

## GREATER EXPECTATIONS: ONE WOMAN'S PERSONAL STORY OF OVERCOMING POVERTY

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When I was a child I had big dreams, but feared that I would be unable to be successful because of the poverty I was born into. But, I'm one of the lucky ones. I'm living my childhood dream of being an attorney.

My family was like many families that live in the cities of this country: we were poor; we were black; my father wasn't around; my mother abused drugs and alcohol; and my grandmother was the glue that held us together. I should have been a statistic but my grandmother would not allow it. I grew up in poverty and was homeless by the time I was nine years old. My mother, brother, and I were homeless for several months. What I most remember about being homeless was the fear and uncertainty that I had every hour of every day. When I finished one meal, I would think about if and when I might have my next meal because nothing was guaranteed. We had to make sure that we made it into the lines for the shelter on time or we wouldn't have a place to stay for the night. We didn't always make it, so my mother would try to keep us safe for the night even if it meant sleeping on a park bench with her eyes open. I remember my mom not wanting people to know we were homeless because she was afraid we would be taken and put into foster care. Lastly, my biggest fear was that this was the way that my life would always look, that I might live on the streets for the rest of my life. The one bright spot of my homeless experience was going to the library. It was a safe and comfortable place where we could stay for many hours during the day before the shelters opened up. At the library, I could read about a better life and it gave me hope. Hope for the future and hope for myself. After several months, my mother made an incredibly selfless decision and realized she couldn't take care of us anymore. I was sent to live with my disabled grandmother who was in Section 8 housing. My grandmother could only take one of us and my brother was put into foster care. My grandmother was also poor and used welfare, food stamps and her social security payments to

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take care of me, but she was more stable than my mother.

My grandmother was the greatest person I have ever known, she was strong, smart, and had an elegance that transcended her financial situation. She also gave me one of the greatest gifts possible especially for a young woman. She had expectations that I would go to college, be successful and could change the world. She made me believe that I had the power to make my life look however I wanted. She would never allow me to make excuses. If I made a mistake she would help me figure out a way to fix it, but I always had to be responsible for myself and my actions. I would not be here if it wasn't for her belief in me. No one makes it alone.

It seemed like my life had turned around for the better when I won a scholarship to college in Philadelphia. But, within a year of going to college, I had failed out of school and lost my scholarship. I was intimidated by college and all the "rich kids" there. I forgot who I was during that time. I forgot that I was as good as anyone. I did not want to go back to my grandmother in California as a failure, so I stayed in Philadelphia, got a job as a live-in nanny on the Mainline and went back to school four nights a week. In 1998, I graduated from St. Joseph's University, the same school I had previously failed out of. My grandmother died while I was still in college, but I know she was there with me in spirit the day I graduated. She never judged me for failing. When I told her what had happened she told me that she loved me and that I had to decide which way I wanted my life to go. She was proud that I decided to go back to school.

I went on to attend Temple University Beasley School of Law where I graduated with my J.D./M.B.A./LL.M in Taxation, all earned in only 4 years. I like to say not bad for a girl who failed out of college. I am a tax attorney in Philadelphia and a member of the Board of Governors of the Philadelphia Bar Association. I am also a frequent speaker on how I overcame a life of poverty and homelessness to become an award winning young attorney. I am a former Co-Chair of the Women in the Profession Public Service Task Force of the Philadelphia Bar Association. I used that position to start a mentoring program for high-school students interested in pursuing a career in law, and conducted numerous panels about issues related to educational opportunities and the law. I have been named a 2012 USA Eisenhower Fellow, where I will travel to India in September to work with women and children who are homeless and living in poverty. I am extremely proud of my career, especially considering the difficulties I encountered along the way. But these are not my proudest accomplishments. Helping others is what matters.

Many people ask me how I was able to overcome the obstacles in my life and I always give them the same answer: God, Grandma, hard work, sacrifice, mentorship, and luck. I needed all of those things for me to make it. I can not say why I made it and so many others do not, but what I do know is that I want to help others to find their own success and live their dreams.

So the question is how do we help children in poverty succeed? We have to set high expectations for them. That does not mean that we aren't sensitive to their circumstances, but we have to realize that we may be the only people in their lives that are teaching them the life skills they need to survive and thrive. I believe we will be doing them a disservice by not telling them truth about life, which is that they are going to have to work extra hard to achieve their dreams. Dreams take work. If it were easy everyone would be successful.

We are not going to be able to fix all the issues of poverty in these children's lives, but by educating and mentoring these children we can mitigate the effects of poverty. The most important lesson that I learned in life is that I was responsible for my life decisions, both good and bad. No matter what my family situation was I had an obligation to be a productive member of society because if I didn't make good decisions I would be the one to suffer. My grandmother used to say that there was no shame in being poor, only of being poor of character.

I have made more mistakes than I ever could have imagined, but my successes have far

out weighted my failures. People are afraid to fail, so they don't even try. We have to tell our children not to be afraid.

Failure was not an option for me because I had nothing to lose and everything to gain. We cannot allow these children to fail. That is not an option. We have to have the same expectations of inner-city children as the kids in other communities or we will continue to lose entire generations of people. When they give you all the excuses of why they can't do something, because of their community, their family, their circumstances, the quality of the schools, teachers, lack of resources, it doesn't matter. You have to look them in the face and be willing to say "So what, what are you going to do about your situation?" and offer to help them find the resources that can help improve their circumstances. Give them the power over their life. They can choose something better, the question is will they.

I know that these things are easier said than done and everyone will not be helped, but we cannot give up. This is a very personal issue for me. Life is about choices and success is about making good choices. I saw in my own life how two people can make different choices, and the consequences of those choices. My brother and I made different choices. I wish I could tell you my brother's story had a happy ending but it did not. He bounced around foster homes and dropped out of high school. During the years when I was struggling to make a life for myself, I did not know where he was. I did not see or talk to my little brother for almost eleven years, from my high school graduation until he found me during my last semester of law school. By that time he had contracted HIV and was addicted to drugs. I spent the last six years of his life trying to get him into rehab, to go back and get his G.E.D, and to go to college. He was never ready, he always said someday. But someday never came. I received a call in the summer of 2010 telling me that my brother had hung himself in rehab and was in a coma. I flew out to California the next day and took my baby brother off of life support.

My brother never realized how smart, funny, handsome, and talented he was. He never believed that he could accomplish anything he set his mind to. He did not realize that the choices he was making would lead to his death. We have to do better and be better. We cannot continue to lose so many of our young people and future leaders. My brother could have accomplished great things; by sharing his story I am allowing him to live on and possibly influence many young people. Because, even if you cannot identify with me or my story, you may be able to identify with my brother Michael and his story. You may even have a Michael in your life. Please do not give up. Because this is a fight and we have to win. We have to fight with our brains and our excellence. Because excellence can overcome obstacles and excellence can overcome prejudice. Excellence gives opportunities.