in me just told me that I had to be with them. She didn’t ask me, it just came to me. I told Florence, “I’ll go with you.” She was surprised, “You wanna go

with us?” I said, “Yes, I’ll go with you. I can be of help. It’s a new journey, you’re taking your kids with you alone.” I felt that she needed me.

Before we got to the apartment, Flora shared with me that she was feeling frustrated because she wanted to be the first one in her place with her husband and kids, but her husband’s parents were already there before her. Her in-laws live in Houston and have for a long time, maybe 15-20 years. Then I said to her, “Flora, why don’t you think of them (you know we’re all spiritual beings) as three angels there, waiting to receive you in your apartment. If you see that, then you won’t feel that sense of frustration or disappointment.” Me saying that helped her to see things differently, and she became much more relaxed. When we reached the apartment, we found out that her mother-in-law had bought a TV stand and other items for them. It was good.

The most important thing that I admire about my daughters is that they believe in themselves. They believe in their self-worth. They were not swayed by friends to go in the wrong direction. They were and still are capable of making decisions, which are positive and can’t derail them. But I admire the most that they were not derailed into doing drugs or smoking or abusing alcohol, like other kids, when they were growing up. The other thing that I admire is their perseverance. They’ve gone through a lot of emotional traumas along with me. But as I’ve persevered, they have persevered too with a lot of strength. As they look back, they too can say, “Yes, those challenging times have made us become strong people, strong women.”

Alana's relationship with her mom is one I admire from a distance. I've never met her mom but have spoken to her on the phone once. However, in my relationship with Alana, I saw that her mom has a proud, powerful influence on her even though she herself is a grown woman in her own right.

So when I sat down with her in her office on the 8th floor at John Jay College, I was prepared to learn about the secrets of her relationship with her mom. What was revealed was how her mother learned from her own mother, and her mother's mother as well. At one point, four generations of the women in her family all lived together under one roof. She equates her sense of self-worth by what she saw in her great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother. Alana's aspirations to aim higher and not settle were developed by her grandmother, who knew what she wanted and didn't budge, and her own mother, who still to this day, continues that work. All the women in her tale have left Alana with "quite a legacy" that she too can pass on not only to her only son but other young persons who will have the privilege of knowing her and working closely with her as I did.

Two Happy Women



My mom and I have a good relationship. It's respectful, it's loving, it's supportive.

We've had a good relationship for a long time, though with ups and downs, I would point out. She has always been supportive and we chat a lot, and even now that I'm much older, we still have those same elements in our relationship.

She has always been a good mother. I thought everybody's mother was like that very dedicated, family oriented. She held the fort and led the family through a crisis. When I was in my teens, the country passed through a terrible recession. My father lost his job, she lost her job. And for a while, the income we had was actually coming from my grandmother. That was a hard time in our lives. And what she did was focus the family on spirituality, how good God was to us. I mean that was when our family was spiritually strongest. She taught us to pray, she taught us to be hopeful. In retrospect, a situation that was very hard, we were able to bear simply because of Mom.

When I was a teen, three generations of women lived in my household - - my great-grandmother, my mother, and me. My mother grew up with her grandmother, so that when my great-grandmother was too old to take care of herself, of course, she came to live with us. And my mother was very caring, very thankful for everything she did for her as a child and that she did for her as an adult, because my great-grandmother also helped to take care of my brother and I when we were born. My great-grandmother was a robust and energetic woman then and also very committed, she connected us to those old family values, our family values of education, hard work, thrift, respect. There were some really strong family values that she handed down: making sure that we all had music lessons, making sure that we were involved in activities outside of school, church activities that really rounded and developed us.

My great-grandmother was very involved also in raising her grandchildren. That was because her daughter was a young widow. My grandfather died at age 34, and my grandmother, who was then 29, had to go out and work. So my great-grandmother stepped in to care for their seven children; she did an excellent job. These women left quite a legacy, and having my great-grandmother there for me was incredible. You get the old stories, we would dance with her, she would talk about dances she used go to. It's the little comments that she made that gave us insight into how things were back then when she was much younger. For example, she would give me one cent and say, "Go to the shop and buy a pound of saltfish." Now, at that time, saltfish was \$30 a pound. Or maybe \$15, but the thing is it was way more expensive than it was in her time. Or she would use vocabulary that was so outdated, she would talk about the rubbish cart, when cars and trucks were used instead, and carts were no longer being used. It was that sort of glimpse into her life. She would also occasionally talk about her mother and sisters.

There were four generations of us alive at one time and the good thing is we got together often. I would sit in the room when we were all together - - great-grandmother, grandmother,

my mother, and myself - - and I realized how lucky I was that the four of us could be together. I was in my late teens when this was happening, so I was very, very lucky.

My great-grandmother, she taught me to be a strong and tolerant individual. Both she and my grandmother taught me that women can really be capable and strong, and hold the fort and keep families together, which was a role that she played. My grandmother's legacy is extremely strong. Oh, she was a proud, proud woman. She did not suffer fools gladly. She did not tolerate disrespect. She saw herself as a catch and a prize and her husband treated her as such. That's why, when she became widowed at quite a young age, she never remarried because she had set a high bar and he met that bar. She was not going to remarry to have a stepfather ill-treat her children, and she was not going to give anybody the opportunity to come in and mess up her family because she knew how she deserved to be treated. There are times when I look at young women now, or some of my contemporaries or I reflect on my own life, and I channel my grandmother and how proud she was and how much nonsense she would not tolerate, and that helps me to deal with a lot of situations, to be unyielding in certain situations when I have to be.

I pretty much learn the same lessons from my mother as well because it's just a common strength, and we're very much like each other. My mother is a softer person, but still very strong, ambitious and supportive. I'll use an example instead of yammering on. Anytime I indicated an interest in something that was academic or anything that was uplifting or could build me up, she was 100% supportive. Ever since I was a teenager, any career that I expressed an interest in, she would be there to encourage, support, go with me - - if I had to go to find out more information - - and harass me if I was dragging my feet. Up to this day, the minute I brought my son home as a baby, she was asking, "When are you going to get your Masters?" Once I graduated with my Masters, "So, when are you going to get your Ph.D.?"

In many ways, and in every way, she has taught me about motherhood. And something that's very interesting: I know that she approves of my parenting style because we never argue about it. You know, I'll tell her about something, and she already knows my agenda, so the conversation would just keep flowing. One day I think she felt she had to tell me and she said, "You are a good mother, I like the way you're raising Aiden." And it was good to hear, but I asked her, "Where do you think I got that from?" I don't think she was surprised because she knew already. But again, it's a long line of such committed mothers and women in our family. She didn't see herself as anything out of the ordinary because she was in that mold and I really appreciate having her.

When my brother and I were babies, she had a plan for how she wanted to raise her children. She wanted to instill a sense of self-respect, of decency. She wanted to raise us knowing the Lord. We had to speak properly. Education was of utmost importance. She kept an emphatically clean house. She was generally a respectful woman, a refined woman. She loved her children and her family and she set a good example. And in terms of commitment, and self-sacrifice, and going the extra ten miles, that's the kind of mother that she has always been, and I can't see myself being any other kind of mother.

We grew up with the staple prayers like, "Gentle Jesus," which Aidan says now - - oh, gosh - - when he says it sometimes, it's kind of heartbreaking. "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild / Look upon this little child. Pity my simplicity/ Suffer me to come to thee." There is more, but I don't remember the rest. We too grew up with that. Actually, even before we were teenagers, we would have been around ten, just preteen, my mom said, "It's time you all learned to pray." It was then that she taught us a prayer where we were actually speaking to God, thanking him for things, asking him for things, and asking him to bless other people. The prayer came in three parts. She taught us to start by reading a Psalm. My brother and I would each have to choose

our Psalm, read it and then each had to pray and she would pray with us. By the time the recession came in Trinidad, it wasn't hard for my family and me to really build on that foundation.

I remember when we were preteens, we used to pray together every night. Then, in our teenage years, we gathered together occasionally to pray, but we attended church every Sunday. We were very involved and we had a lot of discussions about the Scriptures and what was preached. We tended to just sit and have a chat with Mom a lot. We'd get up early in the morning, nobody would have had a shower or breakfast, but the first thing we'd do was go down to the bedroom, and there's Mom and all of us just chatting, chatting, chatting. Then Dad would come in to quarrel: "It's ten o'clock and no breakfast in this place!" Those early morning chats with Mom were really nice.

But, I think by that time, there wasn't the possibility of us not praying. During the recession, it was such a tough time that if we didn't hold that course, it really would have been one of our more sorrowful memories. It's not a nice memory, but just holding onto that faith and that hope, and seeing all the positive little things as miracles, the perspective was always more uplifting than depressing.

During the recession, a lot of people in Trinidad started to migrate to the States. Most started off with domestic jobs. Eventually, when they got their status they would go into whatever. Mom came and she did a domestic job for a couple of months and decided it wasn't for her. Back in Trinidad, she had been a church organist for years. She had actually been a church organist when she was a teenager, stopped for years, and then she took it up again years later. After her stint as a domestic worker, she decided to approach churches for employment. She was hired, both as a secretary and as an organist, so she got out of that domestic thing in a

very, very quick time. She remained in churches until she was documented and then she went on to work in health.

Now as an adult, Mom and I show each other our appreciation by the things we do as opposed to the things we say. We joke with each other a lot. I call her “lazy bones” and “bum” and a whole lot of other stuff. She’s always giving me money, which is helpful. She knows that I appreciate her role in being there when Aiden comes home from school and providing trustworthy supervision until I get home. So I don’t abuse her time. I get home on time and make sure that she has a cup of tea - - I make sure that she’s comfortable. And, if ever there’s an opportunity for her to have a day off, so she can rest, I always make sure that I put that in place.

I know of young mothers who think their parents owe it to them to provide a whole lot of care for their children, and sometimes they don’t respect the fact that those parents need a break too or they need to rest. These mothers would party, drop their children off for the entire weekend, after their parents have been there watching their grandkids all week. They hit their parents also for lots of money. I wouldn’t do that to Mom. My social life is very limited, which is how I like it. I go out once every couple of months, usually with a small group of girlfriends or just one friend.

For years, even as strong as Mom always was, she was a little timid and that came from part of her upbringing with all these strong women. They would be bossy, and you couldn’t answer back because the punishment would be swift. So she learned to be very, very respectful. There are some people when they realize that you are that kind of person, they try to take advantage of you. Most people look at her and they read: quiet, not likely to retaliate, and so they would be very rude to her or even dismissive. For years she would tolerate it and complain only to my father. And I mean, this went on for years. Even when I was a child, I would hear her complaining to my father about stuff that people did and he just kept saying, “Well, don’t come

home and tell me. You need to tell them,” but her philosophy would always be “They’ll do it and do it until I have a huge explosion.” When I came to this country, I taught her to stop that foolishness. “The minute anybody crosses you, you need to put a stop to it.” Wouldn’t you know that the first person she tried it on was me? I created a monster.

Now, what makes my mother laugh is somebody would read her the wrong way and step out of line. And she would unleash that fury upon them and then she would come and tell me about it, and the two of us would laugh and laugh and laugh. I just keep telling her, “I am not worried about you, you know. I am not worried about you at all. I’m sorry for anybody out there who tries to read you.” We have jokes which will cause us to laugh and laugh. Another thing that makes her laugh a lot are people who are bull-headed and think they know it all. They don’t take the time to be reflective and make good decisions. They’re noisy! Then years later, they stub their toe and their life turns out messy. She would sit and say, “Now, Alana, common sense should have told that fool that so-and-so would happen....” Now, the funny thing is Mom is not the kind of person to laugh at people, but I think she saves that belly laugh for those who don’t learn their lessons.

It’s been so long since I’ve seen my mother cry. She cried when her sister died, that was in 1988. I’ll tell you something about my mother. She’s a happy woman. She told me one thing years ago, a simple statement: “If there are two happy women in New York State, I am one of them.” And that happiness just comes from contentment. You see, her and her companion used to be boyfriend and girlfriend back in the day when they were teenagers. They met again when they were in this country and have been together for almost 20 years. And they are good to each other. Her children are grown, raising their families. She really appreciates all of those blessings. So, yeah, she’s happy.

One quality I appreciate about Mom is that she listens. She gives 100% support, but she's not a fan of wallowing. The minute she hears a downside, her philosophy is, "Okay, now we know what situation we're dealing with. What's the solution? What's plan B?" With Mom, I have very little time to be down. The other thing is, because she has always been such a strong and forward moving person, it's also my philosophy that even in the face of crisis, like a recent one I had in my former place of work, she would say, "It may be getting you down but you have to keep looking at what should be your next move." With her, "It's never, ever feel sorry for yourself or curl up in a space and die."

Even when I was younger, she was the same. It's not that you couldn't cry, you could cry, but once she was done listening, she helped you move to the next step, which of course is better than having you sit around and wallow. I never felt I had to keep a stiff upper lip. You could be very human, but she was there to start moving you towards a solution.

Mom is a classic.

One day, she was talking some nonsense and I decided to challenge her on her views. So I'm there grilling her over the phone and she said, "To hell with you! I don't have to answer these questions," and hung up on me! We didn't speak for almost a week. And how was that resolved? Well, school reopened and then she had to meet Aiden's bus in the evening, to pick him up. And when she showed up, we just started talking. That's the thing about her, even if we have a difference of opinion and we're mad at each other, if there's something that she has to do, she's not going to use that as an opportunity for spite. No way.

Eighty percent of me knew that she would show, because that is the kind of person that she is. But I still had a 20% concern and was too proud to call and ask if she was going to show up. But when I checked on my GPS locator so I can see where Aiden is at any given time, I saw that he was home and he was inside. I just smiled to myself. My mom's response taught me

something too: “When somebody needs you and they are depending on you because you have a role to play - - even you have a falling out - - and that thing is critically important, you show up and you can settle your differences another time.” Mom takes her role as a grandmother very seriously.

One thing for sure that I will teach my son is that when it comes to education, we don’t slouch around. She was involved and serious. I have really taken on that responsibility with Aiden. I’ve gotten to know his teachers. I’ve gotten to know the security guards. I work with his teacher, as much as she drives me crazy. I’ve learned to engage and really, really support his educational attainment. My mother already has plans for him to go to this university or that university. She wants him to be an engineer; she calls him Dr. Aiden or Professor Aiden. And we have the same mindset, so there is no disagreeing there. He’s young. The bigger picture is she’s setting up a culture of achievement for him already. It’s not so much that she wants him to be anything in particular, I think she wants him to go to University of Pennsylvania or Stanford or some crazy university or the other. And I just listen. I’m not going to discourage that because we are singing the same song, just a different line at times.

The most precious gift my mom has given me is respect. In terms of the gifts I have given her, she knows that the reason her children don’t cause her stress is because she really put that work in, and she was there when she was supposed to be there, she did what she was supposed to do and then some. She feels satisfied! The way my brother and I have grown into adulthood is her reward. But she’s also very aware that there are parents out there whose children curse them out, are neglectful, abusive, and disrespectful. Her children are so respectful and appreciative. The gifts she has given us simply by her example and her support are priceless, just priceless.

If Mom and I were writing a story together, that story would focus on the way we've always talked, chatted. And for her the surprise is I would remind her of things that she has done, supportive things, and I should have mentioned this earlier, I'm surprised it didn't come out. When I was preparing to do A levels to go into university, I worked very, very hard. I would wake up on Saturday mornings, sit on the couch and study from seven o'clock in the morning to maybe five or six in the evening. And Mom wouldn't disturb me at all. She would bring my breakfast, take away the dishes, bring a snack, bring my lunch. And I would be there on that couch, surrounded by papers all day, and she would not disturb me. If I said, "Mom I need to wake up and study," she'd wake me up so I could study - - support, support, support. I remember I started A levels for one school and came three days later and told her I wanted to go to another school - - I got into both schools - - and she said, "Girl, if you had told me this a week ago, I would have bought the other uniform. Anyway, let me sleep on it." She woke up the next morning and said, "Go. If they take you, stay. If they don't take you, go back to the old school." That was the best decision, because I did really well at the new school, but it would never have happened if she'd decided to be rigid and say, "Look, you had your chance to choose, you've decided and now you...." Mom never quarreled. That's the thing that surprised me. Had it been my father, he would have quarreled for six months and told me, "You're staying where you are." In her case, when she slept on it and woke up, she said, "If you want to go, go." Her reaction was transformative in terms of how I grew and how well I did. It's just to illustrate how supportive, how very supportive she has always been.

So our story will be about these great memories of Mom!

Sometimes when I remember and bring up these moments, she's a little embarrassed and then sometimes she feels good. Because when you bring up good memories and you're expressing appreciation, the person who is being appreciated feels good to know it had all been

worthwhile. Again, you can do good things for people and then they don't appreciate it. That is not a good feeling. But knowing that I approve of the way she raised me and for her to see me reliving that with my own son is really the ultimate sign of approval of the way she raised us.

Belinda and I met, not at her home, but at a Bagel and Cheese Café on Union Turnpike, blocks away from the place she shares with her now aging and ailing mother. Though there were only a handful of customers in the café, there was a lot of background music. At first, we tried our best to ignore them until Belinda commented on one of them: "I love this song." And started singing to Girl on Fire by Alicia Keys.

As we continued certain songs would come on at the proper time: Black or White by Michael Jackson when Belinda was talking about how she didn't understand people who "don't like black people." She was upset about that and the music lightened the mood a little bit. Another song, Everything I Do, I Do It For You by Bryan Adams came on when she was talking about her feeling very "ambivalent" about her grandmother and In Your Eyes by Peter Gabriel when she was talking about her mom coming up to New York to support her. There were many more instances where the appropriate song would come up, not only to drown out our voices, but to soothe the moments that were either intense or sad for Belinda as she thought and responded carefully to each question.

Duck's Pond: My Mother's Dream



As a child, I just thought my mom, Vivian, was wonderful and I felt, it's funny, a sort of protectiveness toward her. She had a nickname, Duck, which as a child, I hated. It referenced the fact that she was bow-legged and a little pigeon toed. And she would share stories about how she wasn't pretty, things like that. Bear in mind that she was from the South, and color, shades of color, was big. She's brown, like me, but her sisters are lighter, and, except her older sister, she was probably the darkest.

I remember she told me once that she was holding someone's baby, and the baby started to cry and some guy, a neighbor, said, "Oh, Duck is so ugly, she made the baby cry." When I met him as an adult, I couldn't speak to him. I refused to. Mom was like, "Oh, don't be that way," and she laughed a little. I was very sure I didn't want to speak to him. She was always so gracious about that nickname. I mean, to me, it was insulting, but for her, it was just family. And as I grew older, I realized that there was a family dynamic between sisters, that as a child, I

couldn't see. I get that now. It always felt like her children, we, were secondary to her sister's kids. We would go visit my grandmother in Virginia. And I remember my grandmother's bed, and how she would make room for all of us. But when my aunt came with her two daughters, we had to vacate my grandmother's room to allow them to have this big old bed. Things like that would bug me. And as I got older, I always felt that the treatment of my mom was a little different and I never felt very kindly towards my grandmother. I mean, I knew my mother loved her mother, but I always felt ambivalent about my grandmother and still do to this day.

My sister and I were just talking about this the other day - - literally a couple days ago. There was just something about my grandmother - - we couldn't put our fingers on it - - that she doted more on her other daughters, especially the two younger ones, the fairer ones, than she did with mom. It's interesting because I think my mom always felt like her mother was wonderful, and I don't know why that was. I didn't see any indication of that, I didn't see her show any kind of affection to my mom. I saw it the other way around. I saw my mom give to her and serve her. When she got to Virginia to visit her mother, she rolled up her sleeves and she was in there. More than anybody else, more than her sisters, I saw her, working.

My grandmother took in her sister, who had dementia. And I remember my mom coming in and helping to bathe her. A portion of my mom's paycheck came out automatically, before she saw it, and went to her mother. She was amazing that way. But I, I never heard my grandmother say to her, "You're just a lovely child."

When I became a teenager, I saw that my mom could be mean, actually. She would say things to me that cut and hurt. I remember her saying things to me while I was in high school. I don't remember what they were, but I remember crying as she looked at me and said, "Your tears don't move me." She went on to talk about things that happened to her in her life. She was

married by the age I was in high school. I can't even imagine what that must have been like. By age 17, she had had a child and was married. By the time she was 34, she had six kids.

In my mom, I saw someone who worked hard and could say things that would be sharp and hurtful, but I never doubted that, on the flip side, that she loved us, that she loved me. And I remember, I would go to bed and she'd still be up. And when I got up in the morning, she was already up making breakfast for everyone. That's the image that I have of my mom. My dad was much more of a "presence." He was gone in the morning, of course, but when he got home, his work day was done. It was like, "Look, give me my food. I wanna watch the news.... Don't bother me." But Mom always wanted her family, her children to be close to each other.

We didn't hear profanity in my house, so whenever I hear people, even now, cursing out their children, it boggles my mind. It just wasn't done. My parents didn't curse at home. But it's funny, I remember wanting to talk to her about profanity, I must have been eleven. She had said, "Ask me anything." I started asking her about curse words. She said, "Give me a specific." And, I wrote the "s" word, and she told me about specific uses of that word, which surprised me. I was like, "How cool is this?"

I remember when I got my period. She had all this literature for me. I'll never forget her saying, you know, it's as natural as a heartbeat. So I understood it, I understood that it was natural, that the pain was natural, I understood the contractions that were part of what was happening with the flow. My mom and I would talk about all kinds of things.

If I asked her about drugs - - back in the day, it was all about drugs - - she would have literature. She worked at a facility and brought home pamphlets. "This is your brains on drugs," kind of thing. She would show me the images and I never really wanted to get into drugs after seeing them. Why would I do that to myself? She used to smoke and I asked her one day, "What would you do if you caught me smoking?" And she just looked at me, closed her eyes and said,

“Please don’t.” And that was all she said. I had no desire for smoking or for cigarettes. If she had threatened me, if she had said “...if I ever catch you,” I would have been like, “Well, you know, you can't stop me...” But all she said was, “please don’t.” She hated that she smoked. It wasn’t something she was proud of.

It was because of her, you know, that I was conscious of having a relationship with God. She would bring us to whatever church she was going to, she wanted that for us. I remember, so silly, I was watching the Academy Awards with her when I was about thirteen. And I said, “That’s my goal, to get an Academy Award.” And she said, “It should be to get baptized and have a relationship with God.” And I thought, “Seriously?” - - talk about ruining the moment! I was like, “Really, why couldn’t you just roll with it, Ma?” It took away the fun of the moment, but I remember it.

When we graduated from the sixth grade, we all bought little albums for our classmates to sign. We'd write little silly mementos to each other. But my mom wrote at the beginning of mine: “If you don’t gain anything at all, gain wisdom, gain understanding.” I kept that album for years, and I thought what she wrote was just so profound.

She was a writer, and I’m so sorry that she didn’t write her thoughts down more. She went back to school to get a college degree, and I found one of her notebooks one day. She had written something like: “I’ve taken care of family, I’ve taken care of my mom. Who will take care of me?” I told her I'd read it and said, “Oh, Mom, this is really touching.” But she was a little embarrassed and said, “Why are you reading my notes?” I said, “I’ll take care of you.” She said back, “You don’t know what you’re talking about.” But I think she was pleased I said that.

She has Alzheimer’s now, and it’s very hard. I can’t imagine her not being taken care of, and I can’t place her in a nursing home. Even though I was off today, I wasn’t off. There's always her care. It’s all about being with her. I can’t place her in a home. I mean, she was in the

hospital while I was away in Seattle a few weeks back. When I returned, she was all bruised on her arm where they were taking blood. And I know she fights and she's not always cooperative, and her veins are tiny, tiny, so it was a bear to take her blood. I get that. But I just thought, if I had been there, it would have been different. I can't be with her all the time, so I'm grateful to have a friend from church to be with her in the house when I'm away at work. Unfortunately, the sister is not young, but she's just so dear to my mom.

My mom and I used to have our little disagreements when I first became Christian because her convictions are different. She's a Jehovah's Witness. I'd talk to her about that - - who wrote their Bible, their teachings about taking blood and things like that. But, at one point, she said, "You know, I'm just convinced, the Witnesses' teachings are the truth." I let it go after that. There's no question that I credit my walk with God to her.

I've gotten some great advice from my mom over the years. From the "get wisdom" passage she wrote in that notebook, that little album, to how I chose my friends. The other was, "Save your money." She used to say, "Just save \$5 a week, even \$10." She said, "Not \$25, you'll miss that. Five dollars you won't feel, just stick it in an envelope and leave it alone. You'll be surprised how it adds up." And of course, I didn't do it that way. I was like, "Oh, Mom, I can do more than \$5." So, I'd do \$25, \$50, \$100, which of course I felt, which of course, I would nibble at. So my savings were never where they might have been. She was always extremely disciplined. There were six of us, initially. And I remember Christmases, we all had gifts, lots of nice gifts. She was given an allowance by my dad and she would buy little gifts throughout the year and hide them from us. On Christmas Day, wow, there'd be two bicycles here, a doll house, books, clothes and you never saw them because she hid them well. My dad would be up until the wee hours putting the bicycles together on Christmas Eve. Just that she could do that, make a dollar

stretch, was amazing. And she would walk from one supermarket to another to find a deal: She'd walked from King Cullen, 20 minutes to Key Food, and then walk home.

I say all that to say that when she decided to buy something, when she went to buy a car, or furniture, she had the money for it. I always thought she had lots of money, most people did, because of how she lived, but she had excellent credit, and good savings, and she knew how to budget herself. Both my parents were like that. I remembered as I got older and I moved out because I thought I was old enough, I would ask her for money - - "I can't pay my phone bill, Ma, could you help me out?" And she would say, "Let me look at my budget." My dad, his approach was a bit harsher, "You should have money set aside." He was right. He was disciplined and was proud that he was the sole provider with a wife and six kids. We were never on welfare. We lived in a home. I remember this family who moved to the block who were on welfare. They would get these huge tins of peanut butter, which I thought was like the coolest thing, because I love peanut butter. I used to say "Dad, why don't we go on welfare so we can get those tins of peanut butter?" And he smiled a little and simply said, "No, we don't want that." I didn't get it then. But now I understand that he didn't want any handouts. Both of my parents, when they retired, one worked for the city and the other for the state, they got retirement salaries, plus Social Security. They're not a burden financially, to anybody. So yeah, definitely, I would say that they worked hard, they really worked hard.

Sometimes when I look at people who are racist, who say, "I hate black people," I want to say, "You don't know my parents." You know what I mean? "How can you say that when you've never met my parents? You don't know their work ethic. They're amazing, self-sufficient. They picked cotton, butter beans, collard greens. From the time she was six years old, my mother was out there in the fields in South Norfolk, Virginia." Mom could be very melancholy, was sad a lot, and kept a lot in. I remember her saying how she wanted to move back home to

Virginia. When she got there, it wasn't what she remembered, you know. Of course it wasn't, it was the '90s at that time. She remembered, what, the '40s? A lot changes in 50 years. Her friends weren't there, everything was different. And I know she felt alone. I regret not moving in with her. At the time I was still here in New York, and I didn't want to live in Virginia, but I wish I had done it for her. I know now she was very lonely there, very lonely.

What I learned from that, not necessarily a lesson she taught, was that you can have family, but family is not always there for you. Sometimes you have friends who are much closer and more reliable. I mean the Bible talks about, in Proverbs 18:24, "a friend who sticks closer than a brother." And it's true. I think I mentioned that she was in the hospital, last week, and I was away, on a trip. When I came back, I had to get her out of the hospital. And my sister was with me, she had traveled with me. When she came in, she was tired, so she took her time out, you know? She slept in. It wasn't the time to do that. It left me to get Mom out of the hospital. I can't imagine anyone, say from my Bible talk doing that. And I remember, I was angry and I'm realizing too that I need to let these kinds of things go. I think, my sister just doesn't know. I mean I've been trained to serve in ways that she doesn't really know, but still, "How could you see me getting up and out and going to the hospital and just be like, "See ya!" I don't know, I don't understand.

Every once in a while Mom smiles, which is a nice feeling, but she's disappearing. It's hard. I miss her humor. I miss arguing with her about things. I miss stuff like that, I miss real talks with her. I just really miss her. It's very hard. She'd really rather you just leave her alone, so she can just curl into a little ball. But that's not helpful. It's not good for her. It's very hard.

I remember her visiting me when I lived in Manhattan and we went shopping. It was just a nice day, and we found this place and she bought all of these really heavy serving dishes that she loves. They were in blue and white, nautical themed, one of her favorites. I remember being

impatient with her at one point because she walked so slowly. And now I'm like, "Wow, if I could just do that again, if I could go back. I wouldn't be impatient with her about anything." I remember another time when she was just starting to lose her memory. I was having thyroid surgery because I had papillary thyroid cancer, suspicious cells, and she drove up from Virginia. She just wanted to be with me, you know. She was apologetic, "I can't make it into Manhattan, it's too confusing." But she came up to New York and I was just so touched by that. Her driving all the way to New York struck me because I have siblings who lived in New York who never visited me, but she drove up from Virginia. Everyone on the hospital staff, kept asking, "Will you have family coming by?" I was like, "Oh, yes. My sister works in the city. She'll stop by before she goes home." She didn't, but Mom was there.

I hate to say it, but two words come to mind when I think of my mom. One is family. The other is love. And I don't mean that phoney kind of love. I mean a lot of what motivated my mom was love, wear-you-out-in-effort, working love, you know. Where you're up at three in the morning with someone who's sick, that's the kind of love that describes my mom. I really got to see that when my younger sister had her children. It was amazing to see the way my mother embraced them. I remember my older sister had a boy who became very ill. He had an ear infection which gave him a high fever and diarrhea. He was maybe five then. Anyway, he had a little accident, on the hallway floor. As my mom cleaned up the mess, he came over and said, "I'm sorry, Grandma," and she shook her head and said with a smile, "You couldn't help it." And he said, "I should be more careful." It was so sweet, the whole exchange. Tears came to my eyes, I walked away. She was like that in a pinch. She was a nurse by training and she was always right there. She knew exactly what to do - - without a lot of fuss and bother. Years later, I had another surgery and it was very different because then she was losing her memory and she would come into the room and she keep saying, "Tell me what you want me to do, tell me what you

want me to do.” It just broke my heart because she wanted to help and didn’t know how. I said, “Mom you don’t have to do anything, I’m just glad you’re here.” But it was very, very hard.

Mom liked to cook. Years ago, I asked if she had a restaurant, what she would call it and she said, “Duck’s Pond.” I loved that. I think about it a lot, “Duck’s Pond,” so the title of our story would probably be that, and the story would be about her. I think I mentioned this before, one of the things I loved about her was how approachable she was. She would always say that I could tell her anything. Years ago, after I had moved out, I had to talk to her because I felt a distance between us. It stemmed from my feeling that she loved my older and younger sisters more than me. When we were all together, they both seemed close and had a lot to talk about. I had to talk to her about it because I was starting to feel resentment toward her. I really believed she preferred my older sister more, that she felt my sister was prettier. She said “No, not at all. Debbie (my older sister) just seemed to need me more.” As soon as she said this I knew what she meant. I remembered times she would want to help me with something, like homework or ask about something I was doing, and I was like, “I’m fine!” or “That’s ok, I got this.” I saw it from her perspective. When I said all that, I was pushing her away. Anyway, I loved Mom’s response. I was about 24-25 years old and that was a changing point for both of us. I understood her a little bit better, and she understood me better. That talk tore down some walls I’d put up.

I had an older brother who died when I was about eleven. He drowned at Rockaway Beach. My father had taken the three boys out to the beach, I had gone to a birthday party, which later filled me with guilt because I felt like I should have been there, like I could have done something. My father came home with the other boys but not my older brother. My father told what happened: He was with Steve - - my younger brother - - who would have been nine or so at the time. My oldest brother was reading on a bench at the beach, and Roger, the second oldest, was in the water. Then there was a fire alarm or something, and Dad and Steve went to

go check that out, but Roger stayed in the water. As he's explaining all this to my mother, she kept questioning him, I went over and asked, "Mommy, did Roger drown?" She closed her eyes and put her hand out, to stop or silence me. For years I thought she was pushing me away. I talked to her about this too along with the stuff about Deb, and she said, "No. I saw if it was obvious to you at eleven, then there was no more fighting it." And that made it very clear, and we just cried and talked.

That interaction with my mom also taught me something about talking, because you cannot read people - - you think someone not smiling means they're angry or don't like you but who knows what they're thinking or going through? Only the person. I mean you won't know until you say something. You think someone is pushing you away with their hand, when they're saying, "You...you nailed it, you got it" or "I can't hear that now." I can't even imagine a mother coming to terms with something like losing one of her babies. What that must have been for her. The anguish! I grieved for him, he was my brother, but I cannot imagine losing a child that young. You just don't know what people are dealing with.

My mom would keep a lot in, but she was also very vulnerable, very open. I admire her for that. I admire her vulnerability, her realness and her approachability. That was very Christ-like of her. Jesus was like that, very real. He fell with His face to the ground. People were always trying to tell Him what to do, or trying to correct Him. And He let them. That quality in my mom has helped me to change the way I look at strength and weakness. Some people think strength is "Nothing hurts me" when in fact, you're more brittle and vulnerable than you think you are. Because once you talk about something, it no longer has power over you.

Like I said, I miss her.

I'm convinced that I've made my mom proud of me and the life I've chosen to live. I remember driving up to New York with Mom and we'd be singing spiritual songs, and she

would sing some I didn't know and vice versa and that was kind of sad, that she didn't know all the songs I knew and I didn't know of all her songs. But I loved that we shared that spiritual walk. I think she would have wanted me to get married, though. She never nagged me but she did bring it up from time to time. She said that I should flirt more. She wanted me to have kids.

At some point I had to tell her, "Look, I saw your marriage, I saw your sisters' marriages, my sister's marriage. I know that marriage is not the thing that makes you happy, it doesn't complete you." And I saw the work. I saw the wizard behind the curtain. I grew up with that and my older sister would share things with me that would make me feel like I should take my time.

Even now, that's what I feel like, I feel sometimes like I want a partner, like a boyfriend. But not by "any means necessary," not desperately. I think that a partner would be wonderful, but he may not necessarily be the thing that makes me feel wonderful. Everyone, every woman has to know this about herself. You're wonderful already. No one can make you feel wonderful or acceptable or worthwhile. Or maybe I don't want to rely on someone to make me feel wonderful or worthwhile. I'd like kids, but because I take care of my mom now, even the glamour of that is gone. I see my sister's kids and they're all grown and doing their thing. Does it occur to me that I won't be a grandmother? Yes, it does.

I have so many friends who are mothers and they're very real, very honest about it. One friend in particular comes to mind. I watched her with her daughter, and her daughter was holding her hand and skipping along. "That's very sweet," I said. My friend said, "You're seeing the 15 minute of joy. You don't see the other side. The running around when they're ill, when they're in pain, when they leave something at home, and you have to leave work, drive home and bring it to them. It cuts into your work day and you're frazzled already. And the other issues, the disappointment." She said people only see the outside, those little happy moments and say, "Look at the cute Gap outfit."

My mom actually went back to college for nursing in her 40's. That's when my parents actually started to grow apart. She became more confident, more independent. Dad saw it too. And it wasn't one of those things that they talked about - - "Oh, I see your new confidence." It wasn't verbalized in that way. She started getting friends, she started a new life, and they split up.

Suddenly she had to handle a household, she never did before. Dad always took care of the bills and everything. She had to take it on. My father would always say, "I don't need people. I can do without them." I don't believe anyone who says that really means it. But it taught me something about being happy with my own company. I love having friends around, but I don't mind being alone. Then again, I also know it's not good for me to be alone all the time.

My mom described me as having "deep reservoirs" or maybe having an untapped reservoir. She'd embarrass me sometimes because she would praise me to her friends and I just didn't hear that kind of thing at home. I remember her introducing me saying, "She's so pretty, she's smart, she's artistic," and I would look at her like, "Who are you talking about?" She once told me, "One thing I regret is talking you out of art school." I always wanted to be an artist. When I had opportunity to go to an art high school, she'd said, "Do you know how many starving artists there are?" She made it seem like the worst idea, just not practical, if I did do it. She said you need training and a job that would guarantee a steady income. I think now that it was common for parents to do that. But, here she was saying, "I regret it." I still may have a go of it because I'm reminded she also said, "Remember, you're untapped."