



Steel Magnolias 2.0

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Life is a word that holds infinite meanings and interpretations. Unfortunately, it is also a word that manifests in so many variants and its experiences are unique to each of us as individuals. Some are fortunate enough to have been born into lineages that afford clear paths to success. Others of us are much less fortunate. For the latter, life becomes less about achievement and more about surviving life's obstacles prior to even being able to pursue what minimal opportunities for achievement are available at that given time. How does one persevere in a life that is so riddled with challenges and heartache? How do those of us who aren't fortunate enough to have what should be inherent tools laid out before us, manage to climb out of poverty or stay afloat in a system that was constructed to keep people of lower-socioeconomic status in substandard conditions? My response: we STEEL! It is my sincere belief that in steeling, we retreat into ourselves while something greater than us speaks life into our purpose and our very existence! This celestial force allows us to harden our minds, as it organically creates a protective encasement around our heart and spirit! This is my story of how I continue to "steel" my way through a life that has not always easy and is not often kind.

Humble Beginnings (Pre-PFLAG)

As a Black Transgender Woman from rural Louisiana, my personal journey has been SO FAR from easy! Although I was blessed to be born into a family that was deeply rooted in love, I would grow to realize that systemic oppression and lack of access would become a permanent fixture on my route to success! This experience is not exclusive to me. So many people of Trans/Non-Binary/Gender-Nonconforming experience have faced some of the very traumas and some unfortunately endure more than anyone could imagine!

Two days prior to Halloween of 1982, I entered the world. According to my Mom (Elizabeth "Neisie" Williams), I came into the world exactly 2 months shy of her 21st birthday, with a bang! We would often laugh as she recounted her experience of my birth but gave credence to the fact that it truly was an extremely traumatic event. She noted that I had somehow become breeched (or flipped topside up) in the uterus; thus, entering the birth canal feet-first. Having gone topsy turvy, she explained that I somehow became entangled in the umbilical cord and was being strangled as laboring began. What an ominous precursor this event would prove to be! Especially in my post-transition years, we found humor in the fact that prior to realizing that I was breeched, the Obstetrician attempt to pull me from the birth canal without success, only realizing the dilemma after fingers ended up in some not-so-pleasant places. Per my mother's report, despite the absolute insanity of that day, I did have a successful delivery and at 1:20 PM, I made my official entry into the realm of the living. Through her account, I literally "fought my way" into the world.

My formative years are the years I still treasure the most. The amount of love and care that my family showed is invaluable. At approximately age 4, my mom ended up getting hurt at work, and sustained injuries that caused her to be hospitalized for spent approximately 6 months. During that time, I was exclusively raised by Maternal Grandmother and Grandfather, as well as my Maternal Great-Uncle who also lived with my Grandparents. In addition to him, my Paternal Great-Grandmother also lived with my Grandparents. As a child, I was so afraid of her (due mostly to ignorance), because she was such an eccentric figure. She spoke no English; only broken Cajun-French. She was also blind, which was not the scariest thing, but her eyes were stark light grayish blue as a result, which is what I think scared me most! I eventually did warm up to her. As an adult navigating a world consumed with hate, I now recognize what a blessing it was to be raised by a multigenerational family. There is no greater wisdom than having lived experience from these generations! My mother was eventually released from the hospital and soon after, was able to buy her own home and have it built on the lot next to my grandmother's home. Although I was still extremely attached to my Grandmother's home, it was so good to have my mom's living right next door and to have a home in both places!

My Saturday mornings were the best! I'd wake up and of course, like every other 80's/90's baby, indulge in Saturday morning cartoons. Most weekends, my favorite cousin, Ebony, would come over. We would wake up and ride bikes at a now unattainably early time for me (like 7 AM) then wait for my Grandmother or Great Uncle to tell us what we would be doing that day. My childhood was so rich in love and substance that I never stopped to realize just how financially poor we truly were, which is something I will expound upon in later sections.

I mention poverty, not for sympathy or to pull your heartstrings, but to illustrate how much of an impact the Social Determinants of Health have on one's overall quality of life. There is great amounts of data and research that support the finding that prevalence of addictions is of higher incidence amongst families and communities in lower-socioeconomic areas. My family is no exception to that phenomena.

My first experiences with witnessing serious addiction were witnessed through the experiences of my Great-Uncle's alcohol addiction. He was my best friend and closest male role model. The sun rose and set on my Great Uncle Earnest. I was with him nearly every day for the first 20 years of my life, at which time he passed away. Within my first 14 years of life, I shared a room with him. I've never felt safer! He lived with us and provided every meal, took me to almost every appointment, got me off to school (even if it meant riding a bike to school), he sat with me at the bus stop every day, and just treated me as if I were his very own child or grandchild. This man stopped his life to become a permanent fixture in my own and I will forever love and cherish him for how he poured love and light into me! I can remember my earliest memories were some of the days that were obviously a turning point for my Great Uncle. One event that sticks with me occurred when I was about 5 years old. My Grandmother had taken me with her to retrieve my Uncle from the liquor store in their old neighborhood. She'd gotten a call that he'd been in a fight and that someone needed to come and get him as soon as possible. We arrived to find my Great Uncle, beaten, and staggering to walk due to his state of intoxication. I remember crying my heart out, not only due to the love I have for him, but also somehow, I sensed his pain. He often told me how seeing the hurt in my eyes at that moment, was a huge catalyst in his journey to recovery! If he ever took a drink again, I never witnessed it and never saw him intoxicated again. I must add how affirmed my Great Uncle always made me

feel, though I know I spooked him beyond belief at times (picture it: A Black Man born in the 1930s...dealing with an obvious gender queer child...in the Mid 80's)!

Despite his obvious lack of exposure to a child with emerging gender identity issues, my Great Uncle NEVER ONCE violated me and never spoke of my effeminate ways with negative connotations. I can remember trying to affirm my gender for the first time (also around age 5); after finding my Mom's curly wig, putting it on with some sort of head scarf, my 1980's tank-top and short shorts (which were gender neutral at the time) lol! I began to walk down the very middle of the street, waving at my friends who were obviously too far away to see who I was. Before I realized, I was swooped off my feet and carried by into my Mom's house by my Great Uncle. I remember him being super embarrassed, but still so kind. He did tell me he had to talk to my mother about my triumphant debut, but he begged her not to chastise me and to just talk to me. THAT is PURE love! I miss him dearly!

The second and scariest experience I have had with addiction was witnessing experiences of my Mother. During the early 1990's, she fell victim to the Crack Epidemic that was sweeping through marginalized Black communities across the US. My younger sister and brother are 7 and 8 years behind me, so they were not old enough to recall many of the details that went on at that time. I remember, after my grandmother and I had gotten a settlement from a car accident (approximately about age 11), and my Mom had been literally beating on the windows behind the house. She came back and asked me for money. I did give her the money but was so saddened to see my other in this state, I broke down and cried uncontrollably begging her not to leave. My mom later shared with me that again, THAT moment was her bottom and that she went to check herself into drug rehab the next day. She did abstain from drug use for the rest of her life.

As to not minimize or generalize my Mother's experience with addiction, I am compelled to give a brief backstory of WHO she was as a mother, a woman, and a person. My Mother was kind, loving, forgiving, patient, and compassionate. She had faced so much within her mere 20 years of living, prior to my arrival, but was still so humble. She had only a GED but was so intelligent. As my gateway to the effeminate, she demonstrated depth, creativity, and unconditional love! She taught me how to draw before I could even write; and although I fine-tuned my own vocal instrument through her examples of singing, she also passed on her vocal abilities to me, via genetics. In addition, my Mother had an immense passion for interior decorating and loved to cook and create new recipes! She always worked hard to keep her mind occupied. Unbeknownst to me at that time, my mother would later share that she was also a victim of sexual assault/molestation at the age of 13. She did share that the perpetrator was a neighborhood man who often hung around the corner store. I sincerely believe that this event festered in her spirit and manifested itself at a time of her life's weakest moments.

School Days: "The Wonderless Years" (Pre-PFLAG)

When recalling my experiences in academia and my professional career there are too many traumatic experiences to name. My early academic years were promising, I remember testing well above average in comparison to my peers. I was bright, loved music, and super creative, although still extremely timid. It was in going to school that I realized that my living conditions were not normal but were in fact extremely sub-standard in comparison to my classmates. Yes, my family worked to give me everything I needed, but in hindsight I realize that having to put pots down when it rained, having to boil water to have hot water, or having my

clothes frequently smell like smoke because our only source of heat was a wood-burning. I remember escaping that reality by always drawing a safe and nice version of my home. If I'm being honest, these conditions were the source of me feeling inferior when among my peers who were from nicer parts of town.

Most of my teachers were kind to me, but there were instances where I ran into teaching professionals who were ill-equipped to deal with a child who did not fit into the norms of their sex-assigned at birth. I remember one instance in the 1st grade, when turning in my class assignment to a young Black Cisgender, presumably Heterosexual male substitute teacher, who instead of acknowledging my assignment submission, loudly stated, "why do you talk like that" in front of the entire class, referring to the pitch and tone of my voice. Though I know I did not have the words to describe how the negative, and demeaning tone of his statements made me feel, I do remember what I now know is a feeling of being ostracized.

My grades were normally A's and B's and up until I finished the 6th grade. Once I entered the 7th grade, I became known as a "problem child". Still smart enough to navigate some (if not all my studies), I became consumed by the emotional trauma of being bullied. My focus again went from learning to pure survival. I had several fights that stemmed mainly from my responses to being teased and bullied. I eventually failed the 7th grade, having to repeat it a second time. This was a great blow to my sense of self-worth. I had never been one to receive bad grades, let alone fail. At that point, my family was greatly disappointed in me, because the person I was showing them, was not the loving child they once knew. One of the few good things that came out of my 7th grade year was meeting my Best Friend, EJ. In terms of academics, we were complete opposites at the time, or so it seemed. We like so many of the same things and were kindred spirits.

The next few years were some of my darkest regarding my mental health. During ages 14 and 15, I became extremely isolative and always felt sad. I would literally force myself to go to school and began to overeat all the time. I remember not wanting to see or deal with anyone. I began to struggle, not with my sexuality, because I knew what I was attracted to, but with my gender identity. There was a huge incongruence between who I know I am inside, and how I presented to the world at that time. Thus, against the wishes of my family, I began my transition to start affirming my womanhood at age 15 in very subtle ways (ex. shaving my legs, wearing foundation, wearing bandanas as an accessory to compensate as hair...lol). They were NOT prepared and had no knowledge of the already-scarce resources for therapy; especially as it relates to Trans/GNC care.

As confusing as my transition was for them, they loved me none the less! I struggled to find the words, but I explained that my transition wasn't for the attention of men, but that "I felt trapped in the wrong body"! I went through so much internal emotional turmoil at that time. Being the product of a culture so deeply rooted in indoctrinated religion, I struggled greatly with my internal view of myself and at times, even questioned why I was even created. I incorrectly reasoned, if my "eternal fate" was already sealed and I was "doomed to hell", why was I even given life in the first place? This is the point where my true "steeling" began. I started to get more in tune with my heart and how I felt as a spiritual being. I had to start telling myself that I had more value than being a shell of a person who was "damned".

While starting that journey, I was still making several physical changes to my appearance. The first time I revealed true myself to my mom with straightened hair extensions,

her exact words were: “I can’t be mad. I’ve always known, plus, you look just like me”. Without much knowledge and extremely limited understanding of the issues that I would face in my lifetime, my mother did begin what I’m sure was a difficult journey to coming to terms that her first born was ready to live as an affirmed Transgender Woman in this cruel and hateful world. She was not only my protector, but often created safe places for me, often being willing to wage battles outside of my awareness. It was that love even through lack of understanding, that helped to form the foundation through which I live my own life.

By age 16, I ended up going to alternative school, but after frequent fights and arguments, I was eventually expelled from that school after a confrontation with bullies. So, there I was, age 16 with no perceivable alternatives to earning a High School diploma (excluding a GED). However, through divine intervention, an old childhood friend showed me an add in the newspaper for a school that allowed students to earn their diploma through the mail! I signed up and my family agreed to pay the fees. I completed the requirements and earned my diploma just two weeks shy of my 17th Birthday. I remember my Mom being so proud! A successful end to a tumultuous chapter.

“Brand New Girl/Whole New World: Entering College” (Pre-PFLAG)

Shortly after I reached age 18, my mom drove me to my first semester of college. I arrived, a tall, timid, flat chested, bandana tied around the head, gender-nonconforming youth, standing in the corner of the student activities center, nervous as all get out! Divine intervention came to save me yet again, when I met one of my mentors and now long-time friend Kirk, who I have come to affectionately term as, “Muva”. Introduced to Kirk through my best friend EJ, he quickly swooped in and guided me through the process of enrollment and getting settled in my dorm. The scariest part of that was that I was housed in a male dorm. Though I still faced pressures unique to being a trans girl living in a male dorm, Kirk, and his best friend Earl’s presence, truly created a safe space for me. These individuals are at the core of my extended “family-by-bond”!

Despite having the protection of friends, I still faced concerns for safety. In one instance, a group of 7 or more guys were standing at the entry way of the stairwell leading to my floor. Of course, toxic masculinity ruled the day, and they all started hurling derogatory, homophobic, and transphobic, insults to which I responded. I was also told that if, I come upstairs they would beat the crap out of me. I prepared to fight for my life with one small pocketknife. What stands out the most about this situation, is that I was not alone. I was accompanied by a Cisgender, Lesbian/Bisexual female who I thought was a friend as I allowed her to reside with me in my dorm, at that time. In that instance, I realized she never was my friend, as she found what a traumatic experience for me, extremely amusing! All these things fell into place, and I still bombed in a major way during my first semester, finishing with a whopping 0.0001 GPA. That was another instance where I felt so disappointed in myself and turned that disappointment inward, which again caused my self-esteem to take another devastating blow.

“She Works Hard for the Money: Well, She Tried.”

Being Trans in the workforce is emotionally and mentally taxing! Being Black or a Person of Color adds a whole additional layer of challenges! I have encountered so much discriminatory treatment in my employment experiences, some of which had no resolution. Specifically, long before I had any degree or credentials I had applied and was hired for a

position as a psychiatric mental health technician at a psych hospital in rural Louisiana. Although I was excited to learn more about the field, my excitement was short-lived! I was terminated two days into orientation and provided the reasoning that they “did not know whether to place me with the males or the females”. Devastated and desperate to maintain gainful employment, I pleaded even for a job in housekeeping, but was denied any opportunity to continue working for the organization! In another instance, one of my closest friends/cousin Adaysha (who is also a Black Trans woman) and I were working at a call center, which we mistakenly thought was more progressive in inclusion at the time. We found out just how wrong we were when the HR department mandated that we leave the building to use the restroom as if we were less than human! This was a gesture done to make OTHER employees feel comfortable. I remember the demeaning and powerless feeling that washed over me in that moment.

In addition to feeling powerless in the workforce, society and law enforcement had a unique way of devaluing the existence of Trans individuals in its entirety. Law enforcement entities across the US are severely lacking when it comes to handling hate crimes against Trans/GNC individuals. In a traumatic incident which also involved my friend previously mentioned, after being chased down and held at gunpoint within an inch of our lives, and with me actually witnessing the suspect attempt to hide the gun just before getting caught and arrested (Divine Intervention again working its magic), law enforcement asked for mine and my cousin’s statement. After, feeling totally embarrassed and belittled while listening to the detective being condescending and blaming US for the attack, the officer spoke in a manner that affirmed what the suspects reported: which was that they did not know that we were Trans (which was FALSE), he laughingly told us that they "can't guarantee that the suspects remain in custody, so it's best we (THE VICTIMS) leave town". We were fortunate to survive the attack, but it's so disheartening that so many Trans women (especially those who are Black and Brown) have not been as fortunate. Society continues to tell us that they place ZERO value on Trans/Queer lives! A world with no protection, mixed with the omni-present toxic masculinity that is present with the Black community, has been among the strongest of contributing factors that plans Black Trans lives in near-constant jeopardy. Surviving these daily feats and striving for mobility has revealed that a huge part of my purpose is to contribute to every effort to change that horrible reality!

At this point in my life, after hitting so many walls in and realizing that I was destined to face so much discrimination in the workforce, I again “stepped” myself and decided to go back to school, the right way. I began to apply myself and started seeing my grades improve! I began to feel like that A/B Honor Roll Elementary Student who took pride in earning good grades. Though I did make it to High School, I had last only successfully completed 7th grade math. I literally had to learn from the remedial math level. I was on fire, I reminded myself that I was capable of anything once I applied myself! In 2009, a classmate in a Sociology Class, heard one of my presentations, and was so impressed, that she offered me a position with a local hospital as a Patient Care Advocate. Things were finally moving in the right direction!

By 2010, I was riding a wave of encouragement and revitalization. I was working full-time, earning a living of my own, going to college, full-time, and even started making the Dean’s list consistently. Around early 2010, I began to wonder if there were any resources available to provide scholarships to Transgender students. Through my own research (and again, Divine intervention) I stumbled across PFLAGNO and saw that I would need to apply closer to the scholarship deadline. I remember being so nervous and still not 100 percent sure about my career

aspirations but took a chance and applied. The application also included a personal statement. I was approved for the scholarship and invited to an awards banquet in May of 2011.

So much occurred between my discovery of PFLAG, the notification of approval for the scholarship, and the actual award banquet. In March of 2010, after what was deemed a reaction to anesthesia, I had a nervous break and ended up being hospitalized after staying awake for 4 days straight. It was one of the scariest times in my life! I felt like I'd lost complete control and, in those moments, felt so unheard. I remember my mind being so deprived thinking the world had literally ended and that my life of struggle and heartache was finally over. The very first night of my hospitalization, I remember an older male hospital attendant taking me to my assigned room (where there no cameras) and telling me to calm down. In the midst of me being in a panicked frenzy, he actually grabbed my hand and made me grope his genitals. When I realized what he was doing a feeling of fear shot through me so that I impulsively jerked and jumped back. This startled him and he left the room. The next day, I did inform the Attending MD, but my claims were completely gaslighted and dismissed as delusional. I never forgot how victimized I felt in that moment and I remember crying to my family, begging that they please believe me. Nothing ever came of my report.

After, my release, everything I had worked for, was now gone. No more job, and I even almost lost my good standing in school. However, with family support and a few follow-up appointments, I was able to start getting things back on track. I remember feeling as though my nervous break was punishment for having undergone a gender affirming procedure. The feelings of dread and despair that I had experience in my teenage years had resurfaced. My family was again covering me in love and support, doing the best they knew how to affirm, love, and embrace me. I remember my counselor not even having the full cultural competency necessary to work with a Trans patient. However, I am grateful that she led with her heart. Once I felt comfortable enough to open up to her, I did share how worthless and undeserving I felt in relation to my spiritual worth. The next thing she said to me, stuck with me! She said, I know you feel as if you don't matter, but God is a divine reader of hearts". He knows the inner workings of your heart and loves all his creations. It felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. That was the affirmation I needed to begin my healing, and it could not have come soon enough.

In August of 2010, my world was again rocked by the passing of my Grandmother, another pivotal figure in my life. After going through several adjustments, my Mom our current home and went to live in an apartment. As things began to calm down, I resumed my pursuit of a college degree, this time, inspiring my Mom to enroll in school also. I was so proud of her for taking the reins and deciding to take her own life into her hands pursue dreams of Social Work. Good things were yet to come. Something I did not understand at the time was how hard my grandmother's death impacted my Mother, because I was grieving her also. Unfortunately, it's something I understand all too well now.

My Introduction to PFLAG- New Orleans

In May of 2011, I had what I define as a culture shock. The day had of the PFLAGNO Scholarship Awards ceremony had finally arrived. It was an exciting time for me. I drove to New Orleans by myself and stepped completely out of my comfort zone for what would be the first of many times to come. Timid by nature, I was so nervous when I arrived at UNO's campus. When I walked into the event, I was greeted and treated so kindly! Prior to attending this event, I

sincerely felt as though I was a lone soul, attempting to fight through a system that did not see or value me as a human being. To witness a room full of aspiring students, and talent, all of whom were of the LGBTQIA+ community was awe-inspiring. I remember feeling overwhelmed with emotion as the Gay Men's Chorus sang and just feeling like I had finally felt a true belonging. The feeling was something right out of a movie! I remember meeting so many people and mentioning my intention on attending grad school! So many attendees of various races/ethnicities were kind enough to offer me shelter in their homes! I was just so taken back by the embrace that I felt! It may sound weird or crazy, but the feeling of peace I felt was how I imagined Heaven would feel! I went home explaining to my mother how good it felt to just be somewhere where I was not only tolerated, but truly CELEBRATED. That was one of the very first times I saw in my mother's eyes, the joy that comes when you finally feel that your child has found their place in the world. While I do appreciate PFLAG's financial support, the sense of community and belonging is what I deemed the most precious and priceless part of this event. This atmosphere of affirmation empowered me in ways that no other event could! I had no idea just how imperative these affirmations would be in upcoming battles that I had probably never fathomed.

The Fight Never Ends

While PFLAG afforded me the luxury of affirmation and embrace my next few years would be void of such cohesion in professional settings. I moved to the Dallas/Fort Worth area to pursue my master's degree in Social Work, expecting the same comradery that I experience with PFLAGNO however, I was sadly mistaken. Throughout my time in the Dallas area, I formed some very meaningful and authentic relationships, many of whom I maintain until this day. My first semester of grad school was very honeymoon-ish in nature, but once I started working in the field, the rose-colored glasses came off. I mentioned to a professor that I felt I would need to get a job to start generating income. She referred me to a local non-profit website with job listings. I ended contacting the Director of Programs for a local shelter who was also a social worker. The day of my interview I had an eye injury that required me to go to the ER. I left the ER and went straight to the interview. I was so brand new and doe-eyed that my every response was, "I want to work with the little Gay kids". Tickled at my greenness, I was offered the job and started in November of 2011. I arrived at the facility and was extremely nervous because it was almost like a prison. The first person I was greeted by someone who is still a close friend, Dreaka. She obviously sensed my nervousness and guided me Tiffany, the program director. Uncomfortable but knowing that I need a job, I tried to stick it out, despite the population being so rough and verbally abusive.

Most of the clients at the shelter were of the general population and were actively abusing drugs. I remember taking a break from work and going home for Christmas in 2011 and staying until January 2012. My very first day back, I was waiting to use the restroom and speaking to two Black Female co-workers who I would always speak and hold small talk with. Well, as fate would have it. I left to go to the bathroom, which was just behind a cubical wall. Just as I was going for the door, another coworker stepped into the restroom, so I stood and waited. Not expecting or looking for anything, I hear them say, "girl can you believe that thing, running around here dressed like that" and the other person saying, "girl I wonder where HE tucks his...". All within ear shot of clients. Hurt, humiliated, confused, and infuriated I excused myself to a coworker's office, where I later was experiencing all harassment from clients who took great pleasure in misgendering me and bringing attention to the fact that I was "not a

woman”. I had mentioned to my friend that I was planning to leave the job due to the toll the consistent mental abuse was taking on my spirit. She contacted the Director of Program, who as a social worker, took these matters seriously. The employees who made the degrading comments were addressed which resulted in one of them being terminated. The abuse continued, but thanks to the recommendation of my colleague, I was offered a position in a different program, the Women and Children’s Program!

As a program that exclusive hired all female staff, this change would prove to be a challenge within itself. With word that I identified as Trans spreading fast, the adult female residents of the program began to voice disdain for the thought of someone being “born a man” working with Women with Children. The Director of Programs and Women and Children’s Program Manager did make me aware of the concerns voiced by the residents and gave me the option to address the concerns in a community meeting. Imagine being a Black Trans Woman, standing in front of a room full of Cisgender, Heterosexual Females and having to discuss the ins and outs of what it means to affirm one’s gender. I remember walking into the room and it being one of the most hostile situations I’ve ever willingly walked into. This was another moment where I had to “steel” myself in order to muster up the courage to speak my truth in an atmosphere of hate and uncertainty. Surprisingly, as I opened up to a room of 50 to 60 complete strangers who already had preconceived notions of who I was, the mood of the crowd started to shift. At the end, several kids, came up and hugged me in sincere embrace. I went on to work for the program for the next two and a half years throughout my entire time in grad school and moved on from the program as the first and ONLY Transgender Woman to hold a position of authority in the program. My last day was the complete opposite of when I entered the program. The women who had been there for the duration of my tenure and I had built therapeutic bonds that empowered them, but in doing so, it also empowered me. My presence and seniority in leadership ultimately served as representation that as a Transwoman, I am still capable of leading, guiding, supporting, encouraging, and empowering others. There are several of us that are more than capable of doing so!

In early 2013, I received another PFLAGNO Scholarship which helped me through a touch financial spell when I can into a crunch with my tuition, books, and fees. It was always to go home Louisiana but even better to again be in the company of my fellow PFLAG scholarship recipients! The same love and supportive atmosphere I had experienced in 2011 was ever-present at this awards banquet as well! After a super tough last few semester of interning, working full-time and being a full-time student, I finally graduated with my Master’s in Social Work in December of 2013! Unfortunately, none of my family was in a position to make it to my graduation, and I was not in a position to help them get travel to TX to attend. However, “Muva” and my family-by-bond showed up and showed out! It felt as though all of my hard work paid off, and I finally thought I was moving up on the ladder as of success. I landed a job right after graduation and was amped to start my journey as a licensed professional.

This victorious feeling was soon eclipsed when reality came to knocking again. It again experienced the very same discriminatory practices I had experienced in past positions prior to even becoming different, but THIS time, things would have a different outcome. My very first job as an LMSW was one that ended in litigation, after being discriminated against by two employees from other departments and it being unaddressed and swept under the rug while the abuse continued, despite frequent reports to HR. The employees had spoken in a derogatory manner in front of mentally impaired patients! As by this time, I was the Social Worker in this

setting, it presented a life-threatening situation when one of the patients became aggressive toward me and began making extremely transphobic and derogatory comments! Still nothing addressed.

Prior to having to seek my own attorney, I went to the EEOC to file a claim of discrimination, only to be met with an extremely dismissive employee who completed my intake. With great judgement and vitriol in the tone of her voice, she said to me “why are you even worried about what people say”? When I tried to explain that my complaint is not so much as about the offenders who wronged me as it was about my HR department failing to address the issue and further contributing to an unsafe and hostile work environment. After 30 minutes of having my experiences diminished, I finally broke down crying and asked to leave the interview. After a few days of emotional rest, I did formally file a complaint against that specific intake worker. Can you imagine, going to the actual governmental entity that is supposed to protect those who are victims of discrimination and harassment, and being met with the very same discrimination? If you’re Trans/GNC I’d safely say you can. I eventually did my own research and found an LGBTQIA+ friendly attorney who filed the complaint back through the EEOC. I was blessed to eventually settle the case before it went to court. This was a great win for me, but what happens to Trans people who experience this treatment and lack the resources and understating on how to navigate the overwhelming bureaucratic nature of the systems necessary to seek justice? Most times, it is THESE situations that lead to many of us having to engage in sex work, as a means of survival.

The Day the World Stopped Spinning & How it changed its Axis

In May of 2019, after traveling for work, getting most of my finances in order and finishing clinical supervision, I submitted my paperwork for Licensed Clinical Social Work exam approval. Again life was going amazingly, I was set to test for my license and finish up my travel contract in San Angelo, TX that month. I talked with my mom and agreed to come and stay at home for two weeks before going to my next assignment in Kansas City, Missouri. I was so looking forward to new experiences in new places. Little did I know, the universe had other plans. I was offered to extend my contract for a fourth time, which was a great opportunity as it would give me a year’s tenure in my position at that time, stop me from breaking my lease, and give me an opportunity to earn more money. So, I extended until July 19th, 2019. My Mom was so disappointed, but she understood.

We had talked extensively, and she voiced how much she wanted to get together with me and my siblings to discuss the plans for my nephew (age 8 at the time) should anything happen to her. My last conversation with my mom was not a good one. She was not in a good place due to her health and was asking about going into a nursing home. I fussed at her and told her “no Mamma, whatever we need to do to help we can, but I can’t agree with you going into a nursing home”. My siblings and I had planned a crawfish boil for my mom on Sunday, June 23rd, 2019. I was all set to make the 8-hour drive home to Louisiana on Tuesday, the 18th. The night before, I had gone to a BBQ at our Director’s ranch. I posted a pic of me firing my gun at his shooting range and later saw my mom comment, “My Charlie’s Angel”. I missed her call earlier that day and intended to call her back but took time for granted. The morning of June 18th, 2019, I received a call from my sister, who was in complete hysteria! She called screaming saying “Laiyia, Mamma is not breathing”. I went into a state of shock! I called my best friend Tion and my cousin Ebony home in Louisiana and asked that they please go to my sister’s home and see

what's going on. My family was afraid to tell me, but eventually, Tion called and said "Laiyia baby, it's not looking good". I was in disbelief. My Mom was my everything! My twin, my best friend, my first love, and my biggest advocate. I could not accept that she could possibly be gone. This was again the hardest thing I've ever had to do. I stood in shock staring in the mirror in disbelief!

Finally snapping out of the shock, I jumped in my car to begin an 8-hour drive to a home that would NEVER be the same. I called my fiancé, Trae who was working in Dallas at that time and was in complete breakdown. I had no family and no friends in San Angelo who could drive me to Louisiana. I had to drive 4 hours to Dallas to meet Trae for him to drive me the rest of the way home. My cousin/close friend Traci stayed on the phone nearly the whole four hours as I drove from far West Texas in complete crisis mode. Trae and I had reconciled a few months prior, after a brief separation. We have now been together for almost 7 years. He is the only partner I've ever brought around my family and my mom had been in his life for 5 years at the time of her death and for we also lived in Louisiana for a couple of years. He loved my mom dearly because she embraced him from the first day, she met him. She loved him unconditionally because she knew how he loves me, despite our previous issues!

We arrived in my hometown, Alexandria, LA at approximately 6:30 PM and by then it was confirmed that my Mother, the Woman who had fought so hard to bring me into the world, had made her exit from this Earthly realm. The last text she sent was "I Love You" the night before, but by the time I responded, she was already gone. I got to see her temple one last time at the funeral home, she looked so peaceful, she had a pronounced smile on her face. My niece (who was 13 at the time) and my nephew (who was 8) were right beside her when she took her last breath. According to my niece she was in a panic gasping for breath and she had a look of panic and fear on her face. My heart broke. I just didn't want her to suffer! To have left in such a frenzy and then leave with a huge smile on her face was so amazing to me. As hard as it was to say goodbye, I have to believe that Jehovah showed her a glimpse of what was to come as well as a glimpse of what was in store for her. Some say that other family members may have been allowed to appear to bring her over to the other side. Either way, I was so glad to have some comfort regarding her peace. She was so sick in her last few years. She deserves an eternity of peace and love.

The passing of my mother left me as the last standing ELDER of our immediate family at the age of 36. She was my last link to my grandmother, my great-uncle, and the generations of the past. My siblings aren't old enough to remember some of the things I can remember and some of the laughs my mom and I shared. We shared a love for music, and art. My life would never be the same! I was so heartbroken and could not rest! When I finally did fall asleep, my Mom came to me in a dream and stood at the door of my nieces bedroom where Trae and I were sleeping, but I was sitting in the middle of the room with my nieces and nephews surrounding me. She was adorned in a warm burnt orange dress with gold and gold head with dangling jewels. She did her favorite pose she'd do when she was all dressed up and smiled at me with her one dimple! She looked so healthy and happy. I soon woke up back to a reality where she was no longer physically present.

The next few months would prove challenging, I had to adjust to my mom not being there and to becoming an instant parent to my nephew, Zai (my brother's son). My mom was adamant that we get paperwork and that his mom legally provide custody to her so she could ensure that

he was safe for the rest of his life. She specifically declared that I be placed on the paperwork along with her as to ensure that he would be in good hands should anything ever happen to her. So when she passed, his custody automatically defaulted to me! I again had to “steel” myself in ways I never had before to nurture my nephew and help him work through his grief, because my Mom was his mom too! What an adjustment! During that time I also hit several obstacles in getting testing approval for Clinical Licensure in Texas. It turns out, had I not come home to Louisiana, I may very still be waiting to upgrade my licensure. Its so funny, how Divine purpose orchestrates things in such a way for the greater good. Now here we are! Myself, Trae, and Zai. An unintentional Neo-Family. Consisting of a Black Trans Woman and a Trans-Amorous man raising a young black male child in a toxic masculinity-fueled and white-supremist society. I cannot stop! I must create a safer world for him and for every Trans/GNC person for generations to come!

In Closing

So today, I continue OPENLY EMBRACE that I am one of the first (if not THE ONLY) #Black #Transgender #Woman to hold a #ClinicalSocialWork license in the state of #Louisiana and Masters-Level licenses in Texas, Georgia, and Missouri; I am also in the process of pursuing licensure in several other states! My goal is to make myself available to as many of my Trans/GNC siblings in need of therapy and support as is humanly possible! So, I celebrate this momentous victory, not for my own gratification but I celebrate the fact that I will do everything in my power to use my access to empower my community and create space and opportunities for those like me! I’m very honored to be one of the first, but the mission is to ensure that I’m NOT THE LAST! That is my biggest honor, especially within the field of Social Work!

I write this abridged version of my life to say, I exist in my current form with my current accolades ONLY BECAUSE I had a family who saw value in me and loved me even when they did not understand my path! I am empowered because I had a mother who has a soul as pure and loving as anything I could ever imagine, and she poured that love into me! If you are a mother, father, parent, or family member of a Trans/GNC youth, I beseech you to PLEASE pour into them and LOVE THEM without bounds, even through lack of understanding! When you do so, you are empowering them to survive in a world in which they have been treated as if they aren’t welcome or wanted! You have no idea the greatness that awaits a Trans/GNC individual who is self actualized.

Lastly, I am emboldened to keep achieving in the face of adversity because PFLAG New Orleans saw something in a young Black Trans girl from a rural area and gave her a chance! This organization and those like it are SO NECESSARY! So, I implore you, if you have the access in any form; please take the chance to give a chance and speak life into Trans/GNC people! We are such an amazingly invaluable resource! Thank you to all those who've spoken and continue to speak life into me and have supported me throughout my journey in this thing called life! Please know that whether it is mentioned in this article or not, your name is forever in my heart!

With Love, Light, and Honor, Alaiyia Nicole

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