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## **Pearls of Courage**

Does it take courage to believe in yourself when all odds are against you? My views on courage go way back to my childhood where the fear of failure drove my passion to be successful and not to let anyone define who I am. According to a Chinese proverb, “Pearls don't lie on the seashore. If you want one, you must dive for it.” This is exactly what I set myself up to establish growing up in Guyana.

I was born in a small, third world country called Guyana, to two underprivileged parents who at the time seemed perfect to me as I never really knew what perfection was. I remember I was around seven years old, living with my two younger brothers and my sister. We grew up dressed in rags, fending and looking around the neighborhood for food because our parents were notoriously poor and the people within our community saw us as little beggars. Some took pity on us and allowed us to run errands for them in exchange for basic things like food. I then realized we were different from other kids. Being at home with our parents was very stressful at this point because they were always fighting; my father never worked to provide for us. He was an alcoholic but my mother remained with him as she worked miles away from home selling garden tools, making a small salary.

When my mother arrived home, my father physically abused her in front of us. He was already drunk; then he would take the money she made from working all day to invest in his alcohol addiction. We were fearful as we knew what was coming; we had to walk to various neighbors' houses at one o'clock in the morning, looking for shelter so we could sleep. If we stayed, my father would hit my mother all night. This was repeated for years, and it's the main reason I was never enrolled in school.

Sadly, one evening my father was at the top of the stairs fighting with my mother who was sitting on a lower step with my five year old sister. My father quickly escalated the verbal fight into a more physical one as he grabbed the lighted glass kerosene lamp and flung it at my mother, forgetting my sister Daisy was sitting next to her. I clearly remember running to my mother's rescue when I saw that glass lamp break. The kerosene spilled on my sister's curly golden hair as the fire made its way all over her tiny body. My mother quickly gathered strength, grabbed my sister and placed her under flowing water to stop the flames. The fire was stopped but the water had done great harm. My baby sister was rushed to the hospital where she was pronounced dead. This remains the saddest moment of my life. Thankfully my father went to jail for murder, and my mother had to seek alternative ways to care for us on her own.

In the year 1997, my mother was left stranded with me and my two brothers after my father went to jail. My mother was left with no job or any means of taking care of her children. I am the eldest of my siblings, and at just the age of eight, I had to put my grown up boots on. My mother had heard of an orphanage in a different county from where we were living, and she quickly wanted to take us there. At least she knew we would be fed and have a roof over our heads, things she couldn't provide raising us in Guyana on her own.

This was a very scary adjustment at first, because it was a different world all together, and my mother wasn't around. The orphanage was controlled by a 'house mother,' the name by which we addressed her in any given situation. I felt trapped and scared being around and sleeping on bunk beds with other children; luckily, girls slept separate from boys. Days, weeks, months and years went by, and I started to groove into my new environment. I started to make peace with the

situation that this was going to be my permanent lifestyle. I got used to it because for me, it was better than walking around the neighborhood hunting for food.

For the first three years living in the orphanage we survived on porridge and bread; at that time, there weren't many donors. Private orphanages operated in Guyana strictly by donations. The orphanage didn't have much money to invest in fancy food for us. Of course, once in a while we would get a treat of a good meal; for me, it was better than what I had had living with my parents. Luckily, in the year 2000, three years later, the orphanage started to receive a lot of donations and conditions improved. We no longer had to walk miles to get water for our daily living, we no longer had to hand wash our clothing, we no longer had to survive on porridge and bread and we no longer watched a tiny black and white TV; most importantly, I had the opportunity to finally enroll in school. At the age of eleven, with excitement, I set foot for the first time in a real school. The other girls and I believed that God had answered our prayers for better days.

Starting school at the age of eleven was very challenging as I didn't even know the alphabet or rudimentary arithmetic. Yikes! Subsequently, I learned that I only had one more year to sit for the placement exam for a proper High School. My country's school system operated like the British one in which students started high school at age twelve. Only the passing score on this exam enabled one to attend a decent high school. I was eager to learn because I knew I needed a proper education to conquer my poverty-stricken situation. Although I wasn't book smart at this particular time, I realized education was the key to escape my present situation. I worked diligently with an adult tutor who used to visit the orphanage to teach us to read. I would be the only one left with him for hours, learning to read, write and compute basic math. Cyril Drepaul

also saw my drive and never complained about the extra time invested. In fact, I felt it gratified him that at least one of the thirty-six children living there had a hunger to learn. In one year I learned so much that when I took that exam, I attained a place in the second best school in my district at that time. This moment was the highlight of my life; it shaped my journey as I was now driven to learn and to be a success.

It is clear that courage made me dive deep and put in the hard work to get those aforementioned pearls, something I continue to do. As a nursing student at Queensborough Community College, I have continually met the challenges the program presents. The little girl from the Guyanese orphanage lives within me still, yearning to excel. As the author Tara Westover observed, "I don't think education is so much about making a living, it's about making a person." Courage made me a person.