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Cherise Hunter Titus

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Working for Education

Cherise Hunter Titus

It was the 24th of June 1992, my graduation day. I was twenty, pregnant, and walking across the stage to accept my high school diploma. My mom had never graduated from high school, having left at sixteen to have me. My father hadn't finished, either. I was happy to be standing there.

Six months later, I had Sincere, my first daughter. I did not know how to raise a kid, so I took parenting classes. When she was three, I was told to take her to PEACE, Inc. Sumner Head Start, where I met Julius Lawrence, who became my parent advocate. While Sincere was in school, Mr. Lawrence enrolled me into a PEACE, Inc. parenting program, where parents were given helpful hints and taught life skills in addition to being recruited to work for PEACE, Inc.

When Sincere graduated pre-K at five years old, I graduated from the PEACE program and began working there as a teacher's aide. By then I had already had my second baby, Keyonta, who was turning three and attending Head Start. In 1997, at the age of twenty-eight, I had my last daughter, Teanoa. I had three children and was making about \$10,000 a year. I was still on public assistance (PA), but life was good. I was budgeting and making sure my kids were dressed and fed, but something was bothering me. I wanted more for myself.

My head teacher at PEACE, Inc. told me she wanted me to sign up for some college classes at Head Start. I was unsure but ended up taking classes in the evening. I was like, *OMG!* It scared me, but this idea felt good. I worked during the day and went to school in the evenings after dropping my daughters off at home with their father. Life was changing before my eyes and I didn't even know it.

By now it was 2000 and my youngest daughter was getting ready to go to kindergarten. All three of my kids were in school, and I no longer had to worry about paying for a sitter. I could work while they were in school and considered finishing up my college degree, but I was in a tricky situation. Though I wanted to work to make extra money, I had to dance around the rules of public assistance. PA doesn't like recipients of assistance to work. So I had to figure out a way to either get around PA or put myself in a position not to need it anymore. To help figure things out, I visited and talked with my instructor at PEACE, Inc. He shared with me that because I had a learning disability the Office of Vocational & Educational Services for Individuals With Disabilities (VESID) could help me. I later learned that the program helps connect those who are learning disabled with tutors who can help them read at school, among other things. Excited to get some help and accomplish my goals, I went to VESID during my lunch break.

As I sat there, my name was called and I met a man who appeared to be not only partially blind but also reading Braille. He had my folder in his hands and began to tell me that there was no reason for me to be there. I started thinking to myself, *I don't even know how he got this far.* I just looked at him with a strained face. What I said aloud was, "Excuse me, sir, but who are you to tell me about myself and what I may or may not need?" Already feeling let down despite my initial excitement, I said, "You take that file and shove it up where the sun don't shine and the moon don't glow." He had ignited a fire within me. Leaving him no room to respond, I ran out of there crying. Everything had

happened so fast. It was 12:58 p.m. when my coworker picked me up. I was crying my eyes out when I got into her car, and she asked me what had happened. I told her that man had no right to tell me what I could or could not do because of my learning disability. He had no understanding of how I had gotten to where I was in life. His insensitivity to my story hurt me. It made me mad, but it also made me eager and more determined to grow without the program's help.

When I went back, I told my instructor that I wasn't going to get help from VESID. My instructor had already learned about everything that had happened from my coworker, which was good because I wasn't able to speak about it without rage. With my dyslexia, I never had the vocabulary to express myself properly. I didn't have ten or twenty dollar words to put things in a way that others might. I was glad my coworker had done so, and I was even more moved by my instructor's anger about how I had been handled. She was like, "Why would someone say or do that?" Her reaction fueled me in not giving up. In addition to expressing her frustration, she wrote VESID a not-so-nice letter.

In the meantime, I stayed with PEACE, Inc. and worked as best as I could until I left the company in 1999. Thereafter, I had a few jobs here and there. I worked at two locations for the Salvation Army as a head teacher, which allowed me to take courses in the evening, one of which was on University Avenue. This was good because I was able to work near my home and daughters' school. Often enough they would come to where I worked after classes.

With my having accomplished a lot in life, my daughters now look up to me in so many

ways. Aside from instilling in them a strong work ethic given all the jobs I've had, I make it my duty to always let them know their worth. I still wanted to get my college degree, and I was inspired even more by a conversation I had with my daughter Sincere. After I told her that I wanted to go back to school one day, she said, "Well, go back to school, then, Mom." So, in 2010, at thirty-eight, I went to Bryant & Stratton College. I'd always said that I would never go to college again, being fearful of the application process, but I got over my fear through certain practices I learned from a pre-college course: time management, scheduling, and the importance of being consistent and not falling behind. The resources I had access to through the college were amazing and helpful.

While going to school I also had to deal with other things: I worked two jobs and took care of my kids, all the while dealing with an abusive relationship. Though my home life was a mess, at school I was blossoming. I became the president of the Criminal Justice Club, I helped out in the library, and I learned how to manage my class schedule. I would see my tutors and advocate for other students. I also learned to advocate for myself. Despite my doing well at school, my home life seemed to be falling apart in many ways.

As I previously mentioned, my mother and father had not graduated from high school. I did not have their support, much less their help, while I was attempting to acquire my degree. Things seemed to take a turn for the worse when I was a semester shy of finishing. One day my mom called me to say that my daughter Sincere had gotten arrested. My mother criticized me for

not being more involved and implied that I was not doing a very good job of taking care of my household. She blamed me for my daughter's arrest and even went so far as to suggest that I drop out of school, even though I had a 3.0 GPA. In response, I cried for three days. My other two daughters supported me. My kids knew the importance of my schooling and how it might improve our lives, especially since I had gotten off PA. Being able to get off PA was, and remains, a big, big thing. So, reminding myself of my daughter's insistence that I finish school, I buckled down and did what I could to be a better mother as well as to complete my degree. My children always spoke the truth. To encourage me further, Sincere called my mother and pleaded with her not to say hurtful things to me ever again. It was a difficult situation all around with my mother not being understanding. Although it hurt to have to deal with my mother's refusal to see what I was trying to do for my family, I pushed on.

To help get a better understanding or view of things, I talked with my advisor and was encouraged to keep on doing what I was doing. He reminded me of how well I had served as an advocate for myself and others, as well as of how others valued me. I remember that on occasion when I couldn't walk to work or to school, my coworkers and classmates would pick me up. There was a time when I came to the aid of a classmate, Scotty, my vice president, who had been dealing with personal matters. He was absent for a few days, so I went to my advisor and asked for Scotty's address. After class I immediately got in a cab—there were no Ubers back then—and went to his house. Scotty's wife answered and I told her I was there to speak

with him. This shows that I was persistent in caring for a friend who had been there for me and whom I didn't want to see fail. This also shows the breadth of my blood and adopted family, which is mixed and loving.

Two months later, on April 26, 2013, I graduated from Bryant & Stratton with a 3.8 GPA. I had the pleasure of having my mom, my boyfriend (who's now my husband), my children, and my granddaughter there. I set the tone this time around by walking the stage not only for myself but also, more importantly, for my daughters and my granddaughter. I became living proof that they, too, could graduate from college. I became the first in my immediate family to obtain a college degree, despite my learning disability. I went to college and achieved a degree in criminal justice. My mom told me she was proud of me. My kids hugged me, and those hugs alone made me feel like I was on the "moms dean's list." To myself I was like, "Oh, so this is what we're doing now." My sisters all expressed how proud of me they were. I couldn't help feeling appreciative of all the people who had helped me believe in myself. Now I stand as a testament that a lack of education should not define one's ability to achieve happiness. I'm currently working as a recovery Outreach Coordinator in the second bracket. I no longer make \$10,000 a year, nor am I on public assistance. But I have not forgotten where I came from and what others still deal with. I want people to know that it's just a matter of time before you shine. If I see you, I'm going to make you aware of the light that's in you.

My name is Cherise Hunter Titus, and life is what we make it. Don't give up! We all fall down, but it's what we do when we get back up that counts.