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Breaking the Cycle

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Kyshari McCullogh

*Breaking the Cycle*

Born and raised into the endless cycle of poverty, I became reluctantly content with the everyday struggle. Chicago Public School, with torn and worn down books with quotes like “F*#% YOU” in them, was more of a fashion show than anything educational--who could spice up their uniform the most? White polos, navy blue Dickies, and the newest Jordans with accessories to match. There was no structure during class, so those like me who cared to pay attention could not because classroom distractions, such as yelling or nonstop talking, outweighed the teacher. Teachers didn’t give a crap. They seemed to just want the little paycheck and the minimal benefits they did earn. For me, life outside of school was no better; at least at school our meals varied. My meals at home consisted of Frosted Flakes for breakfast, lunch, and dinner: no snacks--I didn’t even know what a snack was. Mom was never home, but when she was, she was already drained from work plus school. No father, no child support either. In this environment, I had little hope of becoming anything but a statistic. I could picture the headline of the Chicago Sun Times, “Poor Black Girl from the Hood Killed by Drug Dealing Boyfriend.” That was my reality, until my mother made the executive decision to ship our family to an all-white, wealthy suburb when I was thirteen. Naperville, Illinois was a completely new realm for me: manicured lawns, what seemed like billion dollar mansions, white picket fences, literally, families of two parents, two children, and a dog. I had never seen so many white people. There was one white special education teacher in Chicago, but I didn’t know her. I remember being one of only about 1.5 Blacks at Kennedy Junior High School of Naperville. Half of them were what we called “Oreos” at the time: though they were black on the outside, in skin color, outwardly they seemed to fit the stereotype of a white person.
Uncomfortable and scared during this time, I fell into a slight depression. I would go to school, come home, eat a snack, and stay in my bedroom until the next morning. I was mute. I hated my mom for moving me during the 8th grade, especially to a suburb with “snobby white folk.” A month into this drastic change, my mom decided to provide me with counseling, which didn’t help. I did not want to talk. I just wanted my old life back. Mrs. Cusack, my junior high counselor, helped ease my transition. I was paired with a buddy, so I didn’t feel alone, and she and I met regularly. Still, walking through the hall was a blur, like driving through a wintery snowstorm—I didn’t notice things like the posters on the walls, trash in my path, even the presence of the other African Americans, who stood out like sore thumbs; I just went through the motions, only seeing foreigners. My brain would not process my thoughts; I was mentally paralyzed.

But time heals all.

It was not until I began to make friends that things got better. Life in “The Ville” got easier as I crawled out my hard shell. Friendships, black and white, were established. These friendships were aided by the prestigious Kennedy curriculum, which required students to work together in groups to solve problems and even sometimes meet outside of school for class projects. I became more social, Kennedy Junior High School turned out to be not so bad after all; I was well-prepared for the new life of high school. Freshman year at Naperville Central High School was my evolution.

As I got older, I began to fully understand why we relocated to Naperville. Still in contact with friends from Chicago, I was often informed of the latest events: friends I knew were either killed or shot, and girls I once called “friends” were pregnant. Same ole same ole. Beginning to mature, I understood that what my mother had done she had done so that her children could have
a better outcome than she did. Motivated and determined to make my mother proud, I decided to take advantage of my opportunities and do the best I could to succeed, despite my obstacles.

With the help of God, I started to receive recommendations for honors and AP courses. Now, let’s take a look at God’s work: I’ll break it down. I originate from the CPS (Chicago Public Schools) system, which is corrupt and as poor as any bum from 95th Street. But now I attend a prestigious, majority white establishment and still somehow manage to keep up with my white counterparts, and even excel. As a senior at Naperville Central High School, my knowledge level was above the average college Freshman in math and English. There were of course times when I was discouraged and wanted to give up because I had to work so hard to keep up, but I have learned that that’s life.

I realize that I have gained so much beyond a good educational foundation: I have gained exposure. Black and Whites are not the only ethnicities; Naperville is home to Asians, Africans, and Hispanics. I’ve lived there for 5 years now and currently have friends of any ethnicity one could think of. I’ve tried sushi for the first time, learned to say love in Korean, and been taught to salsa dance. Over the years, learning the importance of diversity has shaped me into who I am today.

The little girl originating from the Southside of Chicago is no longer blindsided by the environment of her hometown. I am my worst enemy. I can’t remember the last time I gave myself credit for a victory. I am not a statistic. I am a child of poverty, but can you tell? I am blessed, I am blessed, I am blessed. I am thankful that God has given me the opportunity to excel. I am determined to make my mother proud. I am my own motivation. I am Kyshari McCullough.