

DISSERTATION

NAVIGATING THE BUMPS IN THE ROAD: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE  
LIVES OF LOW-INCOME, NON-TRADITIONAL AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN  
COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

Submitted by

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School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Colorado State University

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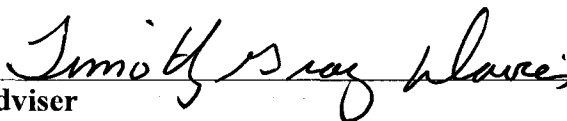
WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE DISSERTATION PREPARED UNDER  
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NAVIGATING THE BUMPS IN THE ROAD: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE  
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## ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

### NAVIGATING THE BUMPS IN THE ROAD: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE LIVES OF LOW-INCOME, NON-TRADITIONAL AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to examine the lives of four women to see how they made sense of their socioeconomic backgrounds, past educational experiences, and educational journeys. The women were asked questions pertaining to their experiences surrounding socioeconomic status (SES) and education to determine what role these factors and habitus played in their decisions to enroll in higher education. Interpretive analysis allowed the researcher to see how participants attributed meanings to their experiences. No less than three in-depth interviews were conducted with each woman. All of the women were low-income, African American, single mothers who attend or attended community college. Their ages ranged from 26 to 53 years of age.

The findings provided a greater understanding of what has taken place in the women's lives. Regarding SES, the women reflected on their childhood SES, their woes with welfare, and their view of education as the key to a new life. The findings surrounding education revealed dramatic changes in the women including increased self-worth and greater social awareness. The women are using education to reclaim their power, and create educational legacies for their children. Habitus and its various components make up a large part of who these women are. Thus habitus plays a tremendous role in the educational journeys of these women. Cultural capital consisted of their foundations. Social capital comprised their relationships. Human capital included their investments in education and economic capital covered their financial situations.

Each area affected these women's educational journeys in some way, be it positively or negatively.

The findings further addressed the women's educational foundations, personal responsibility, and the way they faced societal injustices to explain how this brought them to the decision to enroll in higher education. Living through poverty, racism, and discrimination helped these women realize that they needed to make changes in their lives. Each believed education was the key to a new life, so each chose to enroll in higher education. This study has implications for social service departments, K-12 school districts, community colleges, and other low-income, non-traditional African American women.

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## MEMORIAL DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my precious baby girl, Angel Joanette:

No farewell words were spoken  
No time to say goodbye  
You were gone before we knew it  
And only God knows why  
~Author Unknown

My sweet baby...you came into this world so suddenly and were gone just as quickly as you arrived. Not a day goes by that you escape my thoughts. Know that you are always with me...I will forever be your Mommy and you will forever be my first born. Thanks for being my "cheerleader" in heaven. I love you!

Also, to my deceased grandparents: Ethel Henderson (Mama), Effie Davis (Grandma), Clyde & Louella Rushing (Papoo & Madear). Each of you touched my life in different ways. I miss you dearly, but I know you are with me in spirit. Mama, special thanks to you because you deposited so much into my life. I have felt your presence through every milestone of my life and this is no different. Much love to each of you!

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Overview.....	1
<i>Sarah's Story</i> .....	1
<i>Dissertation Organization</i> .....	5
Purpose.....	6
Research Questions.....	6
Significance.....	6
Researcher Perspective.....	8
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	12
Cultural Poverty.....	12
<i>Familial Environment</i> .....	13
<i>Low-income Women</i> .....	19
Habitus.....	22
<i>Cultural Capital</i> .....	23
<i>Social Capital</i> .....	24
<i>Human Capital</i> .....	25
<i>Economic Capital (Student Price Response)</i> .....	26
Non-traditional Students in Higher Education.....	29
<i>Non-traditional Men &amp; Women</i> .....	30
<i>Non-traditional Women</i> .....	33
<i>Non-traditional African American Women</i> .....	38
Non-traditional Students in Community Colleges.....	41

<i>Non-traditional Men &amp; Women</i> .....	41
<i>Non-traditional Women</i> .....	44
<i>Non-traditional African American Women</i> .....	47
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY .....	52
Design .....	52
Site .....	55
Participants.....	55
Data Collection .....	58
Data Analysis .....	62
Trustworthiness.....	65
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS.....	67
Tiffany’s Story .....	69
Victoria’s Story.....	97
Simone’s Story.....	122
Marilyn’s Story .....	154
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION.....	188
Research Questions.....	188
Discussion of the Literature.....	209
Recommendations.....	217
<i>Recommendations for Social Service Departments</i> .....	218
<i>Recommendations for K-12 School Districts</i> .....	218
<i>Recommendations for Community Colleges</i> .....	219
<i>Recommendations for Low-income, Non-traditional African American Women</i> ...	220

<i>Recommendations for Future Research</i> .....	221
REFERENCES .....	223
APPENDIXES .....	236
Appendix A: Letter to Participants .....	237
Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer.....	239
Appendix C: Consent Form .....	241
Appendix D: First Interview Protocol.....	245
Appendix E: Second Interview Protocol.....	247
Appendix F: Third Interview Protocol.....	249
Appendix G: Fourth Interview Protocol .....	251
Appendix H: Field Notes .....	253

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Overview

Social class has long been an issue in the United States because people with lower incomes are associated with low status, low power, and limited access to resources (Bullock, 1995). Low-income is defined as a household income from \$9,800.00 for a family of one to \$33,600.00 for a family of eight (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). Children suffer most from lack of resources since socioeconomic status (SES) affects the life outcomes of individuals (Conley, 2003). When poor children grow up, they get less education, are less likely to work, and earn lower wages when they do (Mayer, 1997). Poverty affects the environment in which students aim to thrive. Research has shown the effect of poverty on the life chances of children (Ansalone, 2003; MacLeod, 2003; Mayer, 2003; Mayer, 1997) and the outlook is quite grim as indicated by Sarah's story below. The experiences children have shape who they become as adults, and the decisions they make as adults have consequences for their adult lives. In an effort to illustrate this point, I have created Sarah's vignette to demonstrate the importance of considering one's childhood experiences *and* one's adult experiences collectively. These combined experiences comprise the adult the child becomes.

#### *Sarah's Story*

Ten-year old Sarah knew her family did not have much money, and her family's financial situation embarrassed her. It is not that Sarah was not proud of her parents; after all, they were upstanding citizens in their all-Black community. Her father worked for the city's sanitation department since he graduated from high school, and her mother worked at a local dry cleaners. Her father was a deacon at their church and her mother proudly

sang in the choir. Although she does not know why, Sarah remembers always being preoccupied with her family's financial situation. She was thankful for their health and strength, but she wished they had more money. After all, their lack of money was evident everywhere she went. She remembers the embarrassment of going to the grocery store and paying with food stamps. She has vivid memories being on free lunch and wishing she could be on reduced lunch. At least the other children would think her family had a little bit of money. She did not realize that many children in her school were on free lunch as well. What Sarah remembers most is what seemed to be her mother's favorite saying whenever she and her siblings would ask for something, "Y'all must think money grow on trees." If only she had a dollar for every time she heard that.

Sarah was a smart little girl. She was very attentive, a quick learner, and loved to read. When Sarah would tag along with her mother to the grocery store, her mother knew Sarah's favorite place. After completing her shopping, she would locate the aisle where the books were and there she would find Sarah. The little girl would be sitting cross-legged, totally engrossed in one book with several others scattered about her.

Sarah attended an all Black elementary school. They did not have the best of everything. In fact, they did not have the best of anything. The building was dilapidated. Their books were falling apart. Sarah wondered how anyone could learn in a school like hers. Despite the environment, she was a good student. Sarah's teachers knew she was smart as well. She always made good grades, but basically, she was on her own. She learned early on that her parents just did not know how to help her. As a result, she learned to figure schoolwork out on her own. Sarah's teachers always thought her parents were not interested in Sarah's education, but Sarah knew better. She knew her parents

wanted her to do well in school because they stressed it. They also wanted her to attend college, but they just did not know how to help her prepare to get there. The communication between her parents and her teachers was always off. The teachers felt like Sarah's parents were disengaged because they had a hard time making teachers' conferences, and when they were able to make it, they listened but commented little. Her parents had learned from experiences with their other children and felt like the principal and teachers at the school did not value their opinion. They could not seem to work together to help prepare Sarah for a prosperous future.

Sarah eased through elementary school but her grades began to change when she got to high school. She attended an all-Black high school as well and could not seem to find the help she needed when she began to experience learning problems in her classes. Her teachers thought she was being lazy, not putting forth much effort. When Sarah's teachers tried to consult her parents, her parents were not able to make teacher conferences, as they could not afford to lose time from work. Sarah began to fall through the cracks. Her school counselor took her falling grades as an indication that Sarah was not interested in school. No one ever asked Sarah if she desired to go to college and ultimately placed her in vocational classes. She hated the vocational classes but did not inquire about college preparatory classes because she did not think college was an option for her even though she was extremely interested in going. She knew her family could not afford it. After all, if the people at her school thought she was college material, wouldn't they ask her if she wanted to go? Wouldn't they help her prepare for it? Nevertheless, Sarah held on to her dream of attending college. Not knowing where to begin, she visited her school counselor during her senior year. Sarah persisted and despite being

overwhelmed with testing, college applications, and financial aid paperwork, finally entered a university two hours away from home. Her parents could not have been more proud.

During her first semester in college, Sarah discovered she was pregnant. She completed the first semester but did not return the following semester as she prepared to have her first child. Sarah gave birth to a bouncing baby boy but still held on to her dream of obtaining a college degree. Instead of returning to school, Sarah married her child's father and took a job as a waitress at a local restaurant. Six months later, she discovered she was pregnant with her second child. After delivering a healthy baby girl, Sarah began to work as a department store clerk. After years of financial frustration, Sarah and her husband divorced leaving Sarah with two young children to support. After working at the department store for several years, Sarah wanted more for herself and her family. She felt that education was the tool by which she could transform her life so she decided to enroll in the local community college.

Although Sarah is a fictional character in my paper, her story resonates with millions of women in the United States (Coccia, 1997; Nettles, 1991); women who have grown up in less than perfect situations and now find themselves in low-wage jobs trapped in the same cycle of poverty in which they grew up (Karier, 1998; Kates, 1996). Sarah's vignette is my way of painting a picture to illustrate the lifespan of a low-income woman. One must understand that when the cycle of poverty begins during a person's childhood, there are ramifications that carryover into adulthood (MacLeod, 2003). The situations low-income women find themselves in do not begin at adulthood. Her habitus, that is her internalized enduring system of beliefs, perceptions, and experiences about

society that she gains from her environment (McDonough, 1997) begins during childhood. Her socialization as a poor child shapes the way she sees herself as an adult (Ansalone, 2003). Therefore, this mindset does not begin for her as an adult, but rather it stems from her formative years because of her familial environment (Mayer, 2003). This process is what I have attempted to illustrate with Sarah's story. Her life situations did not occur overnight; instead, they are the result of a series of experiences that occurred over her lifespan (Mayer, 1997).

### *Dissertation Organization*

In my dissertation, I address the various issues entwined in the concepts of SES and education for low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students. Non-traditional is defined as students ages 25 or older (Spitzer, 2000). Chapter One begins with an introduction, which includes background information, the purpose, research questions, significance of the study, and researcher perspective. Chapter Two is a synthesis of the literature. Some of the issues discussed include cultural poverty, habitus, higher education, and community colleges. Habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) includes cultural capital (Paulsen & Smart, 2001), social capital (Lin, 2001), human capital (Becker, 1993), and economic capital (Heller, 1997; Paulsen & Smart, 2001). These concepts are presented in Chapter Two. Chapter Three comprises a detailed account of the methodology including data collection and data analysis. Chapter Four presents the findings of the study, which consists of the four participants' standalone stories. Chapter Five answers the research questions, discusses the literature, and concludes with implications and recommendations for future research.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of the study was to examine the lives of low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students to see how they made sense of their socioeconomic backgrounds, past educational experiences, and educational journeys. I used Denzin's (1989a) interpretive analysis to see how participants have experienced SES and education throughout their lifespan and how those experiences affected them and brought them to the decision to enroll in higher education. Since non-traditional students comprise 43% of undergraduates in postsecondary enrollment (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2006), it is necessary to consider their perspective.

## **Research Questions**

In my research, I examined the overarching question of "How do low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students come to the decision to enroll in higher education?" The study explored the following questions:

1. How do low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students make sense of SES?
2. How do low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students make sense of education?
3. What role does habitus play in the educational journeys of low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students?

## **Significance**

When comparing non-traditional women in higher education in general to non-traditional women in community colleges, there is a significant gap in the literature pertaining to non-traditional women in the community college. The deficit is even greater

as it relates to African American women in the community college setting. I conducted searches in several education and social science databases including ERIC, EBSCO, PsycINFO, and Education Abstracts. In order to capture the most recent literature, the searches were limited to research published between 1995 and 2006. The keywords 'non-traditional women' and 'higher education' yielded 154 results. A search with the keywords 'non-traditional women' and 'community college' yielded 60 results. However, a search with the keywords 'non-traditional women', 'community college', and 'African American' yielded only 10 results. Therefore, research specifically related to non-traditional African American women in the community college comprises only 17% of the literature on non-traditional women in community colleges as a whole. Thus, the significant lack of research on African American women is evident. My research will help close this gap in two ways. First, my research will present the low-income African American female perspective regarding SES and higher education. Second, my research will focus on African American women in the community college setting.

My study will be significant for four reasons. First, my study will provide insight to legislators and administrators in higher education regarding the implications of supporting African American women from low-income backgrounds who enter postsecondary education (Kates, 1996). Second, my study will enable community college administrators and their institutions to promote and facilitate the persistence and academic success of low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students enrolled at their campuses (Bauman, Wang, DeLeon, Kafentzis, Zavala-Lopez, & Lindsey, 2004). Third, my study will offer a greater understanding of the institutional, situational, and dispositional needs of low-income, non-traditional African

American women community college students from the perspective of low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students (Harris & Brooks, 1998). Racial-ethnic minorities comprise 38% (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2006) of non-traditional students in community colleges, yet researchers conduct very little research on African American women who are non-traditional students (Bowl, 2001; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996). Finally, as stated earlier, my research will fill a significant gap in literature for African American women in community colleges. It will present the low-income African American female perspective regarding SES and higher education and will focus on African American women in the community college setting.

### **Researcher Perspective**

In qualitative inquiry, the researcher is the instrument. As a researcher, I understand the world from my own perspective. This perspective shapes my basic beliefs, assumptions, and values, which in turn shape the way I conceive my research, what questions I ask, and how I will ask those questions. According to Patton (2002), qualitative researchers must be able to empathize with those under study. They must be able to understand the stance, position, feelings, experiences, and worldview of others, and they must care about the phenomenon under study. Thus, I utilized narrative inquiry for my study. Because in narrative inquiry the human being is the instrument, researchers are required to make known at the beginning their relevant personal or professional experiences. Therefore, I want to share my perceptions about being an African American woman, growing up in a low-income family, pursuing a higher education, and developing my love for the community college.

My perceptions, as the researcher, are important to my study and will influence the outcome since the data will be filtered through my mind and interpreted by me. My perceptions going into my study stem from my own personal experiences as an African American woman who also happens to be a non-traditional student. My humble beginnings shaped these perceptions. Growing up, I was surrounded by working-class women in my life: my mother, grandmothers, aunts (with the exception of one), all working-class. Nevertheless, they are all exceptional African American women. They are women filled with love for God and their families; they are filled with self-pride. While they may not be formally educated through postsecondary education, they are rich in wisdom. Even though I did not have a complete understanding of what working-class really meant at that time, I knew that my family did not have a lot of money. I wonder how situations such as these impact women's educational journeys. Thankfully, my mother stressed the importance of education. She was a para-professional in the school system and constantly pushed my brothers and me to excel in school and persist through college. As a result, my brother and I are two of only six college graduates of all twenty-nine of my cousins.

Over the course of my studies, I have been both a traditional student and a non-traditional student. During my undergraduate studies, I was a traditional student, straight out of high school. As a traditional student, I was able to focus on my studies full-time while maintaining a work-study job. I did not have outside distractions and as a result, was able to complete my undergraduate studies early. I have marveled at non-traditional women since my undergraduate studies. I wondered how these women managed family, work, and school while I simply tried to manage school alone. I have always admired

their determination to provide a better life for their families and themselves. Graduate school has been a different story. I have been a non-traditional student for all of my graduate studies. I have experienced the multiple roles of balancing family, work, and school. It is important to have family members, particularly spouses, who are supportive of one's educational endeavors as it is difficult to succeed without it. Other factors can affect the success of non-traditional students as well. Life experiences or crises, for example, can play a major role. Since graduate studies can last anywhere from two- to four years or longer, many crises can and do happen within that time. Non-traditional students must deal with those crises and persist in spite of them. My life has not been exempt from crises during my graduate studies. I truly believe it has been my faith in God coupled with my strong educational foundation that have grounded me and helped me persist through this journey.

I worked as a faculty member at a community college for six years. As an instructor at the community college, I had numerous opportunities to interact with non-traditional students, most of them female, and most of them African American. Through these interactions, I learned about many of their concerns and the obstacles they had to overcome to be successful in college. It would have been beneficial to have a single parent's program to help meet the needs of these students, but the college was new at the time and many programs and organizations had not yet been established. I only wish I had understood the magnitude of what a single parent's program would have meant to the students. In many ways, I feel like I let them down. My goal as a researcher and future community college leader is to do all I can to assist this population as well as all other students in my future endeavors.

It was not until after I enrolled in the Community College Leadership program at Colorado State University (CSU) for my doctoral studies that I began reading and studying the literature on minority students and non-traditional women. As a result, I gained a deeper awareness and became more enlightened about the challenges facing these populations in higher education. It was also at this point that I began to notice the missing perspective in the literature on minorities and non-traditional women—specifically that of African American women. In addition, I began to question the negative perceptions that past research typically placed on low-income, African Americans, and non-traditional students. I was not pleased with this, nor did I buy into it. Rather than believe researchers were outright misrepresenting these populations, I believe the researchers simply omitted the perspectives of these populations. This is why I am choosing to do my research in this area.

It is the culmination of the aforementioned experiences that help to define who I am as a researcher. Moreover, while I believe these experiences will allow me to empathize with the participants in my study, I believe they will in no way hinder or obstruct the results.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The background literature for my dissertation is set around four areas: cultural poverty, habitus, non-traditional students in higher education, and non-traditional students in community colleges. The distinction between higher education and community colleges is necessary because the literature is unclear in defining its use of the terms. This distinction is further clarified below. Cultural poverty addresses the issues of familial environment (Ansalone, 2003; Lott, 2001; Mayer, 2003) and low-income women (Boldt, 2000; Karier, 1998; Kates, 1996). Habitus (Bourdieu, 1977; Horvat, 2001) includes cultural capital (Paulsen & Smart, 2001), social capital (Lin, 2001), human capital (Becker, 1993), and economic capital (Paulsen & Smart, 2001; St. John, 2003). I present these concepts later in the chapter. Higher education includes literature that combines four-year institutions and community colleges as well as literature from four-year institutions alone. It addresses the issues of non-traditional men and women (Choy, 2002; Shank, Winchell, & Myers, 2001), non-traditional women alone (Burns & Gabrich, 2001; Reay, 2003), and African American women (Johnson-Bailey, 1998; Thomas, 2001). Community colleges consist of information pertaining to community colleges alone and also addresses the issues of non-traditional men and women (Kim, 2002; Outcalt, Tobolowsky, & McDonough, 2000), non-traditional women alone (Miller, 2000; White, 2001), and African American women (Valadez, 2000).

### **Cultural Poverty**

Cultural poverty is a term used to describe the lifestyle of poverty-stricken individuals. It describes the consequences of growing up poor. Cultural poverty is very much tied into habitus, which I am using to reflect the way individuals view themselves

in their environments (McDonough, 1997). I am choosing to begin with cultural poverty that gives a larger umbrella under which habitus starts to form. So after I finish with cultural poverty, I will move into habitus. The first portion of cultural poverty addresses the issues of familial environment (Ansalone, 2003; Cameron & Heckman, 2001; Kelp-Kern, 2000; Lott, 2001; Mayer, 2003; McDonough, 1997). The second portion of cultural poverty addresses low-income women (Boldt, 2000; Karier, 1998; Kates, 1996). It portrays the continuing effect of poverty and describes how higher education can benefit low-income women.

### *Familial Environment*

Children from low-socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds or low-income families most often do not obtain the skills necessary to enter higher education (Gandara, 2002). These children are educated in less-than-adequate schools (Conley, 2003). They are discounted by principals, teachers, and counselors who believe these students cannot learn, and further they believe their parents are not concerned with their educational success (Lott, 2001). Secondary schools play an important role in shaping students' educational aspirations, yet the structure and opportunities afforded by secondary schools are heavily related to societal class structure. Stratification between schools in affluent districts and disadvantaged schools in low-income districts send vastly different college attendance expectation messages. Schools in affluent districts tend to encourage students to enroll in college preparatory courses at a greater rate; increasing students' preparation, access, and college choices (McDonough, 1997). Cabrera and La Nasa (2000a, 2000b) divided SES into four categories: lowest-SES, middle-lowest, middle-upper, and highest-SES. Students from lower-SES levels take college preparatory classes at a lower rate than

students from higher-SES levels. Cabrera and La Nasa (2000b) asserted that students in the lowest-SES group (bottom quartile) were 51% less likely than students from upper-SES group (top quartile), to take the minimum courses in high school that would prepare them for college by the twelfth grade. This puts the low-income students at a disadvantage for college preparation. Affluent schools are more likely to staff more counselors to guide students through the college application process (McDonough, 1997). Children from low-income districts receive little if any counseling regarding college and their families lack the cultural capital to help them acquire that information (McDonough, 1997). Cultural capital is the attitudes, beliefs, resources, and values that families transmit to their children as a means of enhancing class status and privilege (Paulsen & St. John, 2002).

The inadequate education low-income children receive as they proceed through the K-12 educational system, produces students who face limited preparation for college admission and restricted college choices (Gandara, 2002; MacLeod, 2003). Preparation for college admission is limited because the students have taken vocational classes, which prepared them for work, rather than college preparatory classes that prepared them for college. As a result, many children from low-income families do not gain entrance into college. Many of those fortunate enough to gain entrance enter developmental classes due to their lack of academic preparedness. Developmental classes are foundational classes designed to bring students to collegiate academic levels. College choice restrictions are largely related to finances, as low-income students are tuition-sensitive. They are largely tuition-sensitive because family contributions toward higher education are limited or non-existent. For many, college choice is restricted to public, state-funded colleges. Many

low-income children choose two-year colleges because the tuition is cheaper, and they may live at home while attending college.

According to Paulsen (2001), students' SES, including parental education, income, professional experiences, and family background characteristics, exert a powerful influence on individuals' decisions to attend college. McDonough (1997) asserted that enrollment decisions are largely due to self-selection, impacted by socioeconomic statuses. Cabrera and La Nasa (2000a, 2000b) used data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 to gain a better understanding of factors that assist economically and sociologically underprivileged students to ready themselves for college. The students were eighth graders when the longitudinal study began, but were twelfth graders at the time of Cabrera and La Nasa's study. Cabrera and La Nasa (2000b) asserted that the number of students from lower socioeconomic statuses who aspired to enroll in a higher education institution lagged behind students from higher socioeconomic strata. For many lower-SES students, there is no discussion of attending college in the home. One reason is that low-income parents believe college is expensive and is therefore unattainable for their children. For students from higher-SES backgrounds, attending college is typically expected. Consequently, students from higher-SES levels tend to enroll in college (particularly four-year institutions) at higher rates than their lower-SES counterparts (Perna & Titus, 2004). Cabrera & La Nasa (2000a) noted vast differences between the college application rates of the lowest- and highest-SES students. Whereas only 21.3% of the lowest-SES high school students applied to college, 76% of the highest-SES high school students submitted college applications. Yet when Cabrera and La Nasa (2000a) controlled for background, ability, parental involvement, college plans,

and other at-risk factors, the gap in college application rates between the lowest-SES (bottom quartile) and highest-SES (top quartile) students dropped from 55% to 26.4%. Clearly, SES applies a stratifying effect to the college enrollment process. SES impacts students' preparation for college admission requirements, which directly impacts the range of students' college choices. SES is an integral component of the social class structure, which affects the manner an individual is educated and prepared for higher education, whether an individual chooses to attend a higher education institution, and the type of institution the individual selects (Conley, 2003; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999).

It is essential to note, however, that parental income levels alone are not the major determinant of students' college attendance aspirations (Hossler et al., 1999). In fact, parental education and professional experiences exert more of an influence on students' decisions. Parents who are college graduates are more likely to identify and communicate the benefits of postsecondary education and encourage their children to enroll. As parental education levels and professional experiences increase, students' aspirations to attend a higher education institution increase (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000a; Choy & Bobbit, 2000; Hossler et al., 1999). Hossler et al. (1999) posited that 64% of children strongly encouraged to attend college do so, while 34% of children merely encouraged enroll in college. Many low-income students fall into the merely encouraged category. In addition to parental income and education levels, students' socialization and educational backgrounds are equally important factors when considering students' educational aspirations.

Socialization occurs throughout a child's life. It encompasses various messages the child receives growing up, ideas of normalcy in the child's surroundings, and that which the child perceives as achievable in life. Therefore, socialization influences the educational aspirations and the college enrollment process of children from low-income families. Educational resistance and socialization not to attend college has been documented among groups of working class youth (MacLeod, 2003). But parental expectations and encouragement are among the strongest influences on the college enrollment process (Kelpie-Kern, 2000). Students who receive strong parental encouragement to attend college, attend at higher rates (Hossler et al., 1999). They also attend four-year institutions in greater numbers (Hossler et al., 1999). Furthermore, Hossler et al. state,

The impact of parental encouragement can also be seen in the type of institution each group attended: nearly 64 percent of the students receiving strong encouragement attended a four year institution, whereas a little over 39 percent of those merely encouraged went to a four year institution. (p. 57)

Information gained from peers, teachers, school personnel, counselors, institutional marketing, and college personnel is also influential (Hossler et al., 1999). These individuals can provide students with information that increases their perception of educational opportunities. A student's peer group can provide positive or negative pressures regarding future educational endeavors (MacLeod, 2003). Choy and Bobbit (2000) asserted that students who have friends with salient college aspirations are more likely to attend college themselves.

Predisposition factors including socioeconomic status, socialization, cultural capital, educational background, and family background influence students' college searches (Bateman & Spruill, 1996). Students from lower socioeconomic statuses, who perceive college costs as restrictive, or do not understand financial aid opportunities may limit their college search process to institutions of low cost or those in close proximity to home. Moreover, Hossler et al. (1999) stated, "The lists of schools students generate will be tempered by students' social conditions" (p. 24). Students and their families must utilize critical thinking and research skills to gather, synthesize, analyze, and compare different institutions. They must also understand net cost versus gross cost in order to find institutions that match their perceived needs. Furthermore, Hossler et al. (1999) stated, "As the academic performance of students and the socioeconomic status of their families increase, the number of colleges considered also increases and social status and cultural capital determine the colleges students choose" (p. 29). Therefore, it is important to view the college choice stage as an extension of both the student predisposition and college search stages, influenced by SES.

Poor children start out with several strikes against them. They receive a K-12 education of poor quality. They are discounted early on. They are placed in vocational tracks. Their families lack the cultural capital to help them. Low-income schools do not have the resources to help them. How can they successfully prepare for college? How can they improve their life situations? The poor quality of education low-income students receive throughout K-12 negatively affects their life situations as adults. They have not been prepared to make the adjustments necessary to change their lives. As a result, many of them grow up, work in low-wage jobs, and continue the cycle of poverty.

### *Low-income Women*

The group most significantly affected by poverty is women. Women represent a disproportionate share of the poor. In the United States, single minority women and women with little or no education occupy the highest poverty level (Boldt, 2000). More than one woman in four (28%) heads a family that is below or at the poverty level. U.S. Census Bureau data for 2000 showed that 76% of the poor were women and children. Furthermore, the data showed that women were concentrated in the lowest-paying occupations: 79% of clerical workers and 64% of retail workers were women (Women Employed, 2001). As skill requirements for jobs increase, it will become harder for women with little or no education to find a job that will pay a living wage. The precarious financial situation of many low-income women clearly illustrates the need for income and the role of higher education in obtaining better jobs.

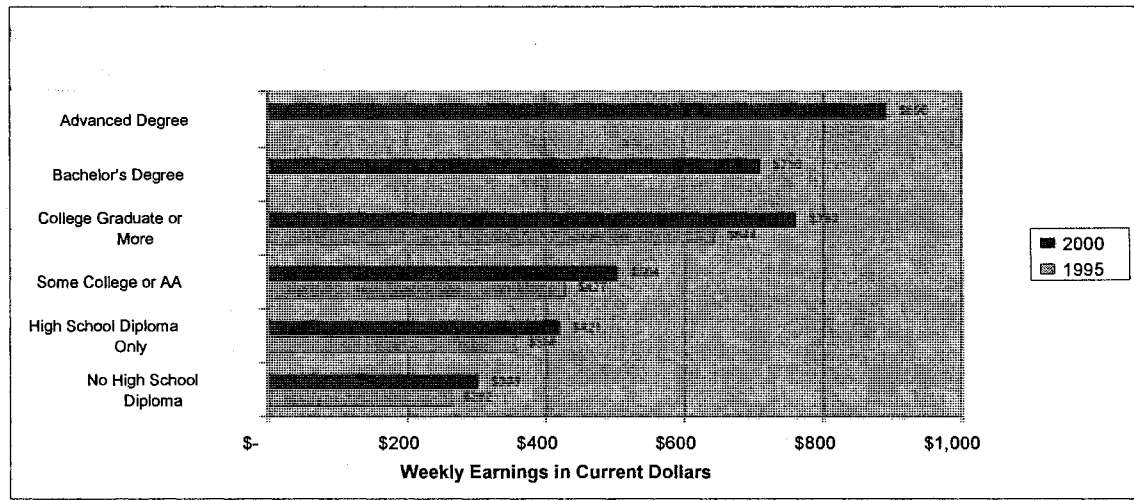
Many see higher education as the key to higher incomes and the way to increase the job options of low-income women. It is quite evident that individuals with more education make a higher wage. Kates (1996) found postsecondary education to be practical and responsive to women's lives, in that it offers a wide array of educational opportunities that can be adjusted to prior educational experiences and present life circumstances. Moreover, higher education has the infrastructure in place to accommodate adult learners as many institutions are developing specific services and resources for low-income women and single parents (Kates, 1996). McCrohan (1996) observed that the importance placed on education in an individual's past greatly affected her attitude about the value of adult education, as well as her determination to reenter school. Higher education begets higher self-esteem and financial stability with increased

job opportunities. Higher education affords low-income women the opportunity to cease public assistance and support themselves and their families.

A 1995 study showed one-third of working female welfare recipients worked as waitresses, cashiers, babysitters, food preparers, or in other low paying jobs (Women's Development Institute, 1995). Nearly twenty percent of these jobs paid only minimum wage and the average wages of the women who had worked in the last twelve months was \$5.37 per hour (Women's Development Institute, 1995). Karier's (1998) study of welfare students at Eastern Washington University showed that wages increased by as much as \$1.14 per hour for each year of college completed by welfare recipients. The study also found positive results regarding welfare dependency and wages; a four-year college degree reduced the rate of welfare dependency by 88%. The percentage of graduates receiving aid continued to decrease after the first year out of college. Not only were one-third of the graduates employed, but the median hourly wage was \$11, well above minimum wage. Kates (1996) also emphasized the importance of reducing welfare dependency. Welfare recipients who acquired postsecondary education had a 41% less chance of returning to welfare than those who did not go beyond high school. Studies in five states found that a college education allowed the majority of women surveyed to become financially independent; 70% of the women attributed their employment success to their college degree (One Dupont Welfare Reform Coalition, 1997).

More recent data from the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2000) showed the median weekly earnings of full-time female workers with different levels of education. Figure 1 clearly indicates the significant increase in earnings with a college degree.

**Figure 1. Median Weekly Earnings of Full-Time Workers, 25 and Over, by Educational Attainment**



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2000)

Women with a college degree or more earned over \$300 more each week than women with only a high school diploma. For many low-income women, who provided all the financial support for their family, the median weekly earnings with a high school diploma are not enough to house, feed, and clothe an entire family. Furthermore, comparing the 2000 data with data from 1995 shows the increased importance of postsecondary education. In 1995, the difference in weekly earnings between women with a high school diploma and women with a college degree was \$288, by 2000, the difference increased to \$339 in current dollars (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2000). Over the past 20 years, those with a college degree have experienced a growth in real wages, while those without college degrees have experienced the largest rise in unemployment rates (Boldt, 2000). The unemployment rates were significantly lower for those with a four-year degree: 1.5% for those with a four-year college degree compared to 11.7% for those without a high school diploma (Karier, 1998).

The consequences of college education for low-income women, particularly women of color, are especially positive. Boldt (2000) emphasized that a year of college can cut the poverty rate for Latinos and African Americans by more than half. Research has shown that a community college degree raises a woman's income by 65% (Boldt, 2000). Nettles (1991), on the other hand, expressed the concern that higher education has limited influence on low-income African American women due to sex and race discrimination in the workforce. While acknowledging that a college degree increases the employment rate for African American women, Nettles maintained that many low-income African American women do not possess the necessary educational backgrounds in order to gain college acceptance.

### **Habitus**

McDonough (1997) described habitus as a profoundly internalized enduring system of beliefs, perceptions, and experiences about the society an individual gains from their environment. McDonough also asserted:

Habitus is a common set of subjective perceptions held by all members of the same group or class that shapes an individual's expectations, attitudes, and aspirations. Those aspirations are both subjective assessments of the chances for mobility and objective probabilities. They are not rational analyses, but rather are the ways that children from different classes make sensible or reasonable choices for their own aspirations. (p. 32)

Individuals make decisions as a result of socialization and cultural capital gained from observing their surroundings. Individuals make decisions by examining their environment and assessing what those who surround them consider appropriate (McDonough, 1997).

Within habitus, there are four pieces: cultural capital, social capital, human capital, and economic capital. Cultural capital is the attitudes, beliefs, resources, and values that families transmit to their children as a means of enhancing class status and privilege (Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Social capital consists of resources embedded in social relations and social structures (Lin, 2001). Human capital is increased knowledge and skills based on investments in education and training (Becker, 1993). Economic capital consists of money or other resources with economic value (Portes, 1998). As Portes simply stated “economic capital is in people’s bank accounts, human capital is inside their heads, and social capital inheres in the structure of their relationships” (p. 7). For my dissertation, I present economic capital in terms of student price response to the cost of higher education.

### *Cultural Capital*

Students’ families’ position in the societal class structure determines their cultural capital and exerts a major influence upon their educational aspirations (Paulsen, 2001). Students who are already economically and socially advantaged incur further advantages because of their families’ cultural capital. According to Paulsen and St. John (2002),

Cultural capital represents forms of symbolic wealth that are transmitted from upper and middleclass parents to their children to sustain class status from one generation to the next. A student’s habitus provides a powerful filter that implicitly determines what a student ‘sees’, how the student interprets and values what she sees, and what action she will take as a result. (p. 195)

The transmission of educational beliefs and values as well as the internalization of those beliefs and values is central to a student’s habitus. Parents, siblings, peers, teachers,

school officials, and mentors who have attended college are more likely than those who have not attended college to value higher education and communicate the importance of college enrollment to students. Furthermore, Dumais (2002) described students' college decisions as dependent on their families' position within the class system and their expectations for college choices. Students' cultural capital also exerts stratification in the college enrollment process, as individuals and families with knowledge and financial resources can access beneficial services and information. Increasingly, parents from higher socioeconomic statuses are hiring private college admissions counselors to raise students' level of cultural capital regarding the college choice process (McDonough, 1997). In addition, parents who have graduated from college communicate knowledge of the process and possess more information on how to navigate through the college choice, admission, enrollment, and financial aid processes.

### *Social Capital*

Social capital consists of resources embedded in social relations and social structures (Lin, 2001). According to Lin, "The premise behind the notion of social capital is rather simple and straightforward: investment in social relations with expected returns" (p. 6). A primary function of social capital is to enable a student to gain access to human, cultural, and other forms of capital (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Social capital focuses on social networks and the ways in which social networks and connections are sustained (Lin, 2001). Portes (1998) noted that social capital is acquired through an individual's relationships with other individuals, particularly through membership in social networks and other social structures. Parental involvement is a form of social capital that provides individuals with access to resources that may facilitate college enrollment (Perna & Titus,

2004). Lin posited four explanations as to why embedded resources in social networks will enhance students' social capital. First, it aids in the flow of information since students obtain information from sources in their social relationships. Second, the social relationships may exert influence on the institutional agents surrounding the individual. Stanton-Salazar (1997) defined institutional agents as "those individuals who have the capacity and commitment to transmit directly, or negotiate the transmission of, institutional resources and opportunities" (p. 6). Third, an individual's social ties could be perceived as one's social credentials, which could reflect the individual's accessibility to resources through social networks and relations. Finally, identity and recognition reinforce social relations.

### *Human Capital*

Human capital theory assumes that an individual decides to invest in human capital based on the ranking and weighting of all options according to their preferences (Becker, 1993). Becker asserted that the most important investments in human capital are education and training because participation in these activities increases knowledge, skills, and analytical ability and in turn causes increased productivity, which is rewarded by greater earnings. Enrollment in a two- or four-year degree program is an investment in human capital that can generate returns, but has costs associated with it (Paulsen, 2001). Although the major economic return of higher education is higher lifetime earnings, participants also realize other benefits, including lower rates of unemployment and higher occupational status (Becker, 1993). The economic theory of human capital predicts that, as an individual invests in human capital, the individual will realize higher returns in the form of income over the course of a lifetime (Becker, 1993). Students who enroll in

college immediately after high school are more likely to receive a greater economic return over time than those who delay enrollment because they have more years over which to realize the return on their investment. This earnings profile may explain, at least in part, why college enrollment research generally focuses on early, rather than delayed, enrollment. Nevertheless, an individual who begins an investment in higher education seven years after high school graduation may still have more than 30 years in the workforce to realize the earnings premium. Even a delay in college enrollment of up to seven years after high school graduation may generate substantial economic, social, psychological, and quality of life benefits for the individual, as well as for society at large.

*Economic Capital (Student Price Response)*

Social class and cultural capital influence students' cost consciousness and the perception of the financial costs of college; nevertheless, students are expected to consider their financial resources when determining the relative benefits and costs of investing in higher education. Low levels of financial resources may hinder a family's ability to pay the costs of the investment especially when there is doubt as to whether the long-term economic benefits will ultimately outweigh the costs (Baum, 2001). Therefore, students and families display very different responses to higher education pricing strategies. Students from low-income families are more sensitive to the costs of higher education (Fitzgerald & Delaney, 2002; Heller, 1997). These students may not have the necessary cultural capital to understand total college costs, available grants and loans, and how to file for financial aid. Clearly, students make enrollment choices based on context, their life experiences, and their exposure to college admission and financial aid processes.

Costs of enrolling in higher education can be direct, such as tuition, fees, and books. The direct cost of college, aspects that are typically included in traditional econometric models of college enrollment, is an important component in a student's college enrollment decision. Paulsen and St. John (2002) found that the cost of attending college and financial aid given to lower college costs were significant factors in a low-income student's college choice decision. They found, through their multivariate analyses of 1987 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:87) data, that a majority of low-income students chose a college based on low cost and financial aid. St. John (2003) posited, "Students respond to prices and subsidies based on their situated circumstances" (p. 187) particularly their family income and academic ability. Heller (1997) also found, based on his review and synthesis of prior research that increases in tuition affect the college enrollment of lower income students to a greater degree than the college enrollment of students from families with higher incomes.

McPherson and Schapiro (1994) highlighted the fact that college enrollment decreases as tuition increases. Clearly, portions of students selected colleges based on high financial aid or low tuition costs. Students from lower socioeconomic strata were less likely to understand how to calculate expected costs and navigate through financial aid programs (Heller, 1997). For example, many students from lower socioeconomic statuses simply see the college's sticker price and do not understand that people actually pay very different amounts to attend the same institution. They do not realize that financial aid significantly reduces the direct cost of attendance. In contrast, college sticker prices do not shock students from higher income levels because they realize that the net costs actually vary because of various funding resources. The availability of

financial aid affects enrollment as well as persistence in higher education for low-income students. A study from the U. S. General Accounting Office (1995) reported that the addition of a \$1,000 grant reduced the dropout probability of low-income students by 14 percent. The study further reported a 23 percent reduction in the dropout probability if grants were targeted to first-year low-income students (U. S. General Accounting Office, 1995).

High-tuition also affects the social and ethnic diversity on campuses. The responsiveness of low-income and minority college students to high tuition and tuition increases is alarmingly high as every \$1,000 increment rise in tuition decreases students' probability of enrolling by 16- to 18% (Paulson & St. John, 2002). High-tuition policies pose more difficulty for low-income students largely because of unmet need. Fitzgerald and Delaney (2002) described unmet need as the amount of money students must pay for college after considering financial aid and family contributions. Table 1 displays the disparities between low-, middle-, and upper-income students as they relate to unmet need. In 2004, low-income students faced an average \$3,100 of unmet need annually at community colleges; \$7,100 at four-year institutions; and \$19,100 at private four-year institutions; while middle-income students faced significantly lower levels of unmet need; and upper-income students had no unmet need at all. These differences are due to significantly different expected family contributions per income level.

**Table 1. Annual Unmet Need, by Institution Type and Family Income, 2004**

Institution Type	Family Income		
	Low	Middle	High
Public Two-Year	\$3,100	\$0	\$0
Public Four-Year	\$7,100	\$400	\$0
Private Four-Year	\$19,100	\$12,400	\$0

Source: NCES 2004. National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04).

Thus, low-income and minority students are more responsive to grants rather than loans (Heller, 1997). Current higher education pricing and students' cultural capital, shaped by their social class membership may help explain students' price responses in the institutional choice and enrollment processes.

### **Non-traditional Students in Higher Education**

The literature uses various terms to describe students who have delayed entry into higher education. Some of those terms include non-traditional, mature, reentry, adult students, and lifelong learners. This is not an exhaustive list, but covers the terms included in my dissertation. Much of the literature regarding higher education is not clear about how the term higher education is used. The terms higher education, postsecondary education, and college are used interchangeably. An issue that further clouds the data is the setting or type of institution included in the research. For example, some authors used data from two- and four-year institutions together when referring to higher education. Some authors reported on four-year institutions alone, while others studied community colleges exclusively. Therefore, this portion of the literature review, Non-traditional Students in Higher Education, includes literature that combines four-year institutions and community colleges as well as literature from four-year institutions alone. It addresses

the issues of non-traditional men and women (Choy, 2002; Shank et al., 2001), non-traditional women alone (Burns & Gabrich, 2001; Reay, 2003), and African American women (Johnson-Bailey, 1998; Thomas, 2001).

### *Non-traditional Men & Women*

According to Choy (2002), the "traditional" undergraduate, characterized as one who earns a high school diploma, enrolls full time immediately after finishing high school, depends on parents for financial support, and either does not work during the school year or works part time—is the exception rather than the rule. In 1999–2000, only 27% of undergraduates met all of these criteria. Thus, 73% of all undergraduates were in some way "nontraditional." (Choy, 2002). Kim (2002) conducted a literature review and presented three definitions for non-traditional students. The most-used definition was the age criterion, which defined non-traditional as students age 25 or older (Spitzer, 2000). These students were typically balancing school with work and family responsibilities. They also had more practical needs such as childcare, counseling, and financial aid. Peer support groups were also proven successful. The second definition referred to student background characteristics including ethnicity and SES. These students were single parents, and part-time students without high school diplomas (Horn & Carroll, 1996). Rendon and Hope (1996) also considered low-income, first-generation, and employment status. The third definition considered at-risk behaviors that may increase students' risk of attrition (Choy, 2002). This section presents data from two major reports regarding non-traditional students in various higher education settings. The reports deal with the enrollment trends and persistence of non-traditional students (Choy, 2002; Horn & Carroll, 1996).

Horn and Carroll (1996) used data from three surveys from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study conducted in 1987 (NPSAS:87), 1990 (NPSAS:90), and 1993 (NPSAS:93) to study the enrollment trends of non-traditional students. The students were identified as non-traditional based on the presence of one or more of the following characteristics: delayed enrollment into postsecondary education, attended part time, financially independent, worked full time while enrolled, had dependents other than a spouse, was a single parent, or did not obtain a standard high school diploma. The non-traditional students were categorized as minimally non-traditional (one characteristic), moderately non-traditional (two or three characteristics), or highly non-traditional (four or more characteristics).

Choy (2002) used Horn and Carroll's (1996) criteria to categorize students as minimally non-traditional, moderately non-traditional, or highly non-traditional. Eighty percent of the highly non-traditional students had dependents, three-quarters were financially independent, attended part time, worked full time, and had delayed enrollment. Sixty-four percent of non-traditional students enrolled in two-year institutions and the more non-traditional they were, the more likely they were to do so. Data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Studies (BPS:90/94) were used for the persistence and attainment data (Choy, 2002; Horn & Carroll, 1996). They used the 90/94 dataset to see if non-traditional students who had entered postsecondary education five years earlier had met their educational goals. Horn and Carroll found that non-traditional students were less likely than their traditional counterparts to attain a degree (52 percent versus 64 percent). However, minimally non-traditional students were more likely (52%) to attain a degree than moderately (41%) or highly (31%) non-traditional students. Even

though the presence of non-traditional students was significantly found in the 2-year segment of postsecondary education, non-traditional students were still half as likely (27 percent versus 53 percent) than their traditional counterparts to achieve their goal of attaining an associate's degree. Horn and Carroll identified a departure from the persistence track, which occurred in one of three ways: a downward transfer (going from a 4-year university to a 2-year college), stopping out for more than four months then returning, or leaving without returning by 1994. Forty-seven percent of non-traditional students departed without returning by 1994, while only one-third of the traditional students left. Rather than not return however, the traditional students who left were more likely to experience a downward transfer.

The characteristics associated with being non-traditional are considered "risk factors" because they are negatively related to retention. Choy (2002) presented persistence data in relation to student goals since not all students enrolled with the intention to earn a degree. Since students' goals were unknown, only students with a degree or transfer goal were included in Choy's (2002) study. Non-traditional students were much more likely than traditional students to leave postsecondary education without a degree. Of those seeking an associate's degree, 62% left without a degree, compared to 19% of traditional students. Among those seeking an associate's degree, 46% of non-traditional students left in their first year, compared with 23% of traditional students. Among certificate seekers, non-traditional students were more likely than traditional students to leave in their first year (43 versus 23 percent). With the exception of single parenthood, each of the non-traditional characteristics had a direct or indirect association with persistence and attainment.

### *Non-traditional Women*

In 2004, non-traditional women consisted of 46% of the undergraduate student population in higher education (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2006). The literature regarding non-traditional women is very diverse, so this section consists of articles that address issues such as role conflict (Burns & Gabrich, 2001; Reay, 2003), support services (Cohen, 1998; Rifken, 1995), academic issues (Jackman, 1999; Reisinger, 1999), and graduate school (Anderson & Mieziotis, 1999; Lenz, 1997). All of the articles consisted of undergraduate non-traditional women students with the exception of two; Anderson and Mieziotis (1999) and Lenz (1997) studied female graduate students.

Many non-traditional women transition into higher education with mixed emotions. Reay (2003) studied the access and participation of working-class women in London. The women expressed sincere feelings of failure regarding their past educational experiences. As they spoke of poverty in their childhoods and its continuing presence in their lives, it became evident that they had internalized their previous educational failures. Reay further submitted that the women conveyed a powerful sense of feeling unimportant and marginalized in the schooling context. The themes that emerged from Rifken's (1995) study of campus support groups for non-traditional women were motivational factors, perceptions and concerns, rewards of returning to school, and support systems. The key motivational factors were feelings of 'a sense of achievement' and completing a long-range goal. The top rewards for returning to school were increased self-confidence, self-fulfillment, and self-worth. Their support systems consisted of familial support and the campus support group. Cohen (1998) evaluated the impact of an elite private college on five returning women who had previously been on welfare. Cohen

developed three stages that encompassed the women's evolvment at the college. The stages consisted of assimilation, class bias, and fields of service. The women felt isolated and spoke of encounters with students from privileged backgrounds and the offensive comments the privileged students made. Cohen posited that the women's experiences at the college brought all of them to fields of service. The women felt the need to use their education to give back to those who needed their services. They all spoke of their passion for service with assertiveness and confidence.

Part of the transition into higher education for women who are mothers, which most are, included the balancing act of studying and mothering their children (Reay, 2003). Burns and Gabrich (2001) identified changes that occurred in the family system when the mother entered school. Fifty-one percent indicated moderate conflict between school and family responsibilities. Forty-five percent indicated low change, where their husband's involvement with the children increased. The husband's involvement usually centered around watching the children, driving them around, and helping with schoolwork. The mothers reported both positive and negative effects their school enrollment had on their children. On the positive side, children seemed to value education more and were excited about learning. Negative effects nearly always involved the mothers not having enough time with their children.

Non-traditional women who were able to manage their family life and studies also had to adjust to the academic side of college. Adult women students responded to a dialogic exchange of experience (Jackman, 1999) and thus thrived in learning environments that incorporated adult students' life experiences (Anderson & Mieztis, 1999). Jackman (1999) used the stories of three adult women to illustrate how adult

women incorporated their life experiences into their classroom experiences for writing. Jackman (1999) asserted that adult women learners were much more likely than men learners to sacrifice their studies for family obligations, which implied that a woman's familial roles were much stronger than her role as student. One woman managed both roles by seeking collaboration and feedback on her writing from family members. Their collaboration and feedback acknowledged her as a writer and validated her self-conception as a family woman. Another woman called upon her life experiences to help her make sense of her experiences in the classroom. She used autobiographical accounts as the basis for her papers. The final woman, the instructor of the class, used stories from her lived experiences to introduce course assignments. According to Jackman (1999), this teaching method combined the personal with the professional: telling and listening to each other's stories in interactive learning, expressing concern for learners as individuals with complicated lives, and working within a predictable, intentional structure of task analysis.

Many women students with children have the ability to succeed in education but face strong pressures to discontinue study because of their life circumstances (Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1996). Scott et al. (1996) studied a group of mothers who discontinued studies and cited family responsibilities as the most frequent reason for leaving study (73%). Similarly, Reay (2003) presented three main reasons working-class women were not able to enter or complete higher education as financial hardship, the demands of being a single mother, and the exhaustion of managing work and school. Scott et al. (1996) created a cluster analysis, which produced results that were suggestive of a life cycle explanation of attrition among student mothers. The authors divided the clusters

into four categories. The Maternal Overload cluster had difficulty with childcare, lack of money, and the weight of family responsibilities. The Student Difficulties cluster had problems more related to the experience of study itself, while the Course Dissatisfaction cluster was simply dissatisfied with their chosen course of study. Finally, the Role Overload group experienced a combination of family and work responsibilities. In most cases, the deciding event was an increase of responsibilities in one or the other of these areas.

Cohen (1998) presented the issues of class bias, assimilation, self-empowerment, and awakenings for non-privileged students who studied in an elite learning environment and highlighted how non-privileged students were aware of their own disadvantage and social limitations as they navigated an unfamiliar system. This research showed how students were able to reinvent themselves and used the ideas of class bias they encountered at the college to fuel their desire to serve others. Similarly, Wicke-Nelson and Ewen (1997) explored issues surrounding leadership for non-traditional Appalachian women and found that the women held liberal attitudes toward the roles and rights of women. The women reported strong pro-feminist attitudes towards social and economic freedom. Attitudes regarding etiquette and social norms of language, sex, and dating were more conservative. The women in Wicke-Nelson and Ewen's study identified their sense of power and leadership in the context of religious activities and the PTA.

Some research has been conducted on non-traditional women in graduate school (Anderson & Mieзитis, 1999; Lenz, 1997). Anderson and Mieзитis investigated life satisfaction in mature female graduate students and found that attending graduate school was a pleasant escape from their other roles as mother or employee. Role conflict was a

major issue for adult learners with the parental role being the biggest conflict. Where social support was concerned, emotional and practical support were the key types of support the women received. They were grateful for friends, baby-sitters, and flexible employers. Lenz presented recommendations to help women complete the dissertation process. Lenz suggested that candidates begin searching for dissertation topics early. They should question faculty members' research interests and ask for help during the dissertation process. Faculty and advisers should establish caring, collegial relationships with women and universities should provide formal support groups and encourage graduate student-faculty research teams. Various retention efforts need to be implemented for returning women since the number of older women returning to graduate school is growing. It is evident that the needs of mature females differed from those of traditional graduate students. Faculty and administrators need to be aware of the realities of life for non-traditional students. Faculty must also be aware that non-traditional students may bring in a different perspective as a result of their life experiences (Anderson & Mieztis, 1999).

Reisinger's (1999) literature review addressed several areas where institutions could provide a successful learning environment for non-traditional women. The first area dealt with the advising needs of women. According to Reisinger (1999), there were special concerns unique to women because of family responsibilities, childcare issues, and arranging the family budget to accommodate financing college. The next area covered peer support groups (Reisinger, 1999; Rifenbary, 1995), which influenced women students to support each other, swap and critique each other's writing, and provide assistance regarding the workings of the university. The final section consisted of

ideas for shared advising which recommended grouping female students with similar thesis frameworks with an advisor. The students met together with the advisor. The women reported benefits of support, experiencing divergent viewpoint, and reassurance while writing.

### *Non-traditional African American Women*

African American students make up 14% of the student population in higher education (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2006). African American women represent 62% of the African American student population (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2006). Yet, the research on African American women is limited. Therefore, the literature reviewed for this section consists of five qualitative research pieces specifically pertaining to African American women in various higher education settings. The articles explored the educational experiences of African American women through various topics including the impact of the transition to higher education (Bowl, 2001; Munford, 1996; Thomas, 2001) and experiencing higher education through the dynamics of the larger society (Johnson-Bailey, 1998; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996). All of the articles here consisted of undergraduate non-traditional women except two. Johnson-Bailey (1998) and Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (1996) included both graduate and undergraduate women in their studies.

African American women are typically portrayed as women who are educationally- challenged. Bowl (2001) explored the impact of the transition into higher education for African American women and found that despite their desire to succeed in education; African American women faced bleak educational futures; mainly because they were labeled as unsuccessful 'early on'. Thomas (2001) interviewed nineteen

African American reentry women and asserted that African American women faced special challenges in higher education. Some of the challenges included situational barriers such as financial constraints, difficulties balancing responsibilities (Johnson-Bailey, 1998), inadequate support systems (Johnson-Bailey, 1998), and institutional barriers including racism and sexism (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996; Thomas, 2001). While some of these barriers may have been common to women of all ethnicities, these women felt racism and sexism further hindered them. Thomas further asserted that African American women felt that the benefits of their college reentry would not be realized as fully as their White female counterparts. One participant stated,

“Different ethnic groups have already been in an educational system where they have gotten benefits, White women have already been exposed to better learning and study skills. On the other hand, these experiences did not occur for African American women who grew up in the inner-city.” (p. 151)

Mentoring can also be a helpful tool for African American women to persist through education. In his examination of the mentoring relationships of mature African American women, Munford (1996) found that mentors provided advice regarding career development, emotional or spiritual support, advice on financial matters, and support for academic concerns. Once the women met their educational goals, mentoring relationships could help them to achieve higher-level jobs and utilize their organizational talent (Munford, 1996).

Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (1996) examined the ways the dynamics of the larger society played out in higher education. They revealed the power relations based on race, gender, class, and color and how those relations intersected in the lives of Black reentry

women in education. In Johnson-Bailey and Cervero's qualitative study, respondents consistently referred to themselves as a "Black woman" rather than a woman or Black only. The study revealed the women's strongest deterrents to their schooling were in the classroom and societal encounters with racism and gender subordination. Johnson-Bailey (1998) examined the common experiences that shaped the academic lives of Black reentry women and reported that many of the women felt marginalized and isolated in their reentry experiences. They were confronted with race and gender oppression. The racism was overt and occurred in and out of the classroom. The women developed strategies for survival in the academic arena. The strategies were silence, negotiation, and resistance (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996). They used silence as an internal and external strategy, which they implemented when situations were particularly hurtful to deal with. Negotiation also occurred both internally and externally. The women utilized it when they needed to find middle ground in the classroom, at home, and within themselves when juggling their various roles. Resistance only existed externally and occurred in the classroom.

Regardless of experiences with racism and sexism, African American women admitted that reentry had positively influenced their self-image (Thomas, 2001) even though their social networks appeared to suffer from reentry. In essence, African American women experienced feelings of resistance and isolation in academic and social settings. When asked why they returned to school, African American women cited economic growth as their number one reason for returning (Thomas, 2001). Many of these women viewed higher education as a way to provide a better life for themselves and their families rather than self-actualization or to flee an empty nest, which were reasons

some of their White counterparts returned (Johnson-Bailey, 1998). Despite feelings of isolation, African American women persisted toward their educational goals and they encouraged other African American women to do the same. Most of the women identified a particular person who encouraged them to further their education. That person was usually another African American woman (Thomas, 2001). Some women were discouraged from reentry by their partners, friends, or their supervisor (Thomas, 2001). Nevertheless, they encouraged other African American women to look beyond any real or perceived obstacles such as financial matters or self-doubt and take proactive measures toward their educational aspirations (Thomas, 2001). In addition to the normal issues reentry women faced such as situational and psychological barriers, African American women found the issues that came with simply being a Black woman much harder to deal with.

### **Non-traditional Students in Community Colleges**

Literature reviewed for community colleges consists of information pertaining to community colleges exclusively and addresses the same issues of non-traditional men and women (Kim, 2002; Outcalt et al., 2000), non-traditional women alone (Miller, 2000; White, 2001), and African American women (Valadez, 2000) that were addressed in an earlier section of the chapter, Non-traditional Students in Higher Education.

#### *Non-traditional Men & Women*

Significant amounts of non-traditional students (86%) attend community colleges (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2006). According to Horn and Carroll (1996), three-fourths of students in two-year colleges have at least one non-traditional characteristic. This section consists of two literature reviews, two qualitative research pieces, and two

practitioner pieces regarding non-traditional students in the community college. The articles deal with issues surrounding the return of non-traditional students to college (Kim, 2002; Lutes, 2004; Rhodes & Carifio, 1999; Ryan, 2003) and community perceptions of community colleges (Holub, 1996; Outcalt et al., 2000).

In a review and synthesis of prior research, Ryan (2003) addressed various ways community colleges can meet the needs of non-traditional students through counseling. Scholars have argued for additional research on the developmental process of non-traditional students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Brilliant (2000) suggested that such research would be helpful in providing insight for use during in-service training for faculty and counseling staff. Such insight would help counseling staffs develop more appropriate action plans to address student situations in reference to their specific life histories. Technology was also recommended to improve counseling through web-based programs that allow students to enroll in courses, obtain degree audits or transcripts, and conduct job searches. This would allow counseling staffs more time to focus on issues that are more significant.

Community colleges have to provide institutional support that will bridge the gap for high school students preparing to enter higher education, non-traditional students who are transitioning into higher education, and community members. Much of the research offered suggestions as to how institutions can assist these populations through various programming (Kim, 2002; Rhodes & Carifio, 1999; Ryan, 2003). Such programming might include orientation programs to assist students who are likely to be unfamiliar with the college environment and how to maneuver it (Kim, 2002). In a practitioner piece, Lutes (2004) discussed Northwestern Michigan College's (NMC) Bridge Program which

is a transition experience designed to serve the highly non-traditional adults that come to the college. The program is linked to over 17 community agencies and helps students solve issues with daycare, transportation, housing, financial aid, and other situations that may affect retention. The academic component of the program features traditional core skill college classes integrated with workplace tools that students can immediately use. Kim (2002) also presented ideas for matching programs to student needs. For example, some programs provide professional retraining courses so workers can learn about the latest advances in their fields. Others provide off-the-job training under company sponsorship. Finally, weekend college programs designed for students employed full time so they can attend classes on the weekend.

Community perception of community colleges is important if community colleges are to live up to their mission of serving the community. Outcalt et al. (2000) interviewed African American students, Latino students, their school counselors, and their parents to examine their perceptions of community colleges. They found that many African American and Latino students and their counselors believed the community college would help the students achieve their academic goals which were to graduate from the community college and transfer to a four-year institution. These students chose community colleges because of the affordability and close proximity to their families. While the students indicated that the community college was not their first choice, they were willing to attend to enhance their academic credentials. Some counselors felt community colleges were appropriate for students with career intentions. Counselors felt students' lack of understanding of higher education caused them to make inappropriate choices for postsecondary education. Holub (1996) also presented a practitioner piece

which identified community-based programming as an effective tool community colleges use to become familiarized with the problems of their constituencies. One community college identified illiteracy as a problem in its community and used Project ACCLAIM (Academy for Community College Leadership Advancement, Innovation, and Modeling) to implement strategies to address the problem. The community college implemented several strategies to help this rural community overcome their problem with illiteracy. Such strategies included policy strategies, dispositional strategies, situational strategies, and institutional strategies. All of the aforementioned efforts were important because they showed community colleges helping to enhance and expand educational opportunities for students currently underrepresented in four-year institutions (Outcalt et al., 2000). It also showed the importance of high schools, community colleges, employers, and other community agencies working together to reach students who may not otherwise enter postsecondary education.

### *Non-traditional Women*

In 1997, over 60% of the students enrolled in community colleges were women over the age of 25 (NCES, 1999). By 2004, this figure had increased to 94% (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2006). This section consists of one literature review, two quantitative research pieces, three qualitative research pieces, and one mixed design pertaining to non-traditional women in the community college setting. The articles address issues that deal with barriers non-traditional women face (Johnson, Schwartz, & Bower, 2000; Miller, 2000), support that keeps them encouraged (White, 2001; Williams, 1997), persistence to get them through (Goldsmith & Archambault, 1997), and transformation once they are done (Coccia, 1997; Robinson & Davis, 2001). All of the

women who participated in these studies were community college students with the exception of one group. Robinson and Davis surveyed a group of women enrolled in Adult Basic Education classes with a state agency. The authors in these studies did not specify the ethnicity of their participants.

Education can have a changing effect on the lives and identities of non-traditional women who return to college (Coccia, 1997). Coccia examined “the educational experiences of women mandated into college by an outside agency” (p. 2). The welfare women spoke toward a theme of life changes and reported significant transformations within themselves. Many gained self-confidence and the ability to stand up for themselves and their kids. They desired education to break free of the oppressive forces they battled. Many of them used previous emotions of fear and terror to motivate themselves to accomplish a newly defined goal, academic success (Miller, 2000). Although the women experienced difficulties juggling multiple roles, their college experiences enhanced their lives in the present and brought hope for the future (Coccia, 1997). The women viewed their future accomplishments as resulting from their own initiative (Robinson & Davis, 2001). The women must overcome a number of barriers to achieve their goal. Some of their barriers are psychosocial. Miller (2000), upon examining the “successes and failures of female reentry students” (p. 61), found that upon being accepted into the community college, the participants experienced emotions of fear and terror. Their emotions ranged from fear of academic failure to ego-related emotions. Johnson et al. (2000) reported on the ability to cope with stress and asserted that three factors affected stress for non-traditional women: age, marital status, and children. Of the three factors, parenting responsibilities extremely stressed adult women

students. Women with children who return to a community college for an education are at significant risk for not completing their education when they feel they are not able to cope with the demands of parenting and school (Johnson et al., 2000).

Because adult women students make up such a large portion of the student body at community colleges, it is important to provide support services and programs to meet their specific needs. White (2001), based on a review and synthesis of prior research, presented recommendations for community colleges to help support the needs of non-traditional female students. Recommendations included campus-based support networks such as an orientation program to introduce adult women to campus resources, career development to incorporate the vocational considerations of adult women, and on-campus childcare facilities to alleviate some of the stress surrounding childcare issues. The presence of a strong counseling network would also be vital to the success of a reentry female (Miller, 2000). Non-traditional women need social support in and outside of the classroom. Williams (1997) investigated the social support for single mothers and found that college peer groups provide comprehensive social support. These peer support groups helped women utilize resources that enabled them to complete their courses of study. Such support included providing tangible help like babysitting or doing household chores, sharing experiences or feelings like listening or being sympathetic, showing concern and understanding when a person was in distress, providing advice, and giving encouragement in helping to overcome feelings of despair, worry, and anxiety (Williams, 1997). Such support was crucial in maintaining the morale and motivation of the women as adult learners.

Many factors contribute to the persistence of non-traditional women and there is no way of predicting from high school grades, which adult women will persist in college (Goldsmith & Archambault, 1997). Robinson and Davis (2001) explored the “environmental and personal differences between poor women who receive public assistance and those who do not” (p. 5). They showed that women who believe in their own ability to influence outcomes in their lives also perceived themselves as more effectual in achieving their educational goals. Goldsmith and Archambault conducted a study of persisters and non-persisters among non-traditional women and found that the only factors that significantly affected the persistence of the women were financial aid and grade point average. The non-persisters did not share in any of the above qualifications; however, they differed from the persisters in their reasons for attending, lack of integration into the college, and lack of commitment to obtaining a degree. If non-traditional women are to be successful in education, the facilitation of integrating family life and college life for adult students must be implemented to encourage persistence (Goldsmith and Archambault, 1997). As a result of their study, Goldsmith and Archambault developed a new persistence model for adult women, which incorporated an intention to change one’s life by getting a college education, an ability to integrate academic and personal spheres, and the goal of getting a degree.

#### *Non-traditional African American Women*

Of the 14% of African American undergraduates enrolled in higher education, nearly half (42%) can be found in the community college setting (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2006). African American women represent 14% of all women students, yet recent literature is limited on this population (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2006). In

an effort to report the most recent data on African American women in a community college setting, I conducted searches using the timeframe of 1995-2006. Using various search terms such as non-traditional women, reentry, and adult learners with community college and African American remaining constant in the searches, I was only able to find one article during that timeframe (Valadez, 2000). My study will add to the body of knowledge in this area and will assist in filling the existing gap in the literature since I am focusing on African American women in a community college setting.

Valadez (2000) presented a qualitative research piece, which explored a community college work education program designed to help women escape welfare and prepare for jobs. The purpose of the study was to explore how the participants processed decisions about their lives, how they oriented themselves for finding jobs, and how they experienced the program. The participants were thirteen African American women who were receiving public assistance and were enrolled in a Work Education Program at Prescott Community College (PCC). The women ranged in age from their late 20s to the mid-30s. Some of the women had never worked, three were displaced workers, and three were high school dropouts. All of the women were single parents hoping this program would lead them to a better life for themselves and their children. Valadez collected life histories of the participants and conducted follow-up interviews with most of them after they went to work or enrolled in the community college. In addition to interviewing the participants, Valadez interviewed college administrators, deans, instructors of the Work Education Program, and prospective employers. He also reviewed relevant documents related to the program including course materials, statistical data, news releases, and institutional reports.

The makeup of PCC's population was typical of many rural communities in this southern state. The college had 2,400 students. Most of the students were White (67%), 29% were African American, and the remaining 4% were Latino, American Indian, and Asian. Most of the faculty was White (91%) as were those on the senior administrative team. Six of the eight (75%) senior administrators were White and two (25%) were African American. Only one woman was a member of the senior administrative team. The director and instructors of the Work Education Program were African American. There was a large disparity in income and educational attainment between White and African American residents in the county. White families had a median income of \$26,000 compared with a median income of \$17,160 for African American families. Seventy-five percent of the Whites older than 25 had achieved at least a high school diploma compared with 65% of the African Americans.

PCC cited the Work Education Program as an example of the college's effort to "train students with few saleable skills for entry into the local workforce" (p. 216). The Work Education course met Monday through Thursday; four hours a day for ten weeks. The program included follow-up activities with the women for one year. The course consisted of discussions, demonstrations, lectures, and motivational pieces all intended to enhance the women's self-esteem and build up their confidence. The women listened to lectures on discipline, attention to rules, compliance, and passivity. That fact that they were being prepared for minimum wage jobs that would only make them part of the working poor was not mentioned.

The results from the study painted a picture of frustration for the women. Some of them saw through the rhetoric and resisted the ideological message the college put

forth. One woman wanted training and skills that would help her do better than a minimum wage job. She felt she could get that on her own, except she would not have the medical benefits public assistance provided for her children. Several of the other women expressed resentment towards one of the instructors because they felt the instructor simplified their problems. "They made it sound so easy. Like all you got to do is say OK, now I'm going to go get a job and my problems are over" (p. 221). Although the goal of the program was to place students into jobs, there seemed to be little thought given to the idea that such movement would not get the women out of poverty. The program seemed to focus more on meeting goals rather than solving the problem of poverty for these women.

Valadez (2000) posited that while the program did give the women entry into a job, it did not place them on a path to recognize their educational problems nor did it help them find the path out of poverty through meaningful employment. This was the desire of the women. They wanted to be able to pay the rent and provide the necessities for their children. The jobs the students went into after the program did not provide such. This reinforced the women's negative beliefs about the empty promises of the educational system. Valadez was able to follow-up with ten women who completed the program. Of the ten interviewed, three had enrolled in the community college GED program. Of the remaining seven, one went to work at a chicken-processing plant making \$6.25 an hour and was still employed; three registered at the temporary agency with the hopes of working in offices or banks, but were only placed into manual labor jobs because they did not have a high school diploma; one found a minimum wage job at a department store but later quit due to the cost of day care; one worked at a fast food restaurant for six weeks,

but quit because of transportation problems; and one had been staying home with her sick child, but expected to look for a job soon because the child's health had improved.

Valadez (2000) suggested reforming the curriculum to teach students to inquire as to why so many of the prospective employers only have minimum wage jobs to offer; to question why the jobs seem to be divided along race, class, and gender lines; to research the companies and learn about possibilities for advancement; and to critique their positions in society and discuss opportunities to collaborate with other members of the program. This is significant because it considered the women's own perception of reality. The women's experiences channeled them, but their experiences also provided them with understandings and resources to contend with difficult situations. Institutions must learn to contest the understandings that have reinforced social and cultural barriers, while also taking advantage of those resources to help lead the women toward action that would lead them out of poverty. Valadez asserted that the women were more likely to find fault with themselves rather than with the educational system that continued to fail them.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

I open this chapter with an outline of the qualitative design that framed this project. Next, is a depiction of the site and participants that I used in the study. I continue with a detailed description of the data collection strategies and an outline of the data analysis. I conclude with an explanation of the strategies that I used to attain trustworthiness.

### Design

According to Merriam (2002), the “paramount objective” of qualitative research is to understand the subject under study. This type of research does not focus on the ability to generalize or to identify causes and effects. Whitt (1991) argued that qualitative research methods enable the researcher to discover and understand everyday, as well as unique, events and processes from the perspectives of the persons involved. Face-to-face, in-depth interviewing allowed me to obtain detailed descriptions and meanings as presented by the participants. This research paradigm focuses on human behavior, interactions, and relationships (Patton, 2002). Qualitative research on education provides more in-depth, descriptive accounts. Narrative inquiry focuses more specifically on student “voice” and narrative (Casey, 1995).

The primary design of my study was narrative inquiry in order to “give voice” to low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students as they made sense of their socioeconomic backgrounds, past educational experiences, and educational journeys. Narrative inquiry explores the personal experiences of those who participate in the research. It provides opportunities to hear the participants’ voices and for their stories to be told (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry focuses on

how people make meaning of various experiences from their lives. The main reason for using narrative inquiry is to understand naturally occurring phenomena in their naturally occurring states. It is the task of the researcher to describe, explicate, and interpret the essences of these experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

Storytelling and the process of making meaning from these stories is the phenomenon of narrative (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described narrative as both a phenomenon and a method. They asserted that:

Narrative names the structured quality of experience to be studied and it names the patterns of inquiry for its study. To preserve this distinction, we use the reasonably well-established device of calling the phenomenon, 'story' and the inquiry, 'narrative'. Thus we say that people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience. (p. 41)

According to West (1997), an indisputable way of depriving, dehumanizing, demoralizing, and denaturalizing people is to place them in stereotypical categories. Human beings are unique, and there is no better way to understand one's uniqueness than to understand one's personal experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Hooks (1992) also asserted that if researchers can identify with others through understanding their own personal testimonies, they could create other paradigms. My research is based on the assumption that people are continually changing by incorporating their subjective experiences into how they view the world. My research examined the overarching question of "How do low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students come to the decision to enroll in higher education?" I focused on three

research questions: “How do low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students make sense of SES?”; “How do low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students make sense of education?”; and “What role does habitus play in the educational journeys of low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students?”

The interpretivist inquiry framework guided the research. This framework allowed me to understand and interpret the subjective experiences of the participants (Schwandt, 2000). Eisner’s (1991) idea of subjectivity was that individuals have many different subjective selves, which alter depending on the situations in which they are engaging. Eisner contended that for the researcher, “it is a matter of being able to handle several ways of seeing...differing views rather than reducing all views to a single correct one” (p. 49). Under the interpretive framework, interpretive biographical researchers ask participants to share their personal stories. The researchers then study different ways of seeing people by placing the “turning point moments” of the participants in context with the participants’ lives. The interpretive biographer believes that subjective knowledge is equally important to objective knowledge and that as a researcher he or she can interpret the meanings of his or her participants. Denzin (1989a) explained:

A person has a life or a set of life experiences which are his or hers and no one else’s. A life is lived on two levels...the surface and the deep.... At the deep level, the person is a feeling, moral, sacred, inner self. This deep, inner self may only infrequently be shown to others. It is assumed by users of the biographical method that this deep, inner life of the person can be captured in an autobiographical or biographical document. (pp. 28-29)

## Site

I conducted the study in the community college largely because of what the community college represents. The community college movement has possessed from its beginnings in Joliet, Illinois, democratic ideals of equal opportunity and open access (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Such access is tied to the general principle that students from all socioeconomic backgrounds should be afforded the opportunity to pursue academic or career goals (Rhoads & Valadez, 1996); therefore supporting the democratic ideal that a college education should be available to everyone. The open-door admission policy is a cornerstone upon which the community college's commitment to access is built. In 2004, non-majority students represented 38% of the community college student population, up from 19.6% in 1976 (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2006; NCES, 2005a). Similarly, women represented 56% of the community college student population in 2004 compared to 45% in 1975 (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2006; NCES, 2005b).

I conducted the study in one urban community college setting because non-traditional students typically attend community colleges. I conducted the study at a community college west of the Mississippi.

## Participants

As I contemplated my research questions, I thought about the women who would have the stories I was seeking. Who would be able to speak of their community college experiences as well as the financial issues and family responsibilities that come with obtaining a higher education? My thoughts went to single mothers. Women who are doing it all by themselves: family, work, and school. I wanted to find out what it was like to make it on your own as a single mother enrolled in higher education. Therefore, I

interviewed low-income, African American women who are single mothers working full- or part-time and have attended the community college full- or part-time for at least two continuous semesters up to completing a degree or certificate.

I interviewed four participants. I interviewed each participant no less than three times. I replaced each participant's name and all other names, schools, places, and geographical locations with pseudonyms throughout the stories. The protocol for each interview is discussed in greater detail in the data collection section. When looking for participants, there were five requirements. First, the participants had to be African American women ages 25 years and older. Second, the participants must have been enrolled at the community college full- or part-time for at least two continuous semesters or be a community college completer. A community college completer included students who have completed an Associate of Art (AA), Science (AS), General Studies (AGS), or Applied Science (AAS) degree; or have completed a certificate of 30 hours or more in one of the technical or allied health vocational fields. Third, the participants had to self-identify as low-income either currently or during their studies at the community college if they are completers. Low-income was defined as a household income from \$9,800.00 for a family of one to \$33,600.00 for a family of eight (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006) or if the participant received a Pell Grant for her studies. The Pell Grant is a grant sponsored by the federal government for postsecondary education and is awarded based on financial need. Fourth, the participant had to be a single mother. Finally, the participants had to agree to allow me to tape record their interviews.

The five requirements were necessary for various reasons. The first requirement was that the participant be an African American woman age 25 years or older. This was

important because non-traditional women ages 25 and older represent 94% of students in community colleges (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2006). Furthermore, racial-ethnic minorities account for 38% of the non-traditional population so it was important to hear their voices (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2006). The second requirement was that participants must have been enrolled at the community college full- or part-time for at least two continuous semesters or be a community college completer. This was necessary to capture the details of the student's collegiate experience and to allow discussion on how the student adjusted to the duality of college life and her personal life. The third requirement was that the participants self-identify as low-income. This was important because I placed participant reflections regarding SES and education within the context of their lives. The fourth requirement was that the participant be a single mother. This was necessary to capture the details of being solely accountable for managing the responsibilities of family, work, and school. The fifth requirement was that the participants allow their interviews to be tape-recorded. This was necessary in order to capture the essence and depth of the data collected during the interviews.

I submitted a cover letter and to the chair of the institutional review board of the community college to obtain permission to conduct the study on the campus. After I completed institutional requirements, I was granted approval allowing me to conduct the study on the campus, and the chair of the institutional review board wrote me a letter of cooperation. I gained access to the participants through the following sampling methods. These methods were appropriate for this project because of availability and accessibility. I selected the participants through purposeful sampling using the following approaches: convenience sampling, nominated sampling, and snowball sampling. I began with

convenience sampling, as the participants were located in a geographic area west of the Mississippi. Nominated sampling consisted of family, friends, and colleagues (nominator) who were familiar with my topic of study and recommended prospective participants (nominee) for the study. For nominated samples, I gave the nominator an electronic copy of the cover letter and informational flyer regarding the study and asked the nominator to give the information to the nominee. The cover letter and flyer included my email address and phone number so prospective participants could contact me. The nominee contacted me if she was interested in participating in the study. Snowball sampling occurred when I met with each participant. I asked each if she knew of others who met the criteria for the study and might be willing to participate. If the participant recommended someone, I followed the same process as with the nominated sampling. Three of the participants resulted from nominated sampling. The final participant was a result of snowball sampling.

### **Data Collection**

The overarching research question that guided this study was, “How do low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students come to the decision to enroll in higher education?” The interview framework that best suited the research question was Seidman’s (2006) format of interviewing. This format allowed me to “understand the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9). Although I utilized the three-interview series, I met with participants four times. The first meeting was an informational meeting. The second, third, and fourth meetings consisted of the interviews. All of the meetings are discussed in greater detail later in this section. I transcribed, analyzed, and interpreted the data between interviews. I

also member checked and shared my interpretations with the participant for clarification and feedback. I utilized a fifth meeting, when necessary, to clarify data from the previous interviews or solicit additional feedback from participants as an additional part of the member checking process.

As a result of the aforementioned sampling approaches, each participant contacted me via phone at which time I verified the required criteria with her to be sure she qualified for the study. Once verified, this became the 20-minute informational meeting (meeting one). In all four cases, meeting one was a phone meeting as this was most convenient for the participant. During this informational meeting, I discussed the details of the study, reviewed the expectations of the participants, and reviewed the information covered in the consent form. I concluded by asking if the student was willing to participate in the study. After she agreed to participate in the study, I scheduled the first interview with the participant. I scheduled the first interview for all participants during their first meeting. I interviewed four participants and conducted a total of thirteen interviews. Each interview lasted 60-90 minutes in length. The interviews for two of the participants were conducted in public places; while interviews for the other two took place in the participants' homes. This is important for me to point out as the women's natural settings shed light into who they are. For example, one of the women described strong religious beliefs, and the artifacts around her home did match with her deep religious belief in God.

During the first face-to-face semi-structured interview (meeting two), I had each participant sign a consent form providing her voluntary consent to participate in the study. I followed a standard interview procedure for each interview. I explained the

confidentiality piece of the study and gave the participant the opportunity to select a pseudonym for herself. As stated earlier, I replaced each participant's name and all other identifiable references with pseudonyms. I asked open-ended questions and interjected follow-up questions or probes when appropriate. At the beginning of each interview, I explained that I would be preparing transcripts from each interview and secured permission to do member checks in the future. After the interview, I transcribed, analyzed, and interpreted the data. At the beginning of the next interview (meeting three), I member checked and shared my interpretations with the participant for clarification and feedback. I gave each participant the opportunity to review the transcripts to make any corrections, adjustments, or deletions at her discretion. I followed the same process for the remaining interviews (meetings four and five).

The interviews consisted of the following structure-- interview one: focused life history; interview two: details of the experiences; and interview three: reflections on the meaning of those experiences. The purpose of this structure was to place the participant's experiences within the context of their lives, the way they remembered the experiences, and the meaning they attached to those experiences. Moreover, Seidman postulated "...behavior becomes meaningful and understandable when placed in the context of their lives and the lives of those around them" (pp. 16-17). By examining the context of a participant's early views of SES and education, and comparing them with her current views, I hoped to place the experiences in that focused life history.

The goal of the first interview was to gather a focused life history of the participant's experiences up to the time she became a non-traditional student. The main focus was on thoughts about SES and education. The main categories of interest were:

familial SES, parents' education, attitudes regarding education, and participant's academic experiences. I began by asking questions about the participant's early experiences with SES and education. I then moved the participants forward in time by asking questions about how they perceive SES and education as an adult. By gathering information regarding how they perceive earlier and then more recent experiences with SES and education, I attempted to place their understanding of SES and education in the context of their lives. Table 2 shows the protocol I followed for the first interview and is included in the appendixes.

The goal of the second interview was to determine what life is like for the participant as a non-traditional student. The main categories of interest were the various aspects of the participant's life such as her education, work, and family life. I attempted to elicit concrete details of experiences in these areas. Table 3 shows the protocol I followed for the second interview and is included in the appendixes.

The goal of the third interview was to explore what it means to the participant to be a non-traditional student. I inquired about what has changed in personal and academic areas for each participant. Seidman (2006) contended that in this interview, finding the meaning "...addresses the intellectual and emotional connections between the participant's work and life... [and] requires that the participants look at how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation" (p. 18). My desire in this interview was to allow participants the freedom to discuss the changes without a predetermined structure. However, I did follow up with more specific categories of change including: changes in educational philosophy, educational aspirations, and view of SES. I realize this was not an all-inclusive list of the possible ways SES and education

can change or affect a person, but my goal was to highlight the essential elements. Table 4 shows the protocol I followed for the third interview and is included in the appendixes.

Narrative inquiry provided me, the researcher, with the opportunity to delve moderately into the participant's personal life and demand a heightened awareness and sensitivity to information that was revealed in the discussion. In order for this to occur, I was quick to establish a caring relationship with the participant and encouraged her to relay her stories. The relationship was based on mutual collaboration, honesty, and trust. After each interview, I recorded field notes regarding the participant, the environment, and any noticeable changes in the disposition of the participant at any given time.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis occurred throughout the data collection process. The data were 80-100 pages of transcripts per participant totaling nearly 400 pages of data. I used the interpretive format, which Denzin (1989b) determined as the process of making sense of an individual's life. The interpretive format allowed me to present the participant's life by presenting her words, followed by interpretations from me. Therefore, I interpreted and analyzed data in between interviews. At the beginning of the second interview, I member checked and shared my interpretations with the participant for clarification and feedback on data from the first interview. I made any corrections, adjustments, or deletions recommended by the participant. I followed the same process for the subsequent interviews. I accomplished my interpretive analysis by implementing various components of Denzin's interpretive process. These components included: capturing, bracketing, construction, and contextualizing. The capturing phase involved gathering the stories told by the participants. Bracketing involved isolating the key elements of the stories. The

construction phase built on bracketing and involved putting the key elements together again in sequential order. Contextualizing involved relocating the bracketed phenomenon back in the worlds of the lived experience. I included the manner I implemented each component later in the section.

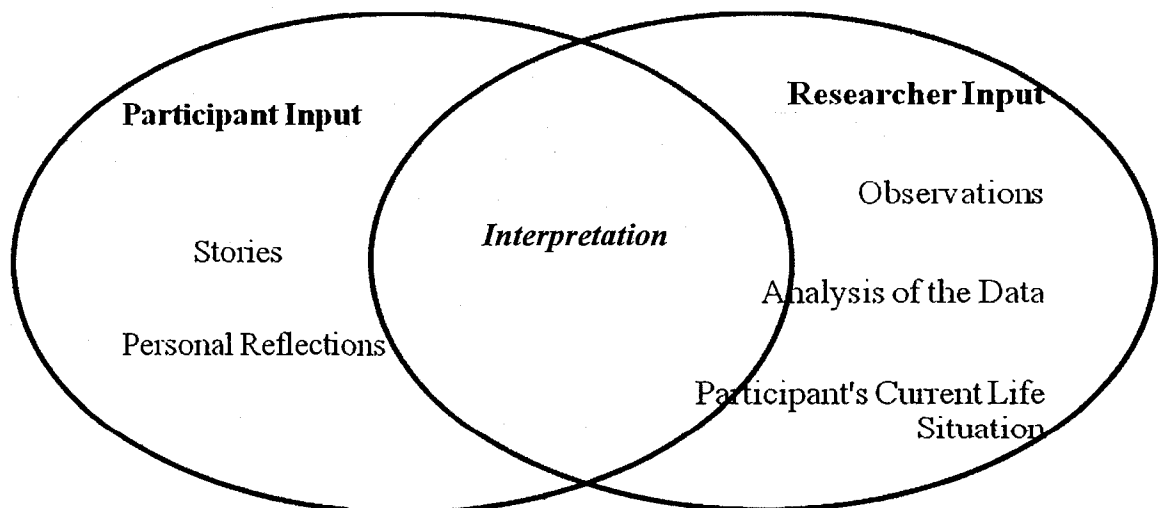
I focused on recollections from two areas of the participants' lives, SES and education. Seidman (2006) called this variation of the biographical method "in-depth, phenomenologically-based interviewing. This method combines life-history interviewing and focused, in-depth interviewing informed by assumptions drawn from phenomenology..." (p. 15). I gathered *childhood* recollections in the first interview, recollections from *adulthood* in the second interview, and how the participants feel they have *changed* because of those experiences in the third interview. The underlying assumptions of my research are that (1) pivotal events occur in everyone's life, (2) these events hold meaning for the individual, (3) by interpreting those meanings, one can understand how the person experienced that event, and (4) the deep inner self of a participant can be revealed in the stories she tells.

Below are the steps I followed during the data analysis process: (1) In order to understand the participants' lives, I read all the transcripts of each participant several times to further familiarize myself with the participants' lives. (2) I implemented the components of Denzin's (1989b) interpretive process: capturing, bracketing, construction, and contextualizing. (3) In the capturing phase, I captured the stories the participants told during the interviews. (4) In the bracketing phase, I went through the transcripts and highlighted the key elements of the stories in the transcripts. I used this phase to code and deconstruct the life story. (5) In the construction phase, I put the stories

together in a sequential order because they were not presented that way in the interviews. I built individual stories for each of the participants using rich, thick description. (6) In the contextualizing phase, I relocated the bracketed phenomenon back in the worlds of the lived experience. These observations are included in my interpretations.

I presented researcher interpretations throughout each story. My interpretations are shown in italics. For each woman, I used two forms of input (participant and researcher) to develop the interpretations. I utilized the participant's input by considering the stories presented in her interviews and her personal reflections. I utilized my own (researcher) observations which included physical and non-physical mannerisms or behavior that occurred during the interviews. In conjunction with those factors, I considered her current life situation. This combination allowed me to see how past experiences impact the woman's life today. Figure 2 is a visual representation of the researcher interpretation process I used.

**Figure 2. Researcher Interpretation Process**

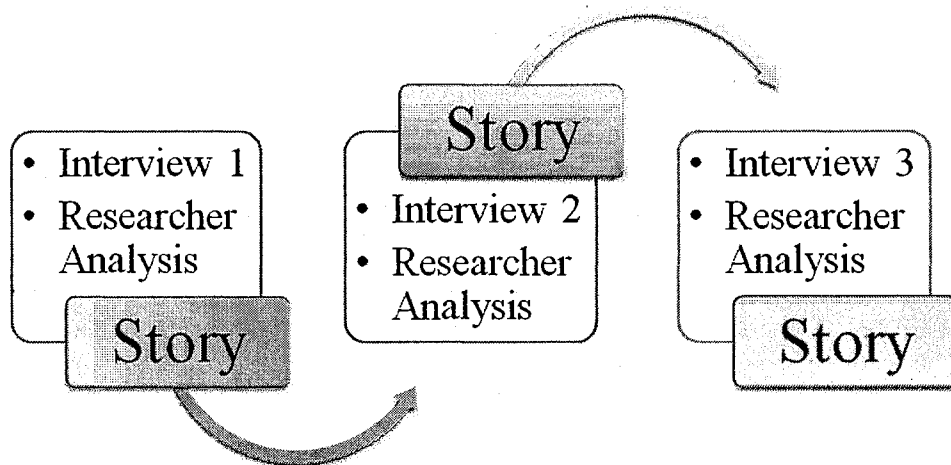


The interpretation served two purposes. First, it supplied the background for a particular section of the story. Second, it provided contextualization by relocating the

experiences in the lived world of the woman. In other words, I presented my thoughts on how the various experiences have impacted the woman's life and the meaning she gained from those experiences. Then I took that information and formed my interpretation of the meaning she gave to the various experiences that have occurred throughout her life.

The reiterative analysis process is intricate. Three or four interviews with each participant produced 80 - 100 pages of data per participant. The reiterative analysis process involved analyzing the data after each interview, interpreting it, and juxtaposing the data to form the story. I repeated this process after each interview. Figure 3 is a visual representation of the reiterative analysis process I used.

**Figure 3. Reiterative Analysis Process**



I used a reiterative process to interpret the meanings of phrases and inspected these meanings to determine what they revealed about the participant. This demonstrated how each piece of various experiences contributed to the whole.

### **Trustworthiness**

I attained validity of my results by applying Merriam's (2002) notions of trustworthiness of the data collection process and findings. The aim of trustworthiness is

to support the idea that I went through competent measures to produce a track record of quality work (Merriam, 2002). This narrative inquiry consists of stories and rich, thick, description. I enhanced trustworthiness through the following strategies: member checks, peer review/examination, researcher reflexivity, and audit trail. To address member checks, I completed member checks with all of the participants. In the process of member checking, each of the research participants reviewed their respective transcripts. I asked the participants to make recommendations for any corrections, adjustments, or deletions they deemed necessary. To address peer review/examination, my adviser and other dissertation committee members read through and commented on my findings. To address researcher reflexivity, I kept detailed field notes to track my thought processes and journaled reflexive moments as they occurred throughout the study. My complete audit trail consists of the original transcripts, data analysis documents, and field notes which included my reflexive thoughts. A template for the field notes is included in the appendixes. The other items are not included due to the sensitivity of the information.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Narrative inquiry explores the personal experiences of those who participate in the research. Since I wanted to find out how these women made sense of their life experiences, the primary design of the study was narrative inquiry so I could “give voice” to the women in the study. I used a focused, in-depth interview technique to gather the data. When I first embarked upon this journey I was not sure of what I would find. Fortunately, I met four women who agreed to share their life stories with me. This chapter consists of the individual life stories of the four women.

I knew I could easily relate to these women because I grew up in circumstances similar to theirs. I was African American. I was poor. My parents divorced when I was four years old, so I was raised in a single parent household. Tisdell (2002) refers to co-creating as shared conversation between the interviewer and interviewee. The interviewer shares personal, relevant information with the interviewee during the interview to develop a rapport. The vast similarities between me and these women made it extremely easy for me to co-create during their interviews. I also wanted to avoid the concept of othering where the participant shares personal data and I share nothing about myself (Fine, 1998). I recognized the sensitivity of my questions so it was extremely important to me to avoid isolating the participants. I wanted to give these women an opportunity to tell their stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000); an opportunity they looked forward to and welcomed. These women were extremely comfortable opening up to me from the beginning. On several occasions I heard ‘I couldn’t wait to tell you what happened to me at school’ or ‘I started to call you because I really needed to talk’. They were open, honest, and quite frank about their life experiences surrounding SES and education. It

was as though they were glad someone was willing to listen their story. They had no problem opening up. It was my job to interpret the essences of their experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The interpretive process was discussed in the previous chapter.

Here is a recap of the process I used to develop each of their stories as stated in Chapter Three. First, I captured the stories from her transcripts. Next, I went through the transcripts and I highlighted the key elements that I felt were part of the story. Then I came back and I constructed the key elements in a sequential order because they were not presented that way in the interviews. This is where I formed the story. I constructed each story around various topics throughout the participant's life span. Finally, I contextualized various events in the participant's life by relocating them back into her lived world to determine the meaning she gave to those experiences. These observations are included in my interpretations.

## Tiffany's Story

*My first contact with Tiffany was over the phone and we hit it off instantly. A mutual acquaintance told her about my study and she thought it was interesting. Her enthusiastic and energetic attitude about life was contagious. She was the second woman to agree to participate in the study, but the first to start her interviews. Our face-to-face meeting was equally pleasant. Tiffany carried herself well. Her ebony skin tone glowed in contrast to the lime green top and matching jacket she wore. Black slacks completed her outfit and fit her slim 5'6 frame well. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail which opened up her oval shaped face. It was obvious that she took great pride in her appearance. Tiffany was mild-mannered but spoke with deliberate words. She was confident, and well organized which I noted as she contemplated her position in life. She is a twenty-six year old single mother of two. Her sons are ages five and three.*

*Tiffany and I met at a public library for all three interviews. When we first entered the library, it was quiet, but there were several people around. I was not familiar with the location as it was Tiffany's preference so I quickly looked around for a private place to meet. There were some stairs to our left so we decided to go upstairs in search of a quiet, private place to talk. There were fewer people upstairs. We entered a large room where books lined the walls. Six computers sat in the middle of the room. Tables and chairs were placed throughout the remainder of the room. There were two smaller locked rooms at the back of the larger room. Both contained a table and chair set. We were able to secure one of those rooms for our interviews. It was a quiet place where Tiffany and I could talk privately. Tiffany appeared to be comfortable sharing her story there. Tiffany's story is structured around various topics throughout her life span. The topics surround a change of plans, the essence of Tiffany, follow your heart, juggling act, making ends meet, overcoming obstacles, and sacrifice: better in the long run.*

### **Change of Plans**

*I opened Tiffany's story with this heading because that is what happened in her life. We'll see that she had a solid educational plan, but life situations called for a change of plans. Those life situations included her mother's injury and having children.*

My dream is to complete my master's in social work. It's been a long road, but I know I'll get there. I just want my kids to have the same appreciation for education that I have. I want them to have more than I had. I recently received my associate's degree in psychology but getting to this point in life hasn't been easy. I got off to a good start and was even a little bit ahead when I finished high school. I was able to take college credits during my senior year of high school since my parents wouldn't let me work. I would

have remained on track, but my mom was involved in a car accident and injured two discs in her back the semester I was supposed to graduate from Urban Community College (UCC). She and my father were having some problems at the time so I took it upon myself to take care of her. Unfortunately, taking care of her began to interfere with my school work. My brother and sister were supposed to help, but they never came when it was their turn to sit with Mom. I was missing classes left and right and couldn't keep up with assignments so I ended up withdrawing from my classes.

I planned to return to school when Mom got better but life happened, and I ended up staying out for four years. Where did the time go? Who knows? I got pregnant with my first son, Brandon, and tried to re-enroll, but I couldn't finish the semester because he was due. So I withdrew again and after that my main focus was taking care of my son. His father and I broke up because I refused to put up with his foolishness. I was extremely head strong back then and had decided I didn't have to deal with it. I'll tell you more about him later. I loved him but our relationship was off and on. We ended up with a second child, yet we were still unmarried. So there I was with two children and totally off my educational track.

I had the perfect plan for my education. I was going to graduate from UCC with my associate's in psychology when I was 20 years old. I would immediately move on to Capital City University where I would only have to do one year to get my bachelor's degree since I had started taking classes when I was a senior in high school. I would then continue with my master's. While my dream for obtaining the degree is still alive, having kids changed everything. School was so easy before I had them. I used to get A's all the time. Nothing else was acceptable. I would retake a class if I didn't make an A. But

trying to maintain grades like that with children has been virtually impossible for me. I tried it at first, but I became one of those TV moms, and I didn't like it. I found myself keeping the boys in front of the television all the time so I could finish a reading assignment or work on a paper. I would fuss at them if they messed up anything in the house. I found it extremely hard to keep up with everything. So I developed my color-coded system which has been a life saver for me.

It's a simple system really. I prepare it on Excel. I take our favorite colors; I like purples and pinks, so my school days are purple. My workdays are pink. My older son is in school, so his color is blue. I include all of our activities; church, bath time, everything. Everything has a color. The schedule starts at five in the morning and ends at midnight. I prepare daily and weekly schedules and the colors often overlap. Wherever I see white squares or white space, I know I have extra time. I use that time to go grocery shopping, to pay bills, or run errands. I update it everyday and keep the schedules on the refrigerator. It works really well when people come over to help me because I've been doing it since my kids were young. Everyone appreciates my organization. I wondered how my mother managed everything. I quickly realized that she wasn't a single mother, and she wasn't in school. It makes a big difference.

*Tiffany's life situations caused her to deter from her original educational plan. Though deterred, she did not give up. She persevered. I commend her dedication to her mother's recovery. She sacrificed her own plans to fulfill familial obligations. Her plans were further deterred when she began having children. Their conceptions were not planned and once again Tiffany had to make adjustments to her educational plans. She knew time management would be the key to her success. Though Tiffany's plans continued to change, the constant factor throughout the changes was her commitment to education. Tiffany realizes she has not accomplished all of her educational goals, but she constantly keeps her eye on the degree she desires. She believes in the value of education and is instilling that value system in her children. She is determined to be a positive role model for her children and other family members.*

## **The Essence of Tiffany**

*A person's character speaks to the essence of who she is. This section of Tiffany's story addresses family, religion, and self-esteem. I chose to address these areas because they make up the essence of who Tiffany is. We will see how Tiffany was raised in a loving family; a family who loved and relied on God. We will also see how Tiffany dealt with and overcame self-esteem issues.*

I grew up in a strong family environment. My father owned a construction business and worked hard so my mother could be a stay-at-home mom. We had a modest lifestyle. We had what we needed. I felt blessed that I came from a two-parent household. I saw differences in my family and other families in our neighborhood. My father made sure we did activities as a family. We went on family outings on Saturdays and to church on Sundays. Religion was important in our family. My parents encouraged each of their children to foster a relationship with God. I've made mistakes in my life, but I learned early on to trust in God. My grandmother taught me to give God glory in anything I do. She said it gives God glory if it comes from within. So for me, God ties into everything I do; every aspect of my life. I can't tell anybody else what to do, but that's what I believe. I didn't see that in other families. My cousins didn't have that. Their mother was a single mom, and I could tell my cousins needed the type of structure we had in our lives. They didn't have that. They just had their mom, and she really didn't care what they did. She had a drug habit and didn't have time for her children. She had three boys and all three of them have been in the penitentiary. I thank God for my parents.

I always liked school. I loved going to school because I couldn't think of anything else I would want to do at that time. According to my parents, everyone in the house had a role. My father's role was to provide for the family. My mother's role was to care for us. Our role was to go to school. So ditching school was never something I thought about

doing. My parents always stressed going. We even had to do school work during the summertime. We didn't get to play all summer. We had to read books, do book reports. My mom would go out and buy new books, and we had to read them and do book reports. We had to do math. But I value those ideals now. The values I learned from my parents are the kind of values I want to do for my kids today.

While I enjoyed learning, elementary school was the hardest for me because I felt I was discriminated against. I had a bad experience that I will never forget. I grew up in the 1980s and many inner-city kids were bused to this school, Hoffman Elementary. Hoffman was a Campbell public school, but it was in the Suburban Heights area. I don't know if the people didn't want us there or what, but there were several Black teachers, and we had a Black principal. So you would have thought it would have been okay, but it wasn't. There was a White teacher who used to pick on me every day. She called me ugly every day. She called me a Black monkey. I don't know why she chose me to torment. I don't even know if she treated anybody else that way. I never told anyone. I never said anything. Maybe it was because I was always in the office. I got into a great deal of trouble at Hoffman. I don't know why; it wasn't necessary. I used to do stuff for attention. I was bad. I was bad for no reason. I think I was just acting out. I guess it was my way of coping with the discrimination at that school. I don't know what was going on with me, but I was always in trouble. When I think back on it, I don't know if she picked on me because I got in trouble or if I got in trouble because she picked on me. The strange thing about all of it was that I never told my mom. I don't know why I never told my parents, but I didn't. I didn't learn much at Hoffman either. I think there was a mental block. I didn't like the way I was treated there, so I didn't learn there. Most of my

learning occurred at home. My mother helped us with our homework. She also taught us self-respect and self-worth.

I didn't really start learning in school until I was transferred to Wilson Elementary School. That's when I really started learning, and I knew I was learning. I was doing well. I remember that. I liked it at Wilson and I learned there. I was happy at that school because the teachers didn't discriminate. But I didn't go there long. I only went there for a quarter or so before I was transferred back to Hoffman. I hated to go back. But this time it was different. I think I learned that if you want to learn, you will learn as much as you can. When I left Wilson, I had the understanding to know that you can go to school and attend without really learning. You have to motivate yourself. So I think by me wanting to learn and wanting to do better and seeing how I did at Wilson, I realized I could do the same thing even though I was at Hoffman. So I took that attitude back with me, and I kept it. I'm not really sure of why I had to go back to Hoffman because I had been expelled. Let me explain the circumstances leading to my expulsion.

Remember the teacher who used to call me a Black monkey every day? She bothered me every day, and there was this boy named Patrick. He was a White boy and he got mad at me for something, I don't remember what it was now, but back then everybody's coats were in the cloak room. He got all the coats dusty and dirty, all but mine. Then he came into the classroom and told the teacher that I did it. So the teacher told me to get up and dust everybody's coats off. I asked her how I could have done it when I had been sitting in class the whole time. She didn't care. She tried to make me get up and do it. My mom and dad always taught me not to admit to doing something if I didn't do it. So I stood my ground. The teacher threatened to take me to the office. That

was fine with me because I wanted to call my mom anyway. She wouldn't take me to the office though.

Instead, she went and got the mean teacher [the one who used to call me names] to watch the class so she could make me clean the coats. And I wouldn't do it. I just stood there. I wouldn't do it. After a while, the mean teacher came out and told my teacher to go back into the classroom, and she would have me do it. She came up to me and twisted my arm and she said 'Listen here you Black monkey, you're going to do what your teacher tells you.' I told her she was hurting me. I said 'You're twisting my arm and you're hurting me.' That seemed to amuse her. She said 'oh, the little monkey has feelings,' and she kept twisting my arm. I started crying and asked her to 'please stop, that hurts.' She thought it was funny and continued. So I bit her arm so she would let me go. It worked. She let me go but grabbed me again so I stumped on her foot, and I jumped up and punched her in her eye. I gave her a black eye, and I ran out of the school. They tried to use my sister to get me to come back into the school. I didn't trust them, so I wouldn't go back inside. They sent the janitor outside to chase me. I was the fastest one in my third-grade class so I knew he wouldn't catch me. They finally called my mom when I wouldn't come in. I stayed outside until she got there. When mom arrived, she was furious. I don't know what they told her, but once she found out what happened she wanted to fight the mean teacher. The police were called and they told my mom if she touched the teacher, she would go to jail. So my mom said she was going to take us out of the school. After she started the process of taking us out, they expelled me.

My experience with the teacher really damaged my self-esteem. It was so bad that I grew up with a complex. I already had some issues about my skin tone and this situation

didn't help. I always thought I was ugly. It was as though her words stuck with me. Even as I grew up I would ask myself 'Am I? Am I who she said I was?' In my heart of hearts I didn't believe it because I knew my parents loved me. They uplifted me. They always told me I was beautiful. They taught me to be proud of who I am and where I came from. I had those values, but I felt like they were my parents, and they were supposed to uplift me like that. But to hear these negative comments from someone who didn't even know me, to hear someone tell me day after day that I would never amount to anything; it did a great deal of damage. At some point (I believe it was after I attended Wilson) I began to use the harassment as motivation. I was determined to prove that teacher and everyone else wrong. My life was going to be a success. However, my negative experiences at Hoffman have caused me to be very particular about the schools I put my kids in. I want to make sure they don't go through anything like what I went through. I will not let my kids go to a Suburban Heights school. I will not. I want to do everything I can to protect them from people like that.

As a child, I was ashamed of my dark skin. I always thought that teacher picked on me because I had dark skin. I hated being dark-skinned and wanted to bleach my skin. Back then, being dark-skinned was not a good thing in my mind. Life seemed to be much easier for light-skinned Blacks. I got my dark skin from my mother. My sister is light-skinned, so we got totally different responses from people. We were treated differently. Very frequently, I was asked if I was adopted because my relatives are light-skinned and I'm dark-skinned. We have Indian blood in our family so there are many different skin tones. My dad has caramel-colored skin, similar to my brother. But my sister may be a little lighter. I used to have such a huge problem with this. It goes back to

society. Even during slave times, we dark-skinned Blacks couldn't get kitchen jobs. We had to be in the fields. So it's hard. You try not to hate, but it's deep. It runs deep, and unless you have been on that side of the coin it's really hard to understand. I think it's even hard for some light-skinned Black people to understand, because there are differences that they have not experienced.

I finally was able to work through my issues so my self-esteem is fine now. I wouldn't trade my dark-skin for anything now. I realized that my dark skin was beautiful. It wasn't until I was in high school though. My self-esteem started to change when one of my friends brought us matching outfits. I never wore shorts or tight fitting clothes. I never wanted to stand out. She had to coax me to wear the outfit and when I wore it my life began to change. I received several compliments on how nice I looked. I began to see myself differently. It kind of brought up my self-esteem. I would have thought I would have experienced these feelings in middle school, but it was a bit later for me and it changed my life. It changed my life in a good way. I was able to reach back and pull from my parents' teaching. I knew who I was. I was a beautiful Black young woman. I was proud of who I was. I'm thankful for that background. I'm thankful to my parents for who I am today.

*Tiffany is extremely proud of her upbringing. She comes from a very religious background where her parents and her maternal grandmother nurtured her faith in God. It is this faith that Tiffany credits with helping her deal with life's adversities. It is also the one factor that has remained consistent in Tiffany's life. I could feel the sincerity in her voice as she described the gratefulness she felt for the values her parents instilled in her. Her parents were very strict regarding education. Neither of them had earned their high school diploma, and they believed education would provide a better life for their children. Her father didn't want his children to endure the physical labor he endured, so he stressed education. Tiffany was a good student during her childhood but an experience with a White teacher in elementary school scarred her for some time. Already suffering from low self-esteem because of her dark skin tone, Tiffany internalized the incident but never shared it with anyone, not even her parents. Over time, she has been able to*

*overcome the negative effects of the experience, but it hasn't been easy. She now realizes the value of internal and external beauty. Tiffany's issue with her skin tone is not unfounded. African Americans have a wide range of skin tones that vary from very fair to ebony-toned. These varying skin tones have long been a source of conflict among African Americans. The varying tones resulted from White slave masters raping the African American women and fathering their children. The skin tone conflicts also date back to slavery when light-skinned African Americans were permitted to work inside the plantation home while dark-skinned African Americans had to labor outside in the fields.*

### **Follow Your Heart**

*Tiffany will be the first to admit that she never intended to be a single parent. She comes from a religious background and planned to marry before having children. She planned to be a stay-at-home mom so she could be there for her children just as her mother was there for Tiffany and her siblings. Unfortunately, Tiffany's life took a different path. She described two romantic relationships in her life which revolved around Marcus, the love of her life, and her ex-husband, Oliver. After making what she deemed a bad decision to marry, Tiffany ended her marriage to Oliver and chose to follow her heart in love. Let's see how this part of her life evolved.*

I fell in love and ended up getting pregnant out of wedlock. Marcus is the love of my life, but the pregnancy was not planned. I had just started college, and I was just coming out of another relationship. Needless to say, there were several issues going on in my life. It was a chance meeting with Marcus. We were out with friends and his friend met my friend. I thought he was cute but I wouldn't say anything to him because I don't approach men. I just won't do it. I think it is disrespectful for a female to throw herself out there like that. He seemed to be eyeing me as well, and I thought 'you can look all you want,' but I knew I wasn't going to say a word to him. He finally approached me and we started talking. I always listen to Christian music, and when Marcus got into my car, he started singing the song that was playing on the radio. I was impressed because it wasn't a popular song that anybody would know. So we started talking about the Bible. I had been asking God to send me a godly man. I wanted someone with a spiritual

foundation, and I thought the Lord had answered my prayers. We started out slow, but our relationship progressed fairly quickly.

We were together about eight months when I found out I was pregnant. I was very early in the pregnancy, about two weeks along, and although we hadn't planned it, Marcus and I both were thrilled. But when my ex-boyfriend found out I was dating someone else, he made Marcus believe I was still seeing him and that I wasn't pregnant by Marcus, but I was pregnant by him instead. I'm still not quite sure why Marcus believed him because we were planning to be a family. But after my ex- put those thoughts in his head, it was like Marcus couldn't let it go. I was furious with him. How could he think I was sleeping with both of them at the same time? What kind of girl did he think I was? I refused to tolerate his constant questions about the paternity of my baby. I did my best to reassure him, but nothing seemed to work. He continued to question me about the baby, so I dumped him. I told him he either believed me or he didn't. I said 'if you ask me about this one more time we're done'. He asked me again about two weeks later, and that did it for me. It was over just like that. I admit that I was extremely stubborn and head strong, and I made a bad decision. I was also hurt. How could he think I was cheating on him? We broke up early in the pregnancy, but I still loved him. We both needed to grow up and just couldn't be together at the time. So there I was pregnant and alone. I wasn't sure of what I would do. I knew my life would be different. But Marcus and I had planned to be together to raise this baby together. What would happen now? Would I have to raise this baby alone?

My answer would come in the form of Oliver. My family thought he was God sent and so did I. I had known Oliver since I was in the seventh grade, but I didn't start

seeing him (romantically) until I was six months pregnant. I didn't love him and didn't want to marry him, but my family had different plans. They felt that I should be married since I was expecting. "This is who you should be with," they said. He loves you and he will love your baby as though it were his own. They thought he would be there for me and the baby. I always wanted to please my family. So I ended up getting married against my better judgment. My family insisted that marrying Oliver would be best for me, and the Lord was sending me the perfect man. We were 19 and 20 years old when we married, and it turned out to be terrible partly because he changed and partly because I loved someone else. I knew in my heart it was a mistake to marry him, but I still considered myself to be young, and I valued my family's input. They were older than I; they had been through more than I and I knew they wouldn't intentionally steer me in the wrong direction. But they were wrong.

Oliver was there for me during my pregnancy and even though I didn't love him, I married him anyway. I thought I would grow to love him but I didn't. It was a stupid mistake. He accepted the fact that I was pregnant and was great during the pregnancy. He attended all of my doctor's appointments and was there when I had the baby. He insisted that this was going to be OUR baby. But life was different after we got married. They were good in the beginning, and I just figured this is what God wanted for me. Oliver was really showing that he loved me and this was what he wanted. And we were together, so I thought maybe this IS God's will after all. I could not have been more wrong. It was a disaster. It seemed like our lives were totally opposite after we got married and got our own place. That's actually when I struggled.

Before the birth, we both worked two jobs. I stayed home after I had the baby and that's when our lives changed. He said he was okay with me staying home because he understood I wanted to be a stay-at-home mom for my child, like my mother was for us. I wanted to be a PTA mom. The change was not good for our marriage. I guess I was living in fairy tale land. He totally changed. We were married for two years, and he was never home. The bills weren't getting paid. We didn't have food. I started baby sitting at home to try to bring in money and was beginning to think I didn't need him. He wasn't helping me financially anyway. He wasn't there, so I considered myself to be a single mom. I knew I did not want to continue in the marriage so I started baby sitting and saving my money. When I had enough money to get a divorce, I paid for one. My family was against it, but they eventually found out how he was. I never told anybody about his behavior because I always believed in what the Bible said, for better or worse, thick and thin. We were young so I thought it was natural for us to go through difficulties. In the end though, my heart still belonged to someone else...my child's father, Marcus.

*Marcus is the love of Tiffany's life. They have two beautiful children together, who we'll learn more about in a later section. The couple recently reunited to live as a family after years of living in two different states. They plan to marry in the near future.*

I knew I wanted to be with Marcus, but I was not woman enough to stand up to my family and tell them that I didn't want to marry Oliver. I grew up during my marriage. It was during this time that I figured out what was best for me as a woman. I always thought of others before myself. At that point, I started putting myself first. Unfortunately, by that time, the one with whom I was in love found out I was married, and he moved to Georgia. So I just lived my life. I never thought Marcus and I would get back together, but he ended up coming to visit after I ran into his mother at the store. She

asked to see the baby. And the minute she saw Brandon, she knew he was her grandson. He looked just like Marcus. She invited me over for dinner one night and Marcus called while I was there. She told him I was there and that I had his son. She told him the baby looked just like him. Marcus wanted to talk to me, but I didn't want to talk to him because I was still upset with him for questioning our baby's paternity. I got on the phone, and he asked me how the baby was doing...blah, blah, blah. He gave me all of his contact information. I put it in my purse, but I had no intention of calling him, ever.

One day I was just thinking about him and I called. That was the beginning of our re-connection. We started over the phone as friends, just talking casually on the phone. In December he came down to see Brandon. Brandon was one and a half years old at that time. We had sex and it was during that visit that I became pregnant with our second child. So then we had two babies, but we were still living in two different time zones. We finally reconciled to the point where we're in the same state. So technically I'm not single, but I'm single.

Marcus recently relocated from the south to be with us. It's been difficult, but we decided we really need to be together if we're going to make this work. We're planning to get married soon. I was going to quit school so many times to relocate. I knew he was the person I wanted to be with because I compared all of my boyfriends to him. I also couldn't see my kids being around anyone else. Before we reconnected Marcus had gotten to the point where he was in a serious relationship with someone else and they were talking marriage. I really didn't want that so I seriously was considering going there. After giving it some thought, I didn't really know what I was moving into. I didn't have any family there. What would I do if we didn't work out? Where would I live? What

would I do with two kids? How would I get all my belongings down there? I was not making enough money to ship all my stuff, and I didn't want to sell everything I worked so hard for. So, I basically decided against going. It wasn't feasible for me and the kids to relocate, but it would be fairly simple for him to move alone. I gave him an ultimatum. Either you come back or we won't be together. He wasn't happy about it, but I stood my ground. I was tired of holding everything together. I felt like I was holding myself back as well as the boys. They deserved to have someone in their life, and he was their father. The boys needed him full-time, not to be a part-time daddy for a few months in the summer. I didn't sign on to have a summer daddy. So I told him 'I'm not doing it anymore. If you come, you come. If you don't, you don't. I'm moving on.' I stopped calling him. I stopped accepting his calls. The next thing I knew, he was on his way.

He said he didn't want to lose me. He wanted to give us a real chance because we never really had that opportunity. So this is like our chance. I think we're destined to be together because of all the adversity we've been through. We've overcome many obstacles, and we're still together. We try to support each other and we have an understanding of how we want to run our household. I must admit that it hasn't been easy for me to make the adjustment with him being in the house because I'm used to running the house a certain way, but I remind myself of what the Bible says. The man is the head of the household; I can't always get my way, and sometimes I have to bite my tongue and compromise. I guess it's just a process because we had to kind of get to know each other all over again. This is the first time that we've lived together, and I'm so thankful he's here. The additional help is invaluable. Right now I am the financial provider, but if it wasn't for him, I couldn't do what I do. He makes sure I get to school. He takes the boys

to school. He bathes them. He takes care of the boys while I'm at work on the weekends. Without him, I would not have a job. If I would have told my job I can't work weekends, I would not have been hired. Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) only gives you so much money. It's not enough to pay rent, a car note, and buy food, shoes, and clothes. I had so much going on and without him, I wouldn't have been hired. Nevertheless, I'm glad he's here. We have a typical relationship; it's just that our relationship starts with us being a family.

*Tiffany did a lot of growing up during her marriage. She became the woman she needed to be and began to stand up for herself, for what she wanted out of life, and for whom she wanted to be with. She demanded that Marcus have a physical presence in their children's lives. Though she is glad Marcus is with her and the children now, Tiffany has had to make many adjustments to having a man in the house. There have been struggles throughout their relationship, but through it all, the two have maintained their love for each other and their children. Marcus is an active father in his children's lives; a role for which Tiffany is most grateful.*

### **Juggling Act**

*Having attended school before she had children, Tiffany had a few misconceptions about attending school with children in tow. Her decrease in grade point average served as one indicator of the difference between attending school before children and attending school after having them. Her need to master time management was another. Tiffany will be the first to admit that managing life around work, children, and school has been anything but easy. Here we see how Tiffany manages this juggling act.*

I have two amazing sons, Brandon and Gerald. They are five and three. I thought going back to school (after kids) was going to be a breeze, because it was easy before I had kids. I did so much. I went to school full time and worked two jobs. So I thought having two kids, going to school, and working only one job would be real simple. In reality it was harder. It was harder because it seemed like I was working five jobs. I think of school as a job, doing homework as a job, taking care of my kids as a job, working as a job, and when I was on TANF, volunteering was a job. I had so many jobs within itself

that I was beginning to neglect my kids. I was really short-tempered. If they messed up something in the house, I was very short tempered because it was something else I would have to do.

I saw myself changing in the way I was raising them. I couldn't help prepare them for school like I wanted to. I wanted to teach them their colors. We used to play educational games around the house, and I wasn't able to do that anymore because I was focused on my career. I was trying to better our lives in that sense. I wanted to instill education in them, because I believe the younger they are the better they will retain it. So I told myself it was okay to get that C. I could not take away from my studies, but I could have more time with my kids. It was very important to me to raise my kids with structure. So I changed and our structure is different now. I realize I'm not going to get that A that I always want. So, I just go with a B or C. Nevertheless, I still push myself to do the best I can because my grandma always taught me to do my best. So I put forth my best effort, but now I don't really pressure myself or make myself feel like I'm not as good as I think I am even if I don't get the grades I expect, because I know I'm still doing my best.

I think my grades have suffered the most. That's been the hardest thing for me. I've been juggling kids, full-time schooling, and full-time work. It's all taken a toll on my grades. Before I had my kids, I had excellent grades all A's and B's. It killed me to get a C because I really don't expect anything less than an A or B. After kids, however, I prayed for a C. As I was nearing the end of my associate's degree, I was struggling in this biology class and I just remember praying for a C. I think that was a new low for me because before, if I didn't get an A, I would retake classes. But that was when I only had myself to be concerned about. Since I've had my kids a C is fine with me. I've been kind

of discouraged by it. I've even wanted to give up a couple of times. I didn't feel like I was moving forward. I went from getting A's and B's in my classes to accepting a C. There was so much to do though, I would just pray for a C.

I knew I could do this, but I needed help. If I was going to do this, I needed help. I'm the type of mom who prepares healthy meals for my kids. I don't do TV dinners. I quickly realized I needed a schedule. If I didn't stick to the schedule, I would be thrown totally off. The kids had to be in bed by eight o'clock. I started my homework once they were asleep. I wouldn't get to sleep until midnight most nights and start it all over again at five o'clock in the morning. This was an everyday thing. I even had to keep the same schedule on the weekends because if I didn't, I would get behind. Before I had kids, I could take four or five classes at a time no problem. I was working two jobs so I thought having kids would not make a big difference without the work. I was SO wrong. It made a very BIG difference. I had to go from four or five classes down to three. Now I'm down to two.

*Tiffany will be the first to admit that the juggling act of work, children, and school is a difficult feat to manage. She quickly found that trying to manage work and school after having two children was no comparison to the school life she knew prior to having children. I believe the most difficult adjustment for Tiffany was the manner in which she was raising her children. She always took pride in spending quality time with her children. As she got more into school, she saw herself changing. She relied on the television to entertain the children while she studied. She spent less quality time with them. She was most unhappy with herself as she wasn't the type of mother she wanted to be. Thus, she decided to change her structure. She knew her grades would suffer, but was no longer willing to sacrifice her children. I applaud Tiffany's ability to find balance in the juggling act of life, school, and work. She looked to the factors that were important to her and made them priority.*

### **Making Ends Meet**

*In addition to managing the various roles in her life, Tiffany also acknowledges the challenges of raising two small children with very little money. She has not yet reached her desired financial status, but she has vowed to do whatever is necessary to avoid*

*future financial mishaps. Here Tiffany recalls several incidents of financial inadequacy and trying to make ends meet. She also discusses how the struggle brings her to a greater appreciation for her degree.*

I've always received financial aid to fund my schooling, but I've had to work hard to make ends meet on the home front. I can recall a time when my son was about six months old. I was putting as much as I could on the electricity bill, but it wasn't enough. The lights in my apartment were turned off. I tried to talk to the service guy. I pleaded with him to leave the lights on. I told him I had a small baby in the house, but it didn't matter. I didn't have enough money to keep them on. Thank God it was summer. It didn't really get cool until the evening, and I put five blankets on the bed and lit candles. I didn't tell my family so no one knew about the situation because my pride didn't allow me to share the information. Thankfully the lights weren't out that long because my mom found out and as usual parents always come to the rescue. I wanted to do it by myself, and it was hard not being able to. I've learned to use instances like this as motivation to push myself because I don't want that to ever happen again. I don't want my kids to go through that.

One time my car broke down and I had to ride the bus and take them to daycare before I went to school. By the time we were on the way home, they both would fall asleep. I would have to walk two blocks down carrying my backpack, the diaper bag (my youngest wasn't potty trained at the time), and the two of them. Walking, carrying the backpack, diaper bag, and the kids, it drains you. When you get home you don't want to cook. You don't feel like doing anything. You just want to sit down, but you know you can't because you have to cook dinner. Then you have to start your reading or do whatever needs to be done for your homework. That was so stressful. So I think going

through all this really makes me appreciate this degree. If I would have gotten the degree before having the kids, I'm not sure I would appreciate it as much. But actually going through it and getting the A's, B's, and some C's, makes me feel like I worked for this. I earned this. Nobody gave me anything.

*Tiffany is extremely proud and painstakingly speaks of her struggle to make ends meet financially and how the struggle brings her to a greater appreciation for her degree. Most mothers want to provide their children's necessities and protect them for the cruelties of the world. Tiffany is no exception. She experienced great despair when the utilities were disconnected at the apartment where she and her small baby lived at the time. She never wants her children to be in that situation again and has vowed to do whatever is necessary to prevent such circumstances. Tiffany has had to work through these issues while pursuing her degree. It is not always easy. The struggle has spawned a greater appreciation for her degree because of the sacrifices she and her family have made in order to make ends meet while trying to achieve her educational goal. I believe her tenacity in this area speaks to her character.*

### **Overcoming Obstacles**

*Tiffany has experienced many successes on her journey, but she has also navigated quite a few bumps in the road. Some of those bumps consisted of an abrupt layoff and receiving public assistance. Actually, receiving assistance was one of the largest obstacles she incurred while pursuing her education. Tiffany participated in a program called TANF in order to receive daycare assistance for her children. Although TANF helped her with daycare, the program seemed to cause a great deal of stress. While she is grateful for the assistance TANF provided for daycare, she resented the bureaucracy that came with the assistance.*

I worked in the Business Development Center at a car dealership. I earned \$12 an hour, so the pay was good. I was able to buy my children shoes when they needed them or take them out for a good time. I would have kept that job except I got laid off. It was very sudden and there was no notice. It was hard going from such a nice salary to nothing. My rent was \$700 a month and I had no idea of how I would pay it. Fortunately, I had applied for housing assistance a few months earlier and by the grace of God I received my housing assistance voucher a week before I was laid off. The voucher allowed me to pay only a portion of my rent. I went from making decent money to

making no money. So it was only by the grace of God that my housing assistance started when it did. Without that, we would be homeless to this day. While I would have loved to focus on education, I needed to work. So I found another job. School was something I wanted to do, but it wasn't a priority at the time. It was about surviving and I didn't see school fitting in right then. I had just lost a job and I had to survive. I had to be the one to make my household work. So I did what I had to do. I worked. I needed six classes to graduate. So that's when I decided to get on TANF.

Going on TANF was very hard for me because I always felt like welfare was for people who really didn't want to do anything with themselves. I needed the time to study and the daycare gave me that time. I was telling a friend about my situation, and she recommended TANF. She thought I would be a good candidate. She said TANF was designed for people who were trying to help themselves. So I thought it would be beneficial. But when I started on the program, it was the opposite. They wanted you to work. I have no problem working. Work was never a problem for me. I had come so close to finishing school that I just wanted to finish. Participating in TANF helped, but I felt like they were more willing to help people who were not trying to help themselves. My caseworker didn't care that I wanted an education. He made sure I understood that I needed to quit school and get a job. They [TANF] were not here to help me get an education. I told him I didn't have a problem finding a job. My problem was finding daycare so I could finish school. I couldn't afford daycare on my own, so that is what I needed assistance with.

TANF felt like you shouldn't go to school. Their thought process was if you're going to be on the program, they want you to work. It was a struggle trying to follow all

of their rules, but I told myself I was doing it so I could finish school. It was a tough decision, but it helped. It helped me get my associate's degree. They say they give you eighteen months without working (to go to school) but that's not true. It didn't take me a year to finish my associate's degree but they told me my time ran out. TANF has so many rules. As I worked to complete my associate's degree, they [TANF] said I was too educated. I had to either work or volunteer. I found that it was easier to volunteer than to work, because I had more control over my own schedule. After I got my associate's degree, they said I was too educated to volunteer. There is so much paperwork involved. It's a job within itself. You have to turn in your school hours. You have to turn in your homework hours. You have to turn in your work and volunteer hours. Everything has to be turned in by the first of the month. If it's not turned in by the first, you lose your daycare and your income.

It seems like it's harder for those of us who really want to do something. My friend wasn't even going to school. She just worked. So I really didn't understand it. Here I am actually trying to better myself to not only do better in life but to be a role model for my children, and it was like TANF was saying we're not here to help you get a degree. They're right because they do nothing to 'help' you finish school. Their rules suck. For example, online classes don't count for time. I was taking a couple of online classes and my caseworker told me I couldn't count them because there wasn't a set time frame that I had to be in those classes. So I couldn't count it towards my 88 hours a month of activities. That was making it hard for me because I was going to school, but my school hours didn't count anymore, because they said my 18 months were over. Even though my school hours didn't count anymore, I still had to give them copies of my school schedule

so they would know I was in school. I still had to tell him how many hours I did my homework. Since school and homework hours didn't count, I still have to volunteer 88 hours a month. So I had to volunteer 24 hours a week plus do my homework and go to school. By the time I did enough to meet all their requirements, I was doing at least 200 or more hours a month just to be on TANF to get \$326 a month.

I don't know how they determine what income you receive, but it's a limited amount. I was getting \$326 a month. That's it. I had to pay rent and all of my other bills on \$326 a month. I received food stamps too. It was helpful because I had never gotten food stamps before. But the money part- it was hard going from a \$12 an hour paying job. It used to upset me because I knew people who were on the system, who were getting more help than I. A friend of mine, who is bi-racial, was on TANF. She was actually the one who told me about TANF. She was receiving way more money per month than I was. She was getting almost \$500 a month while I was getting \$326.

They have guidelines for everything, but I know she was receiving more benefits than I. And she had fewer expenses than I. She received transportation benefits where they gave you money for gas if you had a car. If you didn't have a car, they gave you a bus pass. I did not receive these benefits the entire time I was in school because I didn't know about them. My caseworker never told me about them. I was not aware of these benefits until my friend mentioned them. It wasn't until I inquired of my caseworker that he was forthcoming with the information. That's when I started receiving those benefits.

My caseworker was always giving me a hard time about something. One time he put me on sanction. A sanction is when you only receive a portion of your money. He put me on sanction for no reason and I only received \$100. It totally made me get behind in

my bills. I was receiving assistance at the time and the housing program will work with you if you tell them, but if you don't notify them in enough time, you still have to pay your regular rent amount. I still had to pay more than I was supposed to because he was telling the housing program that he was giving me more money than what I was actually receiving. So I had to borrow money. I still didn't have enough so it eventually got to the point where I had to decide which bill I was going to pay. The result is that I'm behind on my electric bill. So even though he messed me around two months by putting me on sanction for no reason...it's still affecting me today. I'm still \$80 behind on my light and gas bill.

He said I wasn't complying with him because he wanted to know what I was doing everyday of the week. I didn't think he needed to know what I was doing on Saturdays and Sundays, because I don't volunteer on Saturdays and Sundays. I'm not in school on Saturdays and Sundays. So when those boxes are blank I didn't feel like he needed to know what happened on those days. It was as though he felt like I owed him something because I was on this system, but he was not my father or my boyfriend so I didn't think it was his business. I was doing everything he told me to do, but he said he needed to know what you're doing everyday of the week? He would call me just to see where I was. I don't think anybody else had to endure that type of treatment. I always felt like he was abusing his power.

*As with other areas in her life, Tiffany found ways to address the obstacles she faced. The obstacles I want to discuss here are her layoff and her issues with public assistance. For example, her sudden layoff put her in a bad situation as she had no idea of how she would pay her rent. But once again her faith came through for her. She relied on God and trusted that he would make the provision. Fortunately, God had a ram in the bush. In other words, God had a backup plan in store for Tiffany. Though she had to revise her educational plan and focus on work, she was extremely grateful for the housing assistance. Tiffany's issues with public assistance stem from her perception about people*

*who receive assistance. She often felt that people who received assistance were taking advantage of the system and weren't doing anything with their lives, though she did not feel this applied to her. Her perception changed after realizing she needed the assistance for daycare. However, Tiffany would soon come to find that she was not alone in her original perception. She experienced several incidents with her caseworker whom she felt abused his power. He stereotyped her, he seemed to share her perception, and treated her accordingly. Often discouraged by such treatment, Tiffany wondered if the assistance was worth it. But she kept sight of her goal, and reminded herself that she was attending school to prepare a better life for her children and herself. Thus she endured the guidelines of the program, and prevailed over yet another obstacle in her life.*

### **Sacrifice: Better in the Long Run**

*Tiffany is most proud of her two sons. What she wants most in life is to provide a better life for them. She hopes to serve as an example for them; to help them realize the value of education. However, she wonders if her educational pursuits and the sacrifices they have had to make as a family will have an irreversible effect on the children's lives. She prays it does not. Here we learn of some of the sacrifices Tiffany is concerned about: the long-term effect her discipline might have on her children's lives, and the quality time she sacrificed with her children.*

I want a better life for my children just as my parents wanted for me. I too believe education is the key to such a life. I want my bachelor's degree and master's degree because I think it will look good for the boys. They're seeing me do it, and I hope it will help them have an appreciation for school. Everything I do, I do for them. I just hope they don't suffer from this experience. For some reason I think they will. At one point while I was working on my associate's degree, I was so focused on trying to make good grades that I became a mean mom. I was always yelling at them. Sit down, don't do this, don't do that. I know you have to chastise your children to raise them in a way that they're supposed to be brought up and everything, but it seemed like my discipline was to the extreme. I also turned into a mom who loved the television. I would never use the television to entertain my children. I wouldn't let them watch more than two hours of TV a day, but that's who I turned in to. I got to the point where I was always putting a tape in so I could do my paper or do my reading. Disney movies were my way to get everything

done. They were always watching TV, because they would sit there and watch it and I wouldn't have to interact with them. I was able to get my school work done when I needed to get it done.

In essence, I felt like I was pushing the children aside. It was a temporary thing, but something that could affect them long-term. Everyone remembers how they were raised. Even though it's temporary as of now, this is the structure they're receiving. This is what they're going to remember. That wasn't the structure I wanted them to have. They're too young to be couch potatoes. They should be outside playing, enjoying time. And time was something that I didn't have time for them. I didn't have time for them to go outside and play. They didn't get that outside nature. They only got that in the summer when I didn't have to go to school. And I really do think it will affect them. It was temporary, but it has an affect as well. I know I'm going to better myself in the long run, but it hurts to think of the affect this may have on them. I'm still working on my social work degree and that's two years. That's two years of pushing aside. I'm just not sure of what that will do to them in the long run.

In the beginning, my mom thought I should have waited until the kids were older (like middle school) before I went back to school. She wanted me to just work. She thought it was too stressful for me because she noticed changes in me. I wasn't the mom I used to be. My mom used to watch the kids for me and I was always very structured and organized. Their lunch was ready. Their dinner was cooked. They ate at a certain time. They napped at a certain time. So when my structure changed and I didn't have stuff ready all the time, my mom was really against me going to school. She thought I should focus more on my kids and wait until they get older. I didn't see it that way. In my mind,

making sacrifices now would benefit us in the long run. Getting my associates degree in psychology was the first step. It's still strange to think about but it makes me feel so good. I don't think it would have meant as much if I would have gotten the degree before but it means the world to me now. I did it and I'm very proud. My mom finally came around after she visualized what I was trying to do. She finally came around. I'm glad she's on board now. I didn't have any additional support at the time, but life is different now that Marcus is with us.

*Tiffany loves her children very much and wants nothing more than what is best for them. While in school though, she has had to make sacrifices in raising them, and sacrifices in the time she spent with them. I believe those sacrifices will be better in the long run. Tiffany had to do some serious soul searching though. She realized her form of discipline and entertainment wasn't healthy for her children, so she made some changes. She revamped their structure because she wants them to have fond childhood memories. She is hopeful that they will understand the decisions she made while in school, the time she lost with them, and that they will realize she was trying to better herself for the family. I applaud her for making the changes she deemed necessary. She may not be perfect in all that she has done, but she has done her best.*

### **Here's What I Gathered**

*As I reviewed Tiffany's story, two themes came to mind: maturation and tenacity; these two themes occurred over and over throughout Tiffany's life. Over time, we see her mature in three instances. First, were her self-esteem issues which began with her dark skin tone. Tiffany was ashamed of the way she looked. It took years for her to come to love her dark skin and appreciate her self worth. Once she did however, she went from hating what she looked like to being thankful for the way she was made. Second, we see Tiffany's maturation as she moves from the people-pleasing young woman she was to the self-reliant woman she is today. One who is willing to stand up for herself and what she wants out of life. Third, we see her maturation in her relationship with Marcus. She was once satisfied with being the long distance girlfriend, but as she grew she realized he needed to have a greater presence in their children's lives. She needed his help and he needed to be with them if they were going to make it as a family.*

*I can only commend Tiffany's tenacious attitude. It shows itself time and time again as she meets various situations head on and triumphs every time. She consistently battled circumstances that threatened to thwart her educational plans like her mother's injury, having children, and managing various roles. She is determined to meet her educational goal and though knocked down, she continues to get up and keep going. Tiffany's tenacity was further displayed in her ability to fight past TANF guidelines. There were several*

*instances where she felt TANF was hindering her progress more than it was helping it, but again she found a way to remedy the situation and move beyond it. Finally, is Tiffany's overall attitude toward meeting her educational goal. She is dedicated to earning her master's degree in social work and it is evident in the perseverance she displays in every area of her life.*

## Victoria's Story

*At first glance, I noted Victoria's serious nature. She has a very take-care-of-business attitude. It was the same demeanor I heard in her voice when we first spoke on the phone. Someone had given her my recruitment flyer, and she was interested in the study. After a brief conversation, we scheduled our first meeting. I was quite excited because she was the third woman to agree to participate in my study. She is the mother of one 27-year-old son and carries her tall, slender 5'8 frame well. Her toffee complexion was smooth and youthful looking. Her hair was pinned up in a French twist, and her blue sweat pants, matching jacket, and tee shirt indicated that she was in for a relaxing evening at home. At 53 years old, Victoria does not look a day over 40. When I arrived at her home, she greeted me with a firm, but friendly hello and handshake as she welcomed me into her home.*

*Her home was immaculate. We met in the living room which housed a Victorian-style sofa and coffee table which sat in front of a large window. Two large chairs sat on another wall with a round glass table between them. Three mirrors lined the wall above the chairs. The chairs sat across from a fireplace with a large wooden mantle and a beautiful ceramic tile surround. A large mirror hung over the fireplace. The mantel was adorned with family photos and small figurines. Another chair sat next to the fireplace where the room opened to the dining room and then into the kitchen which produced a pleasant aroma where Victoria was preparing dinner. I constructed Victoria's story around various topics throughout her life span. The topics surround her grieving process, humble beginnings, circumstances dictate actions, education: the second time around, a mother's pride and joy, shaky employment, and contemplating the future.*

### Grieving Process

*As we got into our first interview, Victoria informed me of her mother's recent death just four short months prior to our meeting. Her mother died of kidney failure after years of living with congestive heart failure. Her father died years ago after a long battle with cancer. I wanted to open her story in this manner because Victoria is going through a grieving process. Her delicate tone was a clear indication that she was understandably still mourning the loss of her mother. Kubler-Ross (1997) presented the grieving process in five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. It is important to acknowledge that while grief is universal, it is not uniform. No two people will respond to the same loss the same way. It is also not uncommon for a person to move back and forth between stages. There is a part of me as a sister who really believes that Victoria doesn't understand the grieving process she's going through, but as I listen to the tapes and as I put her story together, she is definitely grieving. I believe Victoria is exhibiting behavior from the denial, depression, and bargaining stages. As we go through, you'll notice that there are three major points in the grieving process that she is doing. She uses school as an escape; she skips appointments with her counselor; and she wonders what could have been done to prevent the loss.*

It's been a difficult semester with Mama passing four months ago, but I made it. I thought about taking some time off from school, but Mama would want me to continue, so I'm doing this for both of us. I vowed that I would continue and now here I am. I nearly have one semester under my belt. I took it one day at a time and I made it. Going to school part-time has been ideal for me because I need the distraction in my life right now. School provides an outlet for me. I separate my various roles by wearing different hats. When I leave work, I take off my work hat. When I'm in school, I put on my school hat. I do not try to put work into school or vice versa. It's good to have work and school, but I still need my quiet time.

I need time to unwind. I'm still working on stuff for mom, and I really need to take the time to grieve. I've been dealing with that at counseling. Some days are good and some are bad. Sometimes I go; sometimes I don't. It just depends on how I feel that day. But I pray and ask God to give me strength to make it and do what I need to do. And He has. And I'm not giving up. I'm not going to stop because education was instilled in us. I'm thankful to God and I give him all the credit for helping me through this. It hasn't been an easy road to travel, but I've begun this educational journey, and I plan to complete it.

It wasn't easy watching my mother's health deteriorate. I recently learned that we have a family history of heart disease. In addition to my mother's congestive heart failure, my maternal grandmother died of a massive heart attack. My maternal grandfather also had heart problems. My mother always said he was just old and he died. Now I know that wasn't the case; it bothers me because heart disease is hereditary. So I'm making better decisions for myself health wise. I used to drink and smoke cigarettes.

I still have a drink every now and then, but I stopped smoking altogether. I'm really thankful I stopped smoking cigarettes. I also try to exercise and eat right. I have a sound mind, and I take better care of myself overall. I'm trying to live the best way I can. I want to grow old gracefully. It's sad when I think about it because education may have prevented some of my mother's health issues. Who knows what may have happened with her if we could have learned about some of her health issues early on? It just shows that what a person doesn't know can harm them.

*The three major points addressed here are: Victoria using school as an escape; skipping counseling appointments; and wondering what could have been done to prevent the loss. When I look at Victoria's behavior, it is obvious to me that she is grieving. She is displaying feelings of avoidance, isolation, and guilt. These feelings are associated with various stages of the grieving process. By using school as an escape, she is keeping herself busy in order to avoid her own thoughts. This represents the denial stage. At other times, she is isolating herself by skipping counseling appointments; wanting to be alone with her thoughts perhaps. This symbolizes the depression stage. By wondering what could have been done to prevent the loss she is experiencing feelings of guilt. If she had known how to help her mother take care of herself, the disease may have been prevented. This is where we see the bargaining stage. Victoria is experiencing normal feelings, but I'm not sure she is allowing herself the freedom to grieve. It is quite possible that the pain from her loss is simply too much to bear at this point. As a result, she toggles from one stage to another. I do want to acknowledge the lifestyle changes she has made though. In coming to terms with family health issues that lead to death, Victoria has made better decisions regarding her lifestyle. She stopped smoking, she is exercising, and she's eating healthier. These are good lifestyle decisions which show that she is learning as she progresses through the grieving process, and that she is on the right track in this area of her life. Victoria came from humble beginnings which cause her to value education today. Therefore, I feel that her educational endeavors are not only for herself but her deceased parents as well.*

### **Humble Beginnings**

*Here we learn of Victoria's humble beginnings. Her family of ten lived on her parents' working class salaries. Needless to say, they didn't have much money. What they lacked in money, they made up for in spirituality and pride. Her parents provided for their large family without any welfare assistance. They taught their children to trust God for wisdom, guidance, and provision. They also stressed education in their home because they viewed it as a catalyst for life changes.*

Mama and Daddy would be proud of me. I know they would be. We came from such humble beginnings. We had God, each other, and little else. I came from a large family...my parents had eight children (four boys and four girls). We were a religious family. We went to church and my parents trusted God to make a way. They relocated from the South with hopes of establishing a better life for themselves and their children. My mother worked outside of the home, but she was the primary disciplinarian since my father was always working two jobs. We were poor and needed the money. But if my siblings and I got out of hand, we were well aware of and would do anything to escape our father's wrath. Our mother was no pushover though. She ran a pretty tight ship...especially for the girls. We all had our chores to do, but the boys seemed to have more leeway.

Even though my mother worked outside of the home, my father was very old-fashioned. We had one vehicle and my father used it to get to his jobs because he usually worked farther away. He came home, changed, and went to his other job. My mother didn't drive, and he liked it that way. She rode the bus to work, and he took her anywhere else she needed to go. She didn't get her driver's license until late in life and that was only after my father got sick, and she needed to drive him to and from doctor appointments. So it worked out for them, and when I look back on it, they did more with less. We lived off less. We had less of everything and still survived. That's why I praise my parents because I know it was hard. It had to be, but they made it work.

We had very little money, but so did the other families in my neighborhood. Everyone was in a common place...a place called poverty. I resonated with the idea that the children and families around me were poor. Poverty seemed to override race. We

were all on the same poor playing field. Back then we went to neighborhood schools. We walked to school, nobody rode buses. I found refuge in the familial environment of neighborhood schools. I felt secure being surrounded by my brothers and sisters because I knew if my own siblings weren't around somebody else's brothers and sisters were. It also helped that everybody was poor. The teachers seemed to care more back then, too. They were concerned if you had problems, and they worked with your parents to help resolve those problems. There was a great sense of community when I was growing up. I think this sense of community was enhanced because we all lived in the same neighborhood; we all went to the same schools; and we grew up together. Our families didn't have much money, so we didn't do many outings. We made up our own games as we went along.

Education always was stressed in our household. My grandparents had no formal education, and my parents obtained very little, so they wanted more for us. My parents felt that education was the way to a better life. Therefore, the idea of not going to school was not an option. My siblings and I went to school; we did our work; and we learned. I was a good student. I enjoyed school. I think I liked the social contact more than anything. The hardest part for me, and I think most girls, was fashion; what was I going to wear; how was I going to look. My mother was quick to remind me that I was not going to school for fashion. New clothes were not high on her list of priorities. We typically dealt with second-hand clothes so we worked with what we had.

There were a few children in our school who had money. You could see they had different clothes, nice hair bows, and nice shoes. They had bikes when many of us didn't. These differences were more subtle in elementary school, but became more pronounced

as we proceeded through middle and high school. So we knew who the rich kids were. We could see it. Money was a status symbol. Some of them were nice enough to be friends with, others weren't. It just depended on the person. I personally think it's up to an individual to be secure with whom she is in order to make friends and keep those friends. My biggest issue was peer pressure. I wanted my friends to accept me for who I was. That was probably one of the bigger issues I have had to overcome in life and that didn't occur until my adult life. I know who I am now. I understand my self-worth.

As I said before, my parents stressed education because in their minds, education was the way to better jobs, to a better life. They didn't want us to struggle like they did. So they pushed school. Of my parents' eight children, four of us graduated from high school. My brothers started getting into trouble. They misbehaved. They started drinking and going down a different path. Three of them dropped out and later earned their GEDs as did one of my sisters. Daddy was actually harder on us girls, and as a result, three of the four girls graduated. I think he wanted us to finish school without getting pregnant because back then if you got pregnant, there wasn't very much you could do with your life. You were limited to an extent, and he wanted more for us than that. High school graduations were a big deal in our house too. Everybody was excited. My parents were elated and proud. We all piled into the car and everybody went. It was something for the younger children to look forward to. I was the fifth child of eight so I often fantasized about my turn. When my turn finally came, I felt like I had made it. I got the diploma, I got new clothes to wear afterwards, and I got to hang out with my friends. So yeah, graduating from high school was a big deal.

*The two major points of Victoria's humble beginnings are centered around poverty and education. For a period of time she was removed from both, but has come full circle in*

*her current life status. Since Victoria grew up in poverty, she did not have a lot of material possessions. Her parents worked hard for what they had, and they instilled love and values into their children which were far more priceless. When I look at her today, I see that Victoria has retained those characteristics. She has love in her heart and she tries to live a life that pleases God. As a child education was important to Victoria, but we'll learn more about circumstances after high school that warranted employment over education. It is interesting to notice that although Victoria grew up understanding the importance of education, as an adult she did not recognize the confines of a limited education. We'll discuss her employment later, but during her career, she seemed to abandon the foundations of her educational upbringing. She was financially stable in her job and didn't feel the need for education. It wasn't until she was faced with a sudden layoff, also discussed later, that her thought process changed. Suddenly Victoria was aware of her educational shortcomings and once again remembered the value of education. Let's explore some of the circumstances that Victoria felt dictated certain actions.*

### **Circumstances Dictate Actions**

*I use this portion of Victoria's story to discuss how certain circumstances dictate certain actions. These circumstances are largely due to a lack of cultural capital and habitus, and Victoria is a good model to illustrate both concepts. Cultural capital is the values and beliefs families transmit to their children to enhance their class status (Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Habitus is the internalized belief system that one gains from her environment (McDonough, 1997). Victoria was raised in poverty and is a prime example of how poor children's chances of attending college are hindered. She could not afford to go to college after high school so she went to work instead. This is where we see her abandon her educational foundation as mentioned in the previous section. Although her circumstances warranted work at the time, her attitude regarding education changed after being on the job for a while. She was making a good living and thought life was good. With life going so well, who needed school? She would soon come to find out.*

I have lived a pretty good life, but education was not a part of it early on. I wanted to go to college after I graduated from high school, but I didn't have that chance. I went right to work as I didn't have any money to go to college. My parents really couldn't afford it, because when I graduated I still had two brothers and a sister at home. My father had lung cancer. He was really sick and could no longer work. I didn't know about financial aid and how to get money for college back then which was very unfortunate. I couldn't ask about something I wasn't aware of especially if it was never shared with me. Many people don't want you to know. I think it illustrates the unequal class issues of

society. It seems like poor children are only given a little information; just enough to get a minimum wage job; a job that doesn't take you very far in life...and that's okay with a number of people in our society. They don't want you to know what they know because then you will be like them. So I didn't worry about going to school at that time and went to work instead.

I've always worked. My parents didn't have much money, so in order for me to have money and do activities I had to work. I was a single mother, so I had to provide for myself and my son. I'll tell you more about my son and life as a single parent later. I never got on welfare. I tried, but they turned me down. They said I made too much money. I couldn't get food stamps. They said I made too much money. I did try, but I made good money where I worked. So they looked at that and told me I could probably feed six other kids with what I was making. That's exactly what they said. So I let that go. I maintained a modest lifestyle supported by my career in Information Technology (IT) at a large communications company. I didn't see the need for education while I worked there. Life was good. I was making money. I got several promotions within the company and made more money. I wasn't thinking about school. What was the point? I had some training classes on the job but that was about it. I was doing okay. I didn't think I needed the degree. That was exactly my mentality. I didn't need the degree. I was doing okay. But God wanted me to see education differently. He stopped me in my tracks which made me stop and rethink education.

*The concepts of cultural capital and habitus are key to the discussion of circumstances that dictate actions. On the cultural capital side, Victoria wanted to attend college after high school, but her family's financial situation did not allow it. Her parents instilled education in her but that was the extent of it. They wanted her to go to college, but they did not know how to help her get there. Therefore, her family lacked the cultural capital to prepare her for college. Victoria's habitus also played a role in her not attending*

*college immediately after high school. Education had been instilled in the home, but she lacked the knowledge and ability to seek out grants and other means to finance education. Habitus dictated that she could not afford to forgo earnings to attend school. Did racism and discrimination play a part in the lack of information Victoria received about college and financial aid? She believes they probably did, but she accepted that and moved on. I do not believe she harbors disdain in her heart towards anyone for withholding information from her. Victoria realizes that racism and discrimination exists, however, she chooses not to dwell on them. She believes God made enough for everyone and chooses to live her life being the best she can be, while wishing the same for others. Thus cultural capital, habitus, racism, and discrimination all played a role in Victoria not attending college at that time. Once she started working Victoria was living a good life and didn't feel that education was necessary. Next, we will see how wrong she was.*

### **Education: Second Time Around**

*Earlier I mentioned that Victoria seemed to abandon the foundations of her educational upbringing while earning a decent living from her job. During that time she did not appear to recognize the confines of a limited education. She was making good money and didn't see the need for education. I believe she felt like she had bypassed education and the fact that she didn't have an education was working for her. Here we see how she is shocked back into reality when an abrupt lay-off disrupted her world. It was a humbling experience that changed the way Victoria lived. All of the positions in her job search required high levels of education and suddenly she was aware that she was stagnated by her lack of education. She found herself on an educational path she never could have imagined. Here we will learn more about her educational journey.*

I was suddenly laid-off after 20+ years of service. The company eliminated an entire level of middle-management. The layoff came at a bad time, just after 9/11. Jobs were hard to find, especially in the IT field. Employers wanted educated employees. They wanted a master's degree for jobs that paid \$10 an hour. That wasn't happening for me. I had the experience but lacked the education. I later found that students in my classes had the education but lacked experience. It seemed like a Catch 22 for everyone. And I was experiencing lots of resentment. I worked at that job for 23 years and for them to just let me go in less than 30 minutes and say pack up, here are your papers, sign this, give me your badge, see you. That hurt. I gave them the best part of my life. It hurts your ego. I don't care who you are and what you say. If you say it doesn't hurt, then something is

really wrong. I won't work at another job for 23 years. I don't want to. I don't even want to work at one now for three years. To me that's too long. I need a change. I would be lying if I said I wasn't a little bitter about the layoff because I gave that company so much of myself, and they let us go with no compassion. It was very cold. I have since come to the realization that life brings you to different points for different reasons.

Suddenly I found myself searching for my next move in life. I never thought it would be education; however, a haphazard inquiry into a program for displaced homemakers to obtain skills and reenter the workforce birthed a new zeal in me. I enrolled in a local technical school. Since I came from the IT field, I thought I would take some computer classes to learn about the insides of computers. It was tough for me to go back to school, but I've gotten into the swing of it. I'm kind of treading in uncharted territory because none of my family members have gone to college. I'm actually the first to go.

I knew going back to school would be tough like anything else, but I wanted to do it. I received a nice severance package from my job, so I lived off the severance and my unemployment for a while. I still had to alter my lifestyle a little. I didn't stop living; I just changed the way I lived. I realized I didn't need so much stuff. I didn't need so many credit cards. I didn't have the money to spend, so I didn't buy. I was very good at disciplining myself. I cut all of it out of my life, and I'm surviving quite well. It has been a very humbling experience through which God has taught me patience. I'm not saying I have mastered the concept of patience though. I ask God to help me with it daily, and he does. People wonder how I live my life now, and I tell them it's simple. I cut out the

excess. I was buying so many items I didn't need; just buying because I had the money. So when the money was no longer there, I stopped spending. My priorities changed.

I had been away from education for over 30 years and was unsure of how it would all come together. It was hard to go back. How would I perform? How would I finance it? What if I failed? My biggest concern was the age thing. Would I be the oldest student in the class? How would I fit into a classroom full of young students? I think it was more mental than anything. Once I got there I realized there were several other people there who were older than I. It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. I had built it up to be this big monster almost, but once I got there I felt comfortable. I told myself not to be afraid to ask questions if there was something I didn't understand because I could sit there and not ask questions, but I would never know. It's been a challenge, but I am dedicated to succeeding in these classes. I've been away from education for a long time, but now that I'm here, I am serious about my studies, and I plan to learn everything I can learn.

So far I've been fortunate enough to not have to pay for school. I've had to buy a few books, but that's about it. Somehow I've managed to make contact with the right people, and I've been able to receive money. My niece turned me on to this program called Operation Education where they give you scholarship money for school. They were setting me up for the certificate program, but before I even started any classes, I received money to pay some bills, to get my car fixed, and to buy some clothes. I also received some scholarship money for my certificate program. I studied computers...building them from the inside out, installing memory, stuff like that. People make really good money doing that. I thought it was a good place to start since I had always worked in the IT field.

Now, here it is some 30+ years after high school, and I find myself in college. I'm proud of what I've accomplished thus far though. My first experience was at a technical school where I completed a certificate program in computers. They discontinued the program soon after we started, but three of us already had started it so we were grandfathered in and allowed to finish the program. I finished that program last July and received my certificate in September. It took me a few years, and I wish I could have finished sooner, but I went to school part-time since I had to work. Once I completed that program, I called the Operation Education program again and was able to receive scholarship money for a second time. This time, however, I'm pursuing my associate's degree. Now I'm attending UCC. I plan to use the credits I earned from the certificate towards an associate's degree in computer science or information systems.

My grades have actually been pretty good. I won't say I was an A student when I started at the technical school, but I did finish with a B average. I was pretty thankful for that because I started slow. Thankfully, I had an excellent teacher. His name was Ben. Ben had a master's degree in communications or something like that. He was a brilliant man, kind of nerdy, but really smart. He didn't really have many social skills, but that changed as we got to know each other. He wasn't stuck up at all, and he made me feel very comfortable in the classroom. He was extremely helpful if I had problems. I could go to him if there was something I didn't understand, and I didn't have a problem going to him. I felt a little at ease too because there were a few other people in the class who were older students, closer to my age.

In the beginning, I struggled with the classes. I guess it was an adjustment period. But towards the end I was so happy. It was like I could finally see the light at the end of

the tunnel. Ironically, it almost made me feel empty inside when I got there. School had become a major part of my life. I would go to school, go to work, go to work, go to school; that's what I did for those three years. It was my routine. What was I going to do when it was over? Shortly after that, my mom got real sick and taking care of her became a major part of my life. I would go to work, go to school, go to the hospital, go to her house; that's what me and my sisters did. My mother had congestive heart failure, and eventually her heart just gave out. It just gets weaker, and weaker, and weaker, and then they die. Thank God, I finished the program before she passed. At least she was able to see me get something from college.

I didn't have that same comfort level when I entered UCC that I had when I went to the technical school. I didn't do well on the placement tests to get into the college so I had to take some developmental classes at the beginning. Developmental classes were designed to bring you up to college-level if you scored low on the placement tests. I had to take developmental classes in English and math. I was a little embarrassed. I felt ashamed because I thought I would do better on the tests, but I didn't. When I first went to these classes, I felt like they were beneath me. I thought I was in the wrong place. I'm not supposed to be in here, this is for somebody else. I was getting ready to leave when the instructor explained the purpose of the classes to me. She helped me understand that I had been out of school for a long time and being in these classes wasn't a bad thing. I was not stupid; it's just that I had forgotten most of the lessons that I learned 30+ years ago. She said it would be better for me to do it this way rather than just jump into college courses and flunk out because I wasn't getting the material. I didn't think of it that way, and I think that made a huge difference for me. I felt much better about it. I think it hurt

my ego more than anything, but I got over it. Actually, ~~my embarrassment~~ has changed to pride because I'm getting better since I've been taking these classes so I'm okay.

Ironically my classes are held at UCC's east campus which is housed at Norbitt Middle School; the very school where I attended junior high. Talk about coming full circle. I like it because it's not far from my house. My anxiety about returning to school was not unfounded. I was scared to death. I was really apprehensive about going back. I am the first person to say that college is not for everybody...some people might want to do a trade school or go in the military or something. College is not for everybody and that's okay. Obtaining this degree has a great deal to do with personal achievement for me though. I'm doing this for my own self satisfaction because it's a challenge for me to endure; to have that stick-to-it-ness. I'm determined to make it.

*It is obvious that Victoria's layoff is what brought her to education. I'm not sure she would have taken the educational route otherwise. She probably would not say she ignored education, but I think she did. She was progressing in her career, and it is understandable that she believed she could make it in life without further education. Many people feel this way. After all, one cannot miss what one never had. I am proud of how she rebounded from this setback though. Her world was turned upside down and the changes she made speak to her character. She altered her spending habits to focus on necessities. She took advantage of educational and funding opportunities presented to her and is currently making the most of those opportunities. Victoria faced the same issues most non-traditional women face when reentering education after years of being away. She had anxiety about being the oldest student in class. Her determination to succeed in her classes would help her overcome that. She had to take developmental courses. Pride caused her to resist the courses at first, but she soon developed an appreciation for the foundation they helped her establish. She faced her fears of reentering education and she is conquering them one by one. Similarly, she faced life as a single parent.*

### **A Mother's Pride and Joy**

*As stated earlier Victoria has one son, Phillip, whom she considers her greatest accomplishment. Phillip was the result of an extramarital affair, but Victoria has no regrets. She took responsibility for her actions and vowed to raise her son. She may not be proud of the circumstances surrounding Phillip's conception, but she is extremely proud of him. She made a conscious decision to have him out of wedlock and dedicated her life to raising him.*

At 53 I will be the first to admit that I have not always made the best decisions in life, but the accomplishment that I am most proud of is my 27-year-old son Phillip. He has grown into quite a man who is making the most of his life. I love him so much, and I'm so proud of him I could burst. I have great reason to be proud of the way Phillip has turned out. I knew I would be a single parent when I had him considering the circumstances under which he was conceived. Yes, I could have done the drastic and aborted him, but I didn't believe in abortion so I didn't do that. Having him was probably one of the better decisions I made in my life. I'm very proud of him. Since his father was not forthcoming with financial support for an outside child, I dedicated my life to providing a decent life for Phillip. I finally had to take his father to court for child support which bothers me to this day. I should not have had to do that. He knew what he was doing when we were tipping around, but then all of a sudden when the baby was born it was a problem.

Although I never married Phillip's father, I met someone when Phillip was six years old. I married (and later divorced) him, but he was a good stepfather to Phillip, and I'm grateful for that. I was with my ex-husband for most of Phillip's life. We were married for ten years and were together for seven years before marrying. His biological father didn't want to have much to do with Phillip until I got married. Then he developed a sudden interest in the child. Give me a break. I never kept Phillip from his dad though. He could see Phillip or take him on outings whenever he wanted to. He chose not to because of his other family. He knew Phillip was here and deliberately chose to stay away. But that's for him to deal with. I think he regrets it now because he and Phillip do not have a close relationship. I didn't particularly want Phillip to be an only child. I

wanted to have other children, but it didn't work out that way. I'm fine with that because I'm totally happy with him. Even though he's grown, he's still my baby.

Unlike me, Phillip did not attend school in our neighborhood. Mandatory busing started, and I was not happy about my 5-year-old baby being bused. I would have preferred that he went to a neighborhood school rather than having to attend kindergarten across town. He couldn't keep up with his shoes and gloves, so I couldn't imagine how he would ride a bus to attend school across town. I did not like that at all. Fortunately for me, my mother's neighbor had kids who were going to the same school as Phillip, and she offered to babysit him a few hours after school. She and her family were very good to him. She helped him ride his bike, helped him with homework, and would keep him any time I needed her to. I'm a firm believer in the old African proverb; it takes a village to raise a child. In addition to the neighbors, I had help from my mother and siblings.

I didn't spend much time away from him though, because I didn't want him to be bounced from place to place. Raising him was important to me and I was dedicated to it. I'm a true believer that learning starts at home and I tried to teach him life-long values because that's how I was raised. I hope he will pass them on to his children one day. I was a single parent at that time, but I had support from my sisters and brothers. Phillip was blessed with some male figures in his life, so he's pretty well-rounded and he's doing well with his life. He went to college on a football scholarship. He graduated from college and has a good job. Right now he's taking classes for a project management certificate. I'm trying to get him to go back for his master's, but we'll have to see about that.

I have always stressed education not only to my son, but to my nieces and nephews as well. Their parents ask me to talk to them about their grades in school. Grades were always important in my house. I didn't play that C mess. We were not having that. Phillip was an only child and there was no reason he shouldn't get straight A's in school. He knew he could bring in a few B's, but that was it. He knew what was expected of him when he was little. He could get just about anything he wanted, but he knew he had to hit the books. If he had a problem, I would get him a tutor. I didn't have a problem with that. One time, Phillip was probably in the fourth or fifth grade, and he brought some math problems home. I thought I could help him with it. I told myself I could do it. I did some stuff on that test, and he took it back to school. He was too outdone. He said 'Mom, you messed my test up. I got an F.'; so I got him a tutor. I didn't have a problem with that. If he told me he was having a problem, I did what I could do to fix it. After that, he didn't have any more problems in math.

As a single parent, I never tried to pacify Phillip by giving him everything he wanted. I couldn't afford to do that even if I wanted to. Thankfully, he was content with the basics. I tried to keep him occupied by reading to him when he was little. I read him stories or we went to the library. We went to the zoo. We attended free events that didn't cost money. We went to the park and fed the ducks. We spent valuable time together that we will never get back. We watched television, but we watched programs that Phillip could learn from and ask questions about. Those times were important to me, and I needed to be a part of that. I believed the learning process started at home. His learning came from what he learned at home, at his grandmother's house, and at his aunt's house. It really does take a village to raise a child.

I've always tried to equip Phillip with the tools necessary to succeed in life. I got that from my parents. My father became a cook in the military and taught all of his children how to cook. My mother taught us household chores. I grew up with structure in my house, so I made sure Phillip had structure in his life. He had a great deal of structure for an only child. I taught him life skills, and he's using them now. He thanks me for that to this day. When he was in college, many of his friends didn't know how to cook, clean, or iron, but he did. I believe children need to be taught. I love children and if there are any children around me whether it's my nieces and nephews, my friends' kids, whomever...if I can help them with something I will. I don't have a problem doing that because I would much rather show them and teach them the right way than have somebody in the street do it. You never know what they're actually getting if they get it from the streets. I would fear that I could have helped them and I didn't. I can't imagine that.

I've tried to help Phillip understand the struggles we endure as a people. I wanted him to be aware of our heritage. I was raised in the civil rights era, and the young people today just don't seem to get it. They don't realize that people gave their lives for us to be where we are, and we're still not where we should be. Racism still exists. You still hear it and see it. It's just that some forms are subtle, some are not. We've come a long way, but we still have a long way to go to obtain equality. I really believe that some Whites don't want minorities to be equal. That's fine for those who want to live that way, but I don't have to live my life around the inequalities. I believe there is enough for everyone to enjoy and that's what I tried to teach my son. I wanted him to be socially aware and socially responsible.

*This section of Victoria's story deals with her life as a single parent. Phillip was the result of an affair so Victoria knew what she was facing. I commend her openness about the affair. It is not easy to admit one's indiscretions, but she does. She not only admits it, but she faces the consequences of her actions. She showed character in raising Phillip when his father wanted nothing to do with him. She utilized family members and others to surround Phillip with positive figures in his life. She raised him under the same foundational concepts her parents used to raise her. She stressed education in the home. She exposed him to educational and cultural activities. She wanted Phillip to be aware of the oppression African Americans experienced so he could appreciate the advances that have been made and use those advances as a driving force to make the most of his life. She also wanted him to be socially responsible so she taught him life skills and encouraged him to be the best person he could be.*

### **Shaky Employment**

*Victoria's employment after the layoff has been unstable but consistent, and I felt that her shaky employment warranted discussion. She is the sole provider for her household, so not working is out of the question. At this point in her life working is simply a means to an end. She has had to make sacrifices along the way and is humbled by the life she currently leads. School is priority for her, so her primary goal is to be able to pay the bills. She is thankful for what she has because she realizes it can be taken away just as it was given. Victoria has not found her dream job yet, but is grateful to have found employers who support her educational efforts. She is confident that her schooling will pay off in the end, and is patiently working her way through the process.*

I think I've had four jobs in the last five years. None of them have been in my field, but they have paid the bills. My mortgage company doesn't care where my money comes from as long as they get theirs. My first job after the layoff was as a customer service person at a major grocery store chain. I sold stamps, cigarettes, and lottery tickets at the front of the store. It paid \$9.63 an hour. I went from nearly \$30 an hour to \$9.63 an hour. I hated it but it was all I could find. It was quite a humbling experience. I needed the money, so I did it. I didn't work there long because I didn't like the hours. I worked nights, holidays, and weekends. All of which I was not accustomed to doing. It was kind of depressing because you worked many hours, but not enough to receive any benefits or be considered full-time. My second job was with a collection agency. I worked in IT but the job only lasted a year before I was laid off. I was beginning to think it was me, but the

company was going through a reorganization and eliminated several positions. It couldn't have ended too soon for me though. I worked with a bunch of chauvinistic men. In their eyes, they were way above women on the totem pole. Ironically, the company was owned by two lesbians. I didn't have a problem with that. I'm not into it, but I try not to judge people. I wasn't interested in hanging out and drinking with them though. My philosophy is that I am here to work, not to socialize.

I've been fortunate to have jobs that have been supportive of my educational efforts. I have worked full-time, the entire time I have been in school. After being laid off from the collection agency, I went to work as a paraprofessional in the public school system. My mother was doing that type of work and helped me get into it when I was between jobs. I worked with handicapped children. I got really attached to the children, and I enjoyed what I was doing. I felt like I was making a difference. They are so special. They need someone and I honestly felt like I accomplished something with those children every day; whereas you go in an office, you do your work, and you're done. With the children, you feel like you're making a difference in their lives. And I didn't think I could do it. Honestly, I had second thoughts, but I needed the money. And I didn't care where it came from. It was very difficult, but they were good to me. I was able to leave work and go to school on school nights and it wasn't an issue. Unfortunately, I only worked there about a year. They just didn't pay well and again I didn't have any benefits. As it turns out though, that's probably what I'll go back to once I do retire...is to work with handicapped children. I don't think I would have left that job if the pay was better and they offered benefits.

Benefits became a major issue when I got sick with a real bad pneumonia or flu or something. I needed benefits and I didn't have any. I was sick and didn't know what to do. Fortunately, my ex-husband was working at the time and was able to put me on his insurance. That was the only way I got my medication, so I was thankful for that. We weren't married, so it was a blessing. He knew I was sick and I didn't have anything so he helped me out. It just shows how God uses people to bless us in our lives. I didn't know how I was going to make it.

My next job came with the assistance of one of my classmates. He worked in the IT department at a hotel, so I quit the school system and went to work at the hotel. That was a bad move. They didn't have any openings in the IT department at the time so I started in the accounts receivable department with the hope of switching over to IT. My classmate needed help in the IT department, but upper management didn't want to create another position. They allowed me to help out in the IT department but didn't offer the pay or the title to go with it. I hated it in accounts receivable. I don't know how I managed to get these people for supervisors, but these guys were from third world countries like Iran, Pakistan, and Bosnia and they totally devalued women. No offense because I try not to judge or be prejudiced, but these men treated us like dirt. I even had a confrontation with one of them one day. I spoke up for myself and told him he would not talk to me that way. It seemed like they were always barking orders. Do this, do that! Finally one day I said 'Wait a minute. I am an adult here and I'm a professional. And I think I carry myself in that manner, so if you have a problem with me we can go to the conference room or you can take me outside in the alley to talk to me. But you will not stand here and confront me in front of my coworkers.' Even though the other women let

the supervisors speak to them that way, I had a problem with it. But that was their business. I wasn't going to let them do it to me. Needless to say, I worked there a few more months, but it was just too stressful.

My current job is still a job that just pays the bills. I'm at another big company and I see the kinds of activities happening around me as before. According to the company, they recognize internal candidates, but I've applied for several positions in the IT department (my current department) and I haven't made a move yet. I've been there a year and have applied for ten jobs. I've interviewed and that's as far as it went. What is wrong here? It's funny that the people with whom I interviewed walk past me everyday and say nothing. They don't say you didn't get the job. They don't send you a letter saying you're not qualified or we hired someone else. I've heard nothing. I'm not asking for any favors, just professional courtesy. It makes no sense to me. My supervisor tells me I'm doing a good job, but yet I'm not able to move up. I'm at the top of my current position, so I'm as high as I'm going to be. I don't plan to stay there and be miserable at \$15 an hour. I want more money. I want to be rewarded for my work and I plan to move on to another job to find my worth. I don't think a person should ever stop growing.

*Since Victoria's jobs have served as a means to an end, she has not focused on landing career-type jobs; instead she's maintained jobs that pay the bills. As a result, she has had to deal with a number of issues. Here we discuss lessons Victoria has learned from her work experiences. The items I explore here are gender issues, discovering a new love, and Victoria's work ethic. Victoria was tactful in her confronting a supervisor who devalued women and made for a hostile work environment. She stood up for herself in a dignified and respectful manner even though she didn't stay on that job very long. She worked with handicapped children in between jobs and discovered a new love. She discovered a new purpose. The job was meaningful but the pay wasn't enough to live on so she plans to return to it after she retires. At that time, her retirement pay will cover her financial needs and she can enjoy the true purpose of her job. I commend Victoria's tenacious attitude regarding work. She hasn't obtained the job she wants, but through it all she has maintained a strong work ethic. She is dedicated to her job; she goes to work promptly everyday; and she performs to the best of her ability while there.*

## Contemplating the Future

*Victoria is not currently experiencing the financial stability she desires, but she is content with where God has her at this time. He is teaching her patience and she takes her lessons in stride. Although she trusts God, Victoria is a bit anxious about her future employability. She is hopeful that her education will provide avenues to better paying jobs in the future, and is counting on that strategy for financial stability in her senior years. As she further contemplates the future, she acknowledges her acquired passion for learning. She feels a social responsibility to share that knowledge with others.*

I'm not where I want to be financially; no where near where I want to be. But I don't want for anything. My needs are met. There are a few projects I would like to do around the house, but those are wants. God supplies my needs. He takes care of me and I'm thankful for that. I'm pushing for this degree and I believe I'm going to get some better jobs as a result. But I don't know how many, because I don't know what the future holds. I have to consider my age too. As I get older, there's discrimination that goes along with that. That's a very real issue for me. My age will play a big part into me considering my future socioeconomic status. I've applied for a couple of jobs and this one lady finally told me to take my birth date off my resume. I did it and was surprised at how many bites I got after that as opposed to leaving my birth date on there or the year I graduated from high school. I took that off. I saw a big difference. I didn't get any of jobs, but I got more interviews than I wasn't getting before.

So my age is a big deal for me. It will play a big part into my socioeconomic picture simply because I have ten or fifteen more years to work, traditionally. I can work longer I'm sure, but it'll take me another couple of years to get this associate's degree. It will take an additional two or three years if I decide to pursue the bachelor's degree. So that still gives me five or ten years to apply what I've learned. The idea is that the schooling will provide additional income to compensate for the years sacrificed in school.

At least, I hope it will work that way because otherwise it's going to be even tougher. I know the degree itself does not guarantee. It can write you a ticket, but sometimes it doesn't work like that for people. But I think as a person, I have to decide if I'm going to make the degree work for me. I put a great deal of work into getting this piece of paper, so why would I just sit back and say yeah I got the degree, but then not do anything with it.

Education has always been important to me, but I'm not sure of what I'll do after I get this associate's degree. I've started down this path, but will I continue to further my education? I've been told by people that I have the personality of someone who will continue. They say they don't see me stopping here. I don't know yet, I'm not sure of what I will do. I do believe that God gives us knowledge to share with others, and that's what I want to do because I believe that's what I'm here for. I strongly believe that everyone, regardless of their race, gender, or whatever should get some kind of education because it's out there for us. The more we know the better we can be toward each other. The better we will be as a society.

*Here we see Victoria's concerns about her future. She is concerned about age discrimination; she wonders if she will benefit financially from her education; and she wants to share the knowledge she obtains with others. Are her concerns warranted? I believe they are. At age 53, Victoria has legitimate concerns about age discrimination. We live in a society that does not genuinely value older individuals in the workplace. Although it is illegal, age discrimination does exist. It is subtle and hard to prove, but it happens. Also, it is natural for Victoria to expect to advance her financial position after school. Higher educational levels warrant higher salaries and Victoria is justified in desiring an appropriate financial return on her educational investment. She has always supported herself so it is understandable that the thought of being unable to do so during her senior years would unnerve her. Finally, I admire Victoria's social responsibility to share her knowledge with others. If all goes as planned, she will fulfill this by returning to work with handicapped children in the school system after she retires.*

## **Here's What I Gathered**

*As I reflect on Victoria, I am pleased that I had the chance to get to know her. Victoria has a pleasant attitude. She spoke frankly throughout our three interviews. She was candid and honest in her recollections of various incidents. She doesn't claim to live the perfect life today, but she is grateful that she is not living the life she used to lead. She gives that credit to God. While she always has had a relationship with him, it was the sudden layoff from her longtime job that brought her closer to him. She had to rely on him extremely to provide her needs. He showed her how to reprioritize her finances. He introduced her to education. He continuously tests her patience and He is currently providing comfort in her grief.*

*Victoria is not afraid to admit her past mistakes. I believe she learned from them which brought on changing behavior. We saw this in subsequent decisions such as her changing health patterns, her relationship with Phillip's father, and her attitude towards education. After learning of her family's history of heart disease, she changed her lifestyle. She quit smoking, drank less, and started exercising. After giving birth to her son, she ended her extramarital relationship and entered her own relationship and marriage years later. After her layoff, she realized the value of education and enrolled into higher education.*

*Victoria's circumstances in not being able to attend college after high school were unfortunate, but they were not uncommon. Such is life for poor minority children due to the lack of cultural capital and habitus in their lives. I am not sure these concepts held much meaning for Victoria at that time. Sure she may understand them as they are explained to her today, but that may be the extent of it. Victoria was one of the disadvantaged children who chose to make the best of her life situation. As she got older, she became more aware of the injustices in the world. She realizes that racism and discrimination exists, however, she chooses not to dwell on them. If people want to hold resentment toward others, it is their prerogative. Victoria chooses to trust God with her life.*

*Admittedly, Victoria has experienced shaky employment since the layoff. She hasn't yet landed her dream job, but is hopeful that her education will pay off once she earns her associate's degree. After our first interview, I got the feeling that Victoria will continue her educational pursuits. I believe she has discovered a zeal that she never knew existed. Although she is concerned about her future, I am confident that Victoria will continue to follow God's guidance and make decisions that will enhance her financial future.*

## Simone's Story

*Simone was referred to me by a mutual acquaintance. She was anxious to get started so we scheduled her first interview right away. We met in a conference room on campus. The conference room had a light gray color on three walls which gave the room a sterile feel. The back wall held a sky blue color with three photographs on the wall. The room was filled with two long, brown tables in the center of the room surrounded by fourteen mauve chairs with wood trim. A smaller table lined one of the walls and a white dry erase board hung over it. The top half of the third wall was full of large windows covered with vinyl blind window treatments. The windows ran from one wall to the other and overlooked the courtyard. The final wall housed a coat rack and one picture. Other chairs lined the walls of the room as well. The room provided a nice, quiet place for a private discussion.*

*Simone wears her forty-seven years well and her short five-foot-four frame fits perfectly with her hesitant girlish manner. She fits right into the collegiate setting in her sweat shirt, blue jeans, and tennis shoes. She has a beautiful cocoa complexion and her round face features big dark eyes and a bright smile that lights up her entire face. Simone is the birth mother of two children and was the foster mother of three children over a four year period. Her younger son is eighteen and her older son is twenty-two. Her foster children ranged in age from eight months to eighteen months. Simone is a certified nursing assistant and attends Urban Community College (UCC). Her enthusiasm for education is obvious, yet there is nervous laughter as she describes her past life experiences. I constructed Simone's story around various topics throughout her life span. The topics surround distant family, educational escapades, flaky friendships, looking for love, and dramatic discoveries.*

I have been in college off and on for 23 years now, and all I have to show for it is a certificate I received for taking a six-week employment training class. That was when I first started going to school. My family keeps saying I've been in school all these years for nothing. I guess they can't see my educational vision. I must admit that it's taken me a while to find educational direction for myself. I have attended a number of schools and have changed my major more times than I care to admit. I think I'm on my eighth major. The difference between the past and the present is that this time around I'm close to obtaining my associate's degree in office management. I anticipate graduating next semester. It's been quite a rocky road; a road I believe started during my childhood. Let me see if I can clarify some of the issues from my upbringing.

## **Distant Family**

*During our first interview I learned that Simone came from a blended family. Both parents came into the marriage with children. Simone was the first child from that union; the fifth of ten children. The children weren't taught about different mothers and fathers. Her father was a preacher so they spent a lot of time in church. They lived in a family-oriented environment, but there was a strange dynamic happening here. Something just seemed a little off to me. I could not pinpoint it at first, but the situation became clearer as we proceeded with the interviews. I believe that the close family Simone described in the beginning was not close at all. In fact they were quite distant. This will become apparent as we proceed through this section of her story. First I have provided some background information on Simone's family to foreshadow where I believe the distance began to seep in.*

As a child, I had no interest in school. I never felt like anyone cared whether I learned or not: my teachers, my parents, no one. Education was not supported in our home. We had to go to school, but that was about it. My father was a preacher and his church demanded a great deal of my parents' time. We spent a great deal of time in church, and my parents mostly focused on issues of the church. They believed in God first, then education. However, they spent very little time on our educational obligations. As a result, we were often left to fend for ourselves when it came to school work. Education was something my parents lacked. My mother received her GED late in life, and my father never made it passed the sixth grade. I think my mother cared about our education, but between the church and having kids, she seemed to be stretched too thin. My disinterest in school caused me to act out quite a bit. I refused to do what I was told or asked to do in school, and I fought all the time. I simply did not care. Besides, I knew I wouldn't get in trouble at home anyway. Other kids would be scared to behave the way I was behaving, but I figured my mom didn't care, so I did what I wanted to do. Maybe it was my way of seeking attention, but I was never chastised for getting in trouble at

school. Our neighborhood school (Franklin Elementary) provided no inspiration for me to learn and at the time that was fine with me.

My family was poor. We ate the same food every day; food that we couldn't stand. We walked everywhere: to church, to the stores. We never celebrated our birthdays. My mom would make us a cake if she had the money. Sometimes she had the money, other times she didn't. Sometimes we would get lucky and have cake and ice cream. We did not get a car until I was a teenager. We were poor, but my mother didn't work outside of the home until I was a teenager. She cleaned houses. It wasn't until later in life that she attended a vocational school to learn data entry. I didn't know how other people lived so I didn't know any different. And I didn't care. That was just the way it was and that was okay. We didn't see the other kids with their stuff. I knew they had better clothes than us, and they always made fun of our clothes. My mom used to make our clothes. Other times we got them from the discount store. We had to get the cheapest stuff on the rack... the clearance rack. We had a lot of hand-me-downs. The girls only had two pair of pants because my dad didn't allow us to wear pants. He didn't think women should wear pants so we wore dresses everywhere. We couldn't even wear pants outside to play, and I hated it.

I grew up during the sixties and back then children were to be seen and not heard. We were not allowed to talk when adults were talking. We had to leave the room when they talked about personal stuff. We got in big trouble if we asked anybody anything. You were not to ask for money, and you were not supposed to talk to people you did not know. I always seemed to test the waters by misbehaving. One time I got in trouble for saying hi to a man at the grocery store. He smiled at me and said hello. He said I had a

pretty smile, and I got in trouble for telling him thank you. I don't know if it was the idea that I said something to him or the way I was blushing when I spoke to him, either way, my mother was furious with me.

My parents were very strict. They didn't play. They shielded us from worldly issues, so we didn't know anything about politics, sex, or drugs. For example, I didn't know anything about my cycle until it started, and it nearly scared me to death. We basically didn't know about these issues until we were faced with them. Martin Luther King died when I was in the sixth grade and everybody was crying at school. Even my teacher was crying and that really tripped me out because she was White. I couldn't understand why she was crying because he was Black. Tells you how much I knew about him. My mom didn't teach us about race matters, so I didn't have a clue as to what they were talking about. I thought everybody was tripping.

*As I look over Simone's family background, I believe the children's lack of socialization played a major role in fanning the fire of distance. Early on Simone's parents sheltered their children and they focused more on religious activities than the children's educational obligations. When our interviews first began, Simone said she grew up in a family-oriented environment. However, as the interviews proceeded, I did not perceive the family to be family-oriented at all. Instead of the family-oriented environment she described in the beginning, I believe there was some type of disconnect between the parents and the children as well as constant sibling rivalry among the children.*

Although I was the first child of my parents' union, my two younger sisters and their kids always received better treatment from our parents. Monica is my sister next to me and everybody thought we were twins. Monica was more developed than I. She looked and acted more mature than I. I always felt like my parents loved Monica more than they loved me. As a matter of fact, nobody in my family has ever been supportive of me. They never have been happy with anything I've done. They always have found reasons to make fun of me and make negative comments about me. I worked at this crisis

center for children. It housed children who were in the foster care system. The children were housed there before they were placed in foster homes. I didn't want any children of my own at that time, so I decided to become a foster parent. As a foster mom, I had three foster kids over a four-year period. My family didn't think I should have gotten any. I got one little girl when she was three months old. She was a crack baby, and she had some health problems. She cried all the time. My mother was my babysitter. I guess my mother was tired one day so she wanted me to leave the baby with Monica. I didn't want to do that because I knew Monica was an alcoholic, and I was responsible for the baby. Social services would come after me if something happened to that baby. Monica had caught her husband cheating and was drunk more than she was sober. So how could my mother think Monica could take better care of the baby than I? I was totally offended.

*I believe we are beginning to see the disconnect in Simone's family here. Simone felt like her parents were partial to her younger siblings, and I believe Simone was jealous of her parents' relationship with her younger sisters. This jealousy appeared to fuel a bit of envy on Simone's part as she and her sister Monica grew up. The two were always compared to each other and Simone always felt like Monica was their parents' favorite. Her feelings of jealousy and envy appeared to be validated when her mother thought Monica could care for Simone's foster child better than Simone could. Simone doesn't feel like her family was very supportive of her as a foster parent. She had similar feelings when it came to her birth children. Simone has two birth sons who were born four years apart. Her sons are the result of two of her romantic relationships. I will elaborate on each son as I discuss their respective fathers in a later section. For now, I want to acknowledge Simone's first son as I discuss her struggles as a single parent.*

Prior to the birth of my first son, I was living on my own. However, after his birth, I moved in with my parents to have help with a new baby. We lived there about nine months. Me and the baby moved out when I started receiving housing assistance and went to live in a different city. The new location was the first place to become available so I took it. It seemed like my family became distant with me at that time. Well, actually they were always distant with me. From the time I moved out they never called, never

came to visit, and never kept in touch. I was told that my family was envious because of the various opportunities I have received. I had the opportunity to go to college, and I took advantage of it.

For me, being a single mother was the worst, most horrible thing I would ever endure. When I first had Wesley, I didn't know what to do with a boy in my house. I didn't have a husband, and I had never raised a boy. I never had a man in the house with me. So I had to figure out how to raise this boy. I didn't know what I was going to do. I was lost and totally confused. I did the best I could. I had a difficult time with him because he was a difficult child. When he turned two, life became a nightmare. He tore up everything in sight. He always argued with me, and he never cleaned up after himself. He always seemed to be doing something bad. He scribbled on the walls with crayons. He threw our stuffed animals and toothbrushes in the toilet. He always was getting into something. I had to take him to speech therapy when he was three years old because he wouldn't talk. He would only mumble words that no one could understand, and he cried all the time. He cried more than anything. He seemed to be such an unhappy child.

I was doing the best I could to take care of Wesley by myself. I didn't have any help. His father didn't want to be bothered and neither did my family. They were very distant, so I was truly on my own. I applied for Aid for Dependent Children (AFDC), but one of the workers basically told me that Wesley belonged to them since they were helping me; that he was their child, not mine. As a result of her comment, I chose not to receive any services. I would try to make it on my own. It was rough because I didn't have much money. I brought home a \$215 paycheck at that time. I only had money for my rent, a little food, and gas to get back and forth to work. So Wesley did without.

I'm not sure what the deal is with my family. They didn't seem to care about me or my child. After I entered college, I found out I have a learning disability (dyslexia), and when I told my mother about it, she said I was crazy. She said there was nothing wrong with me, yet she always called me crazy. I guess I was different from my siblings. We have very different personalities and lifestyles. One of my brothers spent his whole life in jail, so that's his lifestyle. Most of my other siblings like to drink and party. I was different. I didn't care for the party life, but I was promiscuous.

*Simone's struggles as a single parent began immediately. The child's father was absent, and her son was a difficult child. Needless to say Simone was having a hard time. Left to fend for herself and her child, she worked hard to support the two of them. Simone struggled as many single mothers do, and she felt abandoned. She believed her family once again offered her limited support. She felt they turned their backs on her at a time when she needed them most. My reasoning for pointing this out here is that I believe it added to Simone's feelings that her family didn't care about her. I believe it also magnified the distance between she and her siblings. Because Simone experienced this distance with her family, she was very apprehensive about introducing them to her current husband. I thought I would interrupt the story here to introduce her current husband, Thomas, whom she recently met and married. This relationship as well as others is discussed in a later section, but for clarification, Thomas is introduced now as he is mentioned in various sections of the story at this point.*

My current husband, Thomas, is the love of my life. We met over spring break and married a few weeks later. We just went to the court house and did it. My family didn't even know. I didn't tell them in the beginning. I wasn't sure of how they would react. I was hoping they would accept him. It all happened very fast, but we had so much in common. We talked about everything, so we just decided to go for it.

Actually meeting Thomas over spring break was a miracle for me because my parents were about to drive me crazy. They wanted me to quit school and get a good job. They said I didn't need school and that I was stressing myself out for nothing. They wanted me to spend more time at the church. I believe they really just wanted me to stay

at home and help them out: do their shopping, clean their house, and be there for them for whatever. They didn't actually say those words, but that's what they meant. Well they can forget it. I am not giving up my schooling. I'm very close to graduating, and I'm not about to quit now. We have a big family and they have enough people around to help them out. There are too many distractions at my parents' house. I can't concentrate there. During spring break, there were seven kids screaming and hollering around the house. I had these migraine headaches. I had tons of homework to do and was exhausted because I had not had any days off from work. I would lie down but couldn't get to sleep. I would finally fall asleep at one or two in the morning and would wake up at four in the morning. So I was getting very little sleep.

I was a basket case and meeting Thomas was a blessing because I could get away from all the madness and hang out with him. When I'm with him, I sleep like a baby the whole night. I may wake up a few times, but I go right back to sleep. I snuggle up under him like a little kitty cat. If I get good rest, I'll get up during the night to study. I can get so much done when I'm with him. I finally told my family about my marriage after several weeks. Surprisingly, they were supportive and receptive of Thomas. My dad is very particular and normally doesn't eat anybody's cooking, and he let Thomas BBQ on Memorial Day. Nobody could believe it. I wasn't sure how they were going to receive him, but they love him to death. They seem to love him more than they love me.

Admittedly, my relationship with my parents was strained, but now they're glad to hear from me. They ask how their son-in-law is doing and are eager to see us. I guess he just has a way of talking to people. He just has that type of personality.

*I believe Simone chose not to share her marriage announcement with her family right away because she did not want to risk exposing him to the rejection she felt from her*

*family. Prior to marrying Thomas, Simone was living with her parents. She was feeling a bit overwhelmed and unable to study as there were distractions in the house with her nieces and nephews there. Her parents were also encouraging her to quit school and focus on work. This was an additional distraction for Simone as she is dedicated to completing her studies. Perhaps their disinterest is due to their lack of understanding towards education.*

*The common theme we see in Simone's family is distance. There is a major disconnect in the family and unfortunately it comes from both ends. The family has been distant with her, and she has been distant with the family. We see several instances of this with: the parents' distance from the children; sibling rivalry between the children; family's lack of support in Simone's life endeavors; and Simone withholding her marriage announcement. The disconnect begins with the parents and the children. Simone's parents were religious and seemed to focus more on the church than they did their children. Simone felt unimportant. As a result, she acted out and showed disinterest in school. The disconnect continues with Simone and her siblings. Simone believes her parents favored the younger children. There is some jealousy and envy regarding life situations between the children. They all lead very different lives, and their decisions have supported their lifestyle. Simone doesn't feel like her family has supported her life endeavors. For example, they didn't think she was fit to be a foster mother, and they offered little emotional support when she gave birth to her first child. Finally, Simone withheld her marriage announcement from her family because she didn't trust what they would do with that information. She didn't want to expose her new husband, Thomas, to the rejection she had experienced over and over in life. As it turns out, the family has accepted Thomas into the family. They have accepted him for now anyway.*

### **Educational Escapades**

*Simone spoke of her past educational experiences with little confidence. She seemed to mask her feelings with a nonchalant attitude. I think it was easier to say she didn't care about something than face the loneliness she felt. In reality, she did care. She cared a great deal. She just didn't know what to do about it. As a child, she needed help with her school work, but didn't know how to ask for the help she needed. She couldn't make her parents forgo their church work to help her with school work. She couldn't make her teachers care about her learning. Simone isolated herself from other children, so there was no help from her peers. She didn't know how to do it for herself. But instead of asking for the help she needed, she acted out. Her antics would have continued, but she met three teachers who changed her life. It's been a bumpy road, but she has finally gotten on a track that leads to a degree. Simone's educational escapades surround her disruptive behavior in school early on, her life-changing experience with three teachers, and her experiences as a non-traditional student.*

I was never fond of school and my grades reflected it. I brought home straight D's and F's. I never did my homework. I was never made to do my homework, so I was

pretty much on my own. I was really bored with school so I just sat there. I sat in class, I acted out, and I wanted to play. I was a teacher's worst nightmare. I ignored everything. I wanted to be a distraction. I never participated when asked. I pretty much stayed in trouble. As I got older, the trouble increased. I was getting in trouble every day; seems like I lived in the principal's office. They tried to punish me by having me write papers, but I never did it. I never did what they told me to do.

I never really figured out why I behaved that way in school. I think I wanted the attention even though I didn't think I would get in trouble at home. I didn't care though. In my mind, I was willing to suffer the consequences. Unfortunately, there were never any to suffer. Some of the children used to tell me they would be afraid of what their parents would do if they came home with some of the behavioral problems I had. But I never got in trouble for it, and I thought my mom didn't care.

We were perfectly happy at Franklin Elementary. It was right there in our neighborhood school and we walked to school. Then we were bused to Marshall which we were not happy about because Marshall was a White school. I remember being really mad about that, and I continued to act out. I went to that school and wrapped this girl's hair around the chair; I was kicking the White students, and making their dresses go up in the air in the hallway. I did all kinds of evil because I didn't want to be there. I'm not really sure why I hated it so much. I didn't really see a big difference in the schools because I didn't do my work at either.

The major difference for me was meeting Mr. Haynes, Mr. Shea, and Mr. Tarver. They were Black men who were my teachers; one was a science teacher, one was an English teacher, and one was a social studies teacher. I was getting in trouble until I met

them; they started communicating with my teachers, and I stopped acting out so much in class. They got my attention about school, and I had a light bulb moment. I started caring about my homework. I don't know what it was about them; I think they made me feel like I mattered. No one else had ever done that. No one else paid any attention to my school work or cared how I was doing in school. They were different. I liked them and I wanted to listen to them. I think I even had a school girl crush on them. Whatever it was, it kept my attention, and I began to listen to them and somewhat started to come alive in school.

When I was in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade, Mr. Tarver took us to a university campus so we could see what a university looked like. I will never forget it. That was my first time ever seeing anything like that. I didn't know what a college was. I didn't even know it existed. I felt like the university was so far out of my reach. How could I go to a place like this? I couldn't even imagine. Going to college was not something that was discussed in my house. I'm not sure I would have finished high school had it not been for the influence of the three men. I spent a great deal of time talking to them. I thought it was because of the crushes I had on them, but that disappeared somewhere along the way, and I kind of adopted them as mentors without really realizing it. Before them, none of my teachers cared about me as a student, my grades, or anything. Other teachers didn't care enough to keep in touch with what I was doing. But these three were different. They may have been like that with all the Black students; I don't know. They made sure they knew what was going on with me. It was because of their influence that I was able to graduate from high school.

I hated my high school. I went to Kennedy High School. It was a mixture of Blacks and Whites, but I hated it. I wanted to go back to Marshall. Mr. Tarver came to

Kennedy, but it wasn't the same, and I reverted back to my old ways. I felt like the people there didn't care about me, and I stopped doing everything. I just stopped altogether again. I was back into my rebellious state and refused to do anything that had to do with school. One of my teachers told me I may as well drop out of school if I wasn't going to do my work. She had the audacity to tell me I wasn't going to graduate. She looked me in the eyes and said that. I was offended. I don't know if I was offended because she was White or because she had a point. Maybe it was a little bit of both. Deep down, I knew she was right. I HAD to turn my life around. I looked at her and I said 'that's what you think.' That was my wake-up call because despite my lack of effort, I did want to graduate. I continued at Kennedy, and I also started attending an alternative school at the same time. They didn't have any problems with me there because it was my last resort to graduating from high school.

I waited a year or two before I went back to school after graduating from high school. I didn't want anything to do with school. I was glad to be out and was through with school for good or so I thought. My first introduction to college was a six-week employment training program that I learned about through social services. I had foster children at the time, and the program was designed to equip single women with job skills. That was the first step I made towards educating myself beyond high school. I received a certificate for completing the course and thought I was on top of the world. I had finally done something for myself and it felt good. I was motivated to continue so I started taking classes at a technical school to brush up on my basic skills. I started the classes, but I always dropped them. I would drop in and out, in and out. I stayed out for a while before enrolling into a four-year institution. My classes were going well until I found out

I was pregnant with my first son, Wesley. I stuck with it in the beginning, but eventually dropped them before the baby was born. I had Wesley and stayed home for a while, and then I came to UCC. I took a few classes and dropped out again. I would never finish anything. Attending school was always on my mind, but I would start the classes and drop them. It was a cycle; start and stop. I did that for a number of years.

I knew education was important which is why I continued to go. I knew I wanted some type of knowledge to obtain a better job, but I wasn't sure of what I wanted to learn. I was working and raising my son, and I wanted to do something for myself. School was that outlet for me; an opportunity to better myself. Originally, I wanted to be a nurse. I wanted to take classes to earn a licensed practical nurse certification or so I thought. However, I started working as a certified nursing assistant and soon changed my mind about nursing. I was taking an anatomy and physiology class, and I thought to myself, this is not for me. I had a study partner, and she recognized problems I was having with the lessons. She observed that I knew the material, but I would turn it around and twist it up. I was also having a hard time following the instructor. She asked if I had ever heard of a learning disability called dyslexia. I said no, so she gave me the number to the vocational rehabilitation office. I set up an appointment to be tested and in fact was diagnosed with dyslexia.

I was also tested at Capital City University and the lady there told me I was lazy and that I just needed to buckle down and concentrate on what I read. She said I was smart and was not trying to do the work. I also took other tests and tested at extremely low levels of math, English, and reading. My math scores were the worst. I tested at third-grade level. I think I tested at fourth-grade level for English, and the same for

reading and comprehension. Fortunately, I found out about my learning disability before I got too involved in my classes.

I did a significant amount of starting and stopping in the beginning, but this last time I have been in school about seven years. I went back to school at the urging of my friend Sharon. She was working on her associate's degree in social work and kept telling me I should go back to school. She said there was all this money available and encouraged me to look into it. So I did. I applied for financial aid and was fortunate enough to receive grants most of the time. I have only had to take out a few student loans. I'm really trying to keep the loans to a minimum because I don't want to get into any financial trouble.

I was also freaked out about the classes. I was the oldest student in the class, and I felt a bit inadequate around the younger students. Frankly, I was embarrassed. I soon realized the young students have issues too, so we learn from each other. Sometimes they help me with the homework, and I help them something I'm good at. One of my strengths is that I have really good ideas for papers. Last semester I helped a young lady with a paper she was all stressed out about. I gave her various tips, and she was so happy. She felt really good about her paper when she left.

I have been at my current job for years now, but they have never been very supportive of my educational efforts. They fought me all the time. They changed my schedule to make it hard for me to make it to school. My co-workers have always harassed me and made the workplace hard for me. I think they did it because of my learning problems. I used their teasing as motivation to do my homework; that's what drove me to stick with school this time around. I've been trying to get away from that job

because I'm tired of dealing with them. They finally gave me Tuesdays and Thursdays off for school; finally, after all these years. They know I'll be graduating soon, and they saw they couldn't break me. I don't plan to continue to work there once I finish school. I think they know that now.

I have four more classes before I graduate. I'm really nervous about Legal Environment. I'm sure it'll be fine though. I hope my teachers are as good as they have been in the past. I've been quite impressed. There have been a few who were really difficult though. They knew I had a learning disability, but it was like they didn't care. One of them even announced my learning problems in class. That really pissed me off.

I enjoy the campus life, although I'm not there much. I like the different activities they have, but I'm typically in and out. I would love to spend more time on campus, but I have too much of a hard time with my homework. Tuesdays and Thursdays are school days. On Tuesdays, I get to go home at three. I used to go to the lab. Now I can't wait to get off campus and spend that time with my honey. Thursday is my long day. I start at nine in the morning, and I'm in class until nine at night. By the time I get home, I'm ready to pass out. I've tried to work on campus in addition to my regular job, but it didn't work out. It was just too much. I wish I could have more dealings on campus, but it is out of the question because my new husband is so clingy. I thought I was bad, but he is worse than I. He wants to be with me every second he can. He says I don't have to go back to school after I finish my associate's degree, I can stay at home. There is a part of me that would like to go back, but I don't want to do the work. It's so difficult and I'm tired of school. He doesn't want me to go back and I'm glad; it kind of gives me an excuse not to.

*This section presents Simone's educational escapades from childhood to adulthood. It covers her disruptive behavior in school early on, her life-changing experience after*

*meeting three teachers, and her experiences as a non-traditional student. She acted out in school because she didn't know how to seek out the assistance she needed. The disruptive behavior she displayed as a child and her disinterest in school follows her to this day. She now understands the importance of education and regrets the valuable time she wasted. Simone will be forever grateful to the three teachers who changed her life. The interest they showed in her education represented a pivotal moment in her life because she began to view education and herself in a positive light. Simone has had an off-and-on love affair with college. She started and stopped, dropped in and out. She faced the basic fears most non-traditional women face in that she was afraid of failure, and she was scared of being the oldest student in class. In addition, I believe she had to overcome her self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy. Fortunately, Simone has persevered. After 20+ years of schooling, she is only a few classes shy of earning her associate's degree.*

### **Flaky Friendships**

*I would like to open this section by pointing out the "loner" syndrome that I believe Simone dealt with in childhood. She isolated herself from others early in life, but I feel that she used the isolation as a defense mechanism to cope in her living environment. I perceive this to be the driving force behind many of her decisions pertaining to her friendships. I submit that these feelings developed from lack of socialization as Simone's social skills were limited. Underneath the loner was a needy little girl. As she got older, the loner syndrome manifested as neediness. Simone's nonchalant attitude about life combined with extreme naivety appears to serve as a mask for loneliness; an art she has mastered quite well; so well I'm not even sure she realizes she does it. The loneliness she endures has caused her to tolerate inconsiderate behavior from so-called friends whose friendships should have been terminated long ago. She has used this nonchalant attitude as a cover to protect herself from people. She has mastered this art throughout her lifetime. The ramifications of her loneliness are evident in various areas of her life, including friendships which we will see here, and relationships which we'll see in the next section.*

I have always been a loner. I was shy and had very low self-esteem. I used to speak in such a soft voice that people had to strain to hear what I was saying. That was my personality, my character. My mom said I was always like that. When I was a baby, I wouldn't let anybody play with me. I didn't want to be bothered. I liked being by myself and wasn't interested in mingling with other kids at school. I was this way from elementary school through high school. I got nervous if too many people were around. I only wanted one friend, and if she wanted to be around other people, I would withdraw

from her. I only wanted to talk to that one person. I didn't know how to open up to people.

I really didn't hang out with anybody until I met Linda. She lived around the corner from me, and we went to elementary school together. We actually met during the summer before we went to Marshall, and we ended up in classes together. We came from totally different backgrounds. Linda's family was uppity. Her dad was in the military, and they were accustomed to living a comfortable life. We were poor, so Linda made fun of us. She put us down, but she did it in a sneaky way, and I wasn't aware of what she was doing. Eventually our different backgrounds drove a wedge between us. Linda would always hang out at my house with me and my family and then she would go back to school and talk about us. She made us sound like horrible people and would tell people how poor we were; how we didn't have this, we didn't have that. Yet she stole from my house. She had everything anyone could want, but she would steal from us. She always did things like that, but I tolerated her all the way through school from Marshall Elementary to Kennedy High School.

It took me a while to realize that Linda wasn't a true friend. I knew she wasn't right. I felt it. I was a friend to her but she didn't reciprocate. I didn't realize it in the beginning because I was a child. I didn't really know what to expect of friendship and didn't know how to make real friends at that time. I was lonely; I had real low self-esteem and was just happy that someone finally wanted to be my friend. Prior to her, nobody else ever played with me. So I guess I developed some kind of sick loyalty to her. Linda and I had several classes together, and I thought that would be good for me because she did her work. She was a good student who made A's and B's. But she didn't

help me with my work. I wasted time thinking she would help me, and I probably missed out on meeting somebody who cared enough about me to help me do my school work, to help me stay motivated to do what they were doing. Linda wasn't the one, and it got to the point where I no longer wanted to be in classes with her. She was a big-time back stabber, and I was finally realizing it. I eventually began to distance myself from her. I started taking separate classes from her, but we still ended up in at least one or two classes together. We also saw each other after school because we lived in the same neighborhood. I tried to distance myself from her, but I couldn't seem to make a clean break.

Linda and I were still hanging out when Dorothy joined us. Dorothy was worse than Linda, because Dorothy was a bully and liked to fight. She liked to start trouble and was a gossip. Dorothy was from a poor family like I was. Her mother was a single parent, and Dorothy and her siblings didn't have any structure, and they weren't taught to clean up after themselves. They were all about having sex and getting drunk. I'm not sure of when she and Linda started doing that because they didn't tell me. I didn't find out they were doing it until we were at Kennedy. They didn't actually tell me what they were doing, but I could tell by their conversation and the way they were being real secretive around me. They were describing what it was like to feel sex, and I was not concerned with that because sex was the farthest thing from my mind. Whatever they did was their business. That's how I saw it. Whatever they did was their thing, it was their problem. My sister and I played with dolls until we were sixteen. We were still watching Sesame Street and Electric Company. Linda and Dorothy were long past that.

Despite my crazy friendship with Linda, we remained friends. After high school, we moved into the same building which I thought would bring us closer, but it didn't. I basically didn't know her anymore, and one would think I would move on with my life. For some reason I didn't. I became god-mother to Linda's first child. I would clean her house and babysit for her while she was out having fun. I think I was a glutton for punishment. I knew she was using me, but I chose to ignore it. I allowed her to continue to do it. I don't know what I was thinking. Did I fear losing her friendship? She hadn't been a good friend to me anyway, so why did it matter?

During this time, I started working at the nursing home which is where I met Amanda. We worked together about six months before Linda came to work there as well. After a while, Amanda started to point out how Linda was using me. I was cleaning her house and keeping her baby while she went out with other friends and never invited me. As I stated before, I knew she was using me, but I didn't care. I was having fun with the baby. The way I saw it, Linda was my friend, this was my god-baby, and that was all there was to it. I was taught to treat people nicely regardless of how they treat you. I was naïve for a long time. I finally stopped helping her like that once Amanda brought it to my attention.

Amanda and I have been friends for years now. Recently, however, there seems to be a bit of distance between us. She started acting weird because of her dog; well she used the dog as an excuse, but it was really her husband. Her husband is African and my ex-boyfriend, Scott, is African too. I'll tell you more about Scott later. I really think my breakup with Scott was the reason behind her sudden distance. I never got along with Amanda's husband. He was mean and he always talked nasty to me. Well not just me, but

other people too, but I took it personal because I don't like to be talked to that way. He's African and he's rude. He would holler at me every time I called her and every time I came around, so I've always tried to keep my distance from him. I would hang out with her when he wasn't around. When he arrived, I would leave. It wasn't strange for Amanda and me to go a year without talking. Sometimes she didn't have a phone, other times we would have some type of disagreement and not speak for a while. Somehow we always came back together.

I have three other friends I have met over the years. They're my friends, but they have not played a significant role in my life. They are Elizabeth, Sandra, and Sharon. Elizabeth started tapering off when she noticed Amanda tapering off. I'm not sure what her problem is. I think she's jealous of my new husband. I really don't care if they taper off. They don't have a penis for me, and they get upset with me when I tell them that. Sandra comes around when she needs something. When life is good, I don't hear from her. Sharon is on her usual high horse thinking she is better than everyone else. Ever since she got her associate's degree, she tells me we need to leave low-life people alone and only deal with high-class people because we will have degrees. All of my friends say they are supportive of my schooling, yet they do nothing to help me. If I ask to come to their houses to do homework, they say no or they have excuses. They tell me they admire me for going to school; that they couldn't do it. The bottom line is that they aren't there when I need them. Unfortunately, my love life wasn't much different.

*Simone has experienced some flaky friendships throughout her lifetime. She consistently had difficulty maintaining friendships from her toxic friendship with Linda to her current haphazard friendships with Amanda, Elizabeth, Sandra, and Sharon. Linda seemed so cruel to Simone. Yet, Simone seemed desperate to remain in Linda's life. Why did it take Amanda to point out that Linda was using Simone? Why was Simone so content with such treatment? I feel it was her lack of self-esteem. She did not think enough of herself to*

*realize she didn't have to tolerate such treatment. She was desperate to have a friend at any cost. The unfortunate thing is that her flaky friendships didn't end with Linda. As we see, there were others. I believe two factors contributed to Simone's difficulty with friendships: isolation resulting from lack of socialization and loneliness. Growing up, Simone wasn't involved in many social activities and did not have a clear gauge on how to pursue or maintain friendships. Thus she wasn't socialized to nurture friendships, rather she gave of herself with an expected return in mind. The loneliness played a role in Simone's relationships because she wanted desperately to avoid it. She would endure just about anything in order to avoid being alone. The only time she was willing to look beyond her friendships was when there was a romantic relationship involved. Either way, she tried to avoid the loneliness.*

### **Looking for Love**

*Simone didn't make any better decisions in her relationships than she did in her friendships. Her romantic relationships ranged from marriages to loveless relationships to casual sexual encounters. She was promiscuous and jumped in and out of a series of bad relationships. She admits to several encounters with men with whom she should have never gotten involved. Two of the encounters resulted in Simone's two children. We will also see that her need for companionship even caused her to deny her own religious beliefs in order to gain the attention of a man. Again, the penetrating factor here is loneliness; loneliness that dictates the need for companionship at any price.*

I admit that I made a series of bad decisions. I had relationships with men I barely knew. I ended up with two sons as a result of two of these relationships. My first relationship wasn't very productive. It wasn't a relationship really. His name was Ronald and he was just a sex buddy. I didn't really know him. I'm not even sure why I got involved with him in the first place, but he was light-skinned, and I always had a crush on those light-skinned guys with good hair. I know; not much criteria right? As I stated before, I've made some bad decisions. I ended up getting pregnant. I always loved children, but I wasn't trying to get pregnant. I was 23 years old and I had not planned on having kids at that time. The pregnancy was an accident. I was taking birth control pills, but I never did take them faithfully. I don't like pills so I probably forgot them. I was careless and I ended up getting pregnant. I didn't know Ronald very well before I got pregnant and all of a sudden he started stealing out of my house, acting crazy towards me,

and making negative comments to me. I began to hate him. I knew I didn't want to have a child with this man so I had my sister to take me to get an abortion when I was about two months along. My parents didn't know about the baby because I was too embarrassed to tell them. I knew they wouldn't approve and would be mad at me. I wouldn't have gotten an abortion had my parents known about the baby. Afterwards, I was very depressed about it though. I cried for at least three years over that.

So then I stupidly decided to have another child, which was another mistake. I thought I could make up for the baby I aborted. This relationship didn't turn out much better than the first one. This time I got pregnant by a monster who also turned out to be someone I didn't know. His name was Michael and I met him at a club where I used to work. My mom told me he was an alcoholic, but I didn't believe her. I knew he drank, but I didn't know he was an alcoholic because he didn't show that side of himself to me. I didn't know what he was like. I was waitressing at the bar and I served him a drink. He asked for my number and I gave it to him. Normally, I would give a false name and number but for some reason I gave him the right name and number, and I have no idea of why, but I did. He was getting on my nerves and I tuned him out. But he kept bothering me, so I just gave him my information.

It must have taken him about six months to catch up with me, and one day he called and I answered the phone. He invited me to dinner, and I went over there and like a dummy I ended up spending tonight. After that I was just seeing him for sex. Again, I wasn't taking the birth control pills correctly, and I ended up pregnant with my first son, Wesley. He's twenty-two years old now. We didn't really spend any time together, and when I found out I was pregnant, I told him over the phone. My mother warned me that

he was an alcoholic when she first met him, but I didn't believe her. As it turns out, she was right. He came over to my apartment one night. This was my first time seeing him since I told him about the baby so I didn't really know what he was up to. He was drunk, we got into an altercation, and he slapped me. I was so angry with him that I wanted to hurt him. He told me he was going to quit his job and that my baby was never going to get any of his money. And he did just that. He quit his job after I had the baby, and he was true to his word. He did not give me any money; he did not help me, and he denied Wesley was even his child. He said the baby didn't look like him and swore he would have nothing to do with the child.

Michael was a dead-beat dad who refused to accept responsibility for his actions. He chose to blame everybody else. He said Wesley didn't look like him because Wesley had a darker skin complexion and Michael's skin tone was much lighter, about two shades lighter than Wesley's skin tone. Michael was skinny and Wesley has always been thick and is more a combination of both of us. I refused to name him Michael because Michael was not involved in Wesley's life. But Wesley has many of Michael's ways. I thought that was strange because he wasn't raised around his dad, but he had all of his dad's ugly ways.

I met Charles when Wesley was three years old. Getting involved with him was another big mistake because I didn't know him either. Charles and I met through a dating service called tele-date. The way the service worked is that you would dial a number and your lines would be connected. He asked if I was a religious freak. That should have been my first clue to run, but I didn't. I told him I hated religion and that I just went to church because my parents made me go. I don't know why I lied. I guess I wanted to impress

him, and I didn't think much about it. Like I said, I've made many stupid mistakes and this one was major. I didn't know about atheists and that's what he turned out to be.

*Simone was raised in a religious household, so why would she jeopardize her relationship with God to pursue a relationship with an atheist? According to Simone she didn't know about atheists. This speaks to the naivety I mentioned earlier. Perhaps she did not have a personal relationship with God, but rather loved God on a surface-level as a result of her upbringing. I believe her actions speak to the extent she is willing to go to fill a void of loneliness. Her next actions confirm my thoughts.*

Prior to Charles, I didn't allow men to come around my son because I didn't want him to get attached to a man only to have the man leave. I tried to protect him from that, but it happened anyway. That's exactly what Charles did to Wesley. He told Wesley that Wesley was his number one son, and he would never leave him. Life was good for a short time; he was helping me financially, but it wasn't long before Charles started abusing Wesley. He beat him, he held his head under water in the bathtub, and he slammed the door in his face. It was horrible. I'm still not sure of why I stayed with Charles knowing how he was treating my son. He had not abused me at this point, but I was scared. I didn't know what to do, so I just put up with it. I regret that decision to this day. I feel like I failed to protect my son. I'm not surprised Wesley had behavior problems and acted out. Looking back, he was probably seeking attention for someone to help him in the only way a three year old knew how.

*What was Simone thinking by not removing her child from such an unhealthy situation? Why did she stay in the relationship? What I heard was a woman battling such severe insecurities that she would sacrifice her child's safety. It is no surprise that Wesley was a difficult child. He lived a hard life.*

Wesley's frustrations must have carried over into his teenage years and adult life. He started getting into all kinds of trouble; burglary, gun possession, and drugs. He wasn't living the life that I was living, and I wasn't going to let him live under my roof

with that type of behavior. So I put him out when he was sixteen. I would let him sleep over sometimes though, because I couldn't stand to see him living in the streets. But his destructive behavior continued. His most recent trouble with the law is assault. That's what he's in prison for now. He should be getting out in a few months.

Anyway, back to Charles. He took me to the nicest places I had ever been to in my life. He took me to his mother's house. He showed me parts of the mid-west that I didn't even know existed. I was only familiar with the neighborhood I grew up in. I was lonely out of my mind, and he showed me a different part of the world. I reveled in the attention. He recommended that I go to business school. He said I could carry a briefcase and wear nice clothes. He even offered to babysit Wesley while I attended classes. It felt good to have his support. I felt like I could do it. He supported me, but he didn't have the patience to help me if I had problems. He was quick to put me down if I didn't know something. I got pregnant while I was attending business school. We had only been dating for three months. Wesley was four years old when I had my second son, Ted.

Charles' family wanted me to have an abortion because they felt like I was trying to trap him. I admit that he was very good to me and Wesley in the beginning. He was the first man I had ever dated. The others were just sex. Charles showed me and my son a good time, and I fell in love with the treatment. It was something I had never experienced before. So I guess that's why his family thought I was after his money. Needless to say, they didn't want the baby, but I had him anyway. His mother threatened to call social services. She said they were going to take my baby and take Wesley away too. I thought his family was crazy so I stayed away from them. Charles was not around throughout the

entire pregnancy. He didn't even see Ted until he was three weeks old. He got real attached to him after he saw him.

We tried to work it out. We started living together and married when Ted was thirteen months old. We used to have family outings, but we weren't happy. I had tolerated him abusing Wesley, but he was getting worse. He started taking Ted away from me. He would take the baby to his mother's house and keep him from me. One night he attacked me and took the baby. He kicked me in my chest and knocked me to the ground. Then he took my wedding rings and my baby and wouldn't give him back to me. He said his family would "take care of their own." Whatever. This wasn't the first time he had been abusive towards me though. He pushed me around, and he slammed the door in my face. His attacking me was the final straw for me.

I had him arrested and pressed charges against him. He only spent a weekend in jail because he and his friend lied to the police. They said I fell over a stair. My sister witnessed the whole incident, but she wouldn't tell the police what she saw. She said she wasn't paying attention and that she was trying to calm Wesley down. He was hysterical. He was upset because I had thrown out all the toys Charles' mother had bought him. I wanted them to know that I was not materialistic and that I did not marry Charles for his family's money. He filed for divorce soon after that. That was fine with me though. We hadn't been happy for a long time. He was staying out with his friends, and I was at my parents' house most of the time because I didn't want to be home when he got there. It took me a while to realize it, but he only wanted Ted. I thought he wanted me around too, but as it turns out he didn't want me or Wesley.

Ted's childhood was a little different from Wesley's because Ted's dad was around. He wasn't around long because he kept listening to his crazy family and our marriage didn't stand a chance. Ted was not a difficult child though. Fortunately, Charles continued to see Ted after we divorced. Neither Wesley nor Ted graduated from high school, but Ted is actually going to UCC now. He started taking some GED classes here a few months ago. I'm very proud of him. I never would have thought we would be in school together.

*I believe Wesley's behavior is an act of rebellion. It seems like years of anger and frustration are finally manifesting in his life in a negative way. I'm sure he felt abandoned by both parents. Even though his mother was present physically, I'm not sure she had the emotional capacity to give him the support he required.*

I mentioned Scott earlier. He was my last boyfriend before my current husband. Scott and I had been seeing each other for about a year and a half, and I was crazy about him. We had been living together about six months, and I thought our relationship was going pretty well. We had our ups and downs, but I thought we were doing fine. Scott is African and I had never dated an African. I guess I wasn't sure of what to expect. I definitely wasn't expecting him to tell me he wanted to see someone else. I didn't know who he was seeing, but I wasn't ready for our relationship to end. Nevertheless, he put me out the week of finals. He told me to get my stuff and do it quickly. When I went over there to pick up my clothes, I used my key to let myself in. He didn't know I was coming, and let's just say he was a bit preoccupied. He and his new White girlfriend were in the bedroom. They were naked and they both were glowing and that just killed me. He hurt me to the core. I cried and cried. Then I was upset with myself because I had never cried in front of anyone before. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing that he hurt me, but it was too late.

He knew I loved him and used it to his advantage. My stupid butt wouldn't leave him alone, so he strung me along. I knew he was seeing someone else, and I wouldn't leave him alone. I guess deep down I was hoping to get him back. He told me that the new girl didn't mean anything to him, but her picture was on the face of his cell phone. I looked further into his phone book and saw that he had my name listed as S-I-M-O-N and her name was listed as Angel. He tried to make it sound like it wasn't a big deal and that she was nothing to him. I knew that was a lie though. He was much nicer and more respectful to her than he ever was to me.

*Simone is confident in her decision to marry Thomas, and she's happy about it. Here we notice her surface-level rationalizing regarding Thomas.*

I don't have to worry about any of that anymore because I have Thomas now. Thomas is my current husband whom I mentioned earlier; the one I was afraid to tell my family about. As I told you before, they finally met him. But let me tell you a little bit more about him. Thomas has had brushes with the law in the past. He has two felons for domestic violence from ten to twelve years ago. I'm not exactly sure what happened; I only know what he told me. He said he only slapped the first one. He said the second one stabbed him, but he didn't touch her. Then she pressed charges against him. He went to jail for six months since he had already gotten in trouble for domestic violence. That's his side of the story anyway. I know he had a temper though. He also had an alcohol problem which is what got him in trouble in the first place. Thomas' dad used to have Thomas drinking him when he was growing up. So he became an alcoholic, and that's where his problems with women began.

We have already faced obstacles as a result of Thomas' felonies. We haven't been able to find an apartment. No one wants to live near a felon. I can stay there, but he can't.

So for now, I'm still staying at my parents' home. He found a room in a boarding house so I've been hanging out with him in his room. The place is a big building with a bunch of men in there and they're not supposed to have overnight guests. But sometimes I stay over anyway.

Thomas has also been very supportive of my schooling. When we first met, we sat at the coffee shops, and he helped me with some of my homework. He said he and I were a team now, and I should let him know if I needed anything. His support is encouraging and refreshing. I wish he had been around earlier in my life when I struggled with school and had no one to help me.

*Simone light-heartedly dismisses Thomas' temper and alcohol problems; his felony charges were the women's fault (although it seems that her woman's intuition is telling her there's more to the story); and his father made him drink as a child. Acknowledging all of these factors, she continues to bask in the newness of their relationship. This obstinacy speaks to the lengths she will go to dispel her neediness. More importantly it speaks to the type of man who would not only break the house rules but also would let his wife spend the night in a boarding house with a bunch of men. Exactly who has Simone married?*

*Simone endured tumultuous relationships throughout her life with family, friends, and lovers. One of the issues that plagued Simone in her friendships was the same issue that plagued her in her relationships: loneliness. This was the driving force behind her promiscuity and bad decisions. We see this in her casual sexual encounters, her first marriage, and other loveless relationships. Here Simone made choices that were not in her best interest or the best interest of her children. Having never received the type of love she always longed for, I'm not convinced Simone knew how to give that love to her children. She loves them, but I don't know if she had the emotional capacity to express her love to the extent where her children would not suffer from her inadequacies. She tolerated and displayed appalling behavior. Again, she didn't want to be alone, and her actions proved she would do anything to avoid it. We even see this in her current marriage that I mentioned earlier when she marries someone she barely knows. I know it happens, but this type of behavior is habitual for Simone. She makes hasty decisions and faces the consequences later.*

### **Dramatic Discoveries**

*According to Simone, she has made dramatic self-discoveries as a result of her education. I felt like those discoveries were important and warranted discussion. The*

*discoveries consist of increased self-esteem, greater social awareness, open-mindedness, and outspokenness.*

Education is power. The more education you have, the more power you have. If I had the chance to do it all over again, I would take my education much more serious. I see now that education affects the way people treat you. I didn't take my elementary school days serious, and I'm still paying for it to this day. I'm a different person in several ways though. My college experiences have significantly boosted my self-esteem. My self-esteem has really increased throughout the years as I have overcome classes, earned A's and B's, and made the Dean's List; that really built me up. So now I feel much better about myself. I used to walk with my head down. I didn't care about my work. Before school, I was closed-minded, narrow-minded, and naïve. Now I'm exposed to more people. I'm more aware. I am still a little insecure, but I'm nothing like I used to be. My skills have also gotten better. I am more organized and I take pride in my work. I have learned so much, but I still want to know more. I want to continue to build up my vocabulary and my math skills. I also want to get into politics. I want to be more civic-minded. I want to be involved. As I continue to contemplate the future, I've thought about continuing school. I would like to earn my bachelor's and then my master's. But I don't know; that's up in the air right now.

I wanted to major in psychology at one time, but I was scared somebody would kill me because of my mouth. You see, I have no problem speaking my opinion. My friends get mad with me about it all the time. They don't tell me that I've said something to offend them. They think I should know why they stopped speaking to me. I guess I'm supposed to be able to read their minds. Elizabeth likes to be controlling and I told her my husband wasn't going to let anybody control me; nobody but him. That really upset

her, but I didn't care. I told her I was a Christian woman who was submissive to her man. So yeah, he can be controlling. My friends are having a hard time adjusting to my life with a new man. They aren't used to there being a man in my life. I guess it's going to take some time for them to get used to the idea.

Pursuing an education has also changed the way my friends treat me. They used to talk down to me. They thought they could criticize and control me, and now they know they can't. School has enlightened me about various topics, so I am more aware. I know more than my friends know about several things. They have read my papers and have seen some of my homework assignments so they know what I'm learning. I admit that there is still much I do not know though. I want to continue to grow, but they have more respect for me now.

*The self-discoveries mentioned here consist of increased self-esteem, greater social awareness, open-mindedness, and outspokenness. Simone's increased self-esteem developed over time as she successfully completed classes. It has caused her to have a higher opinion of herself. Her greater social awareness is displayed in her desire to become involved in politics. She is more aware of her surroundings. She is now open to people who are different from herself and recognizes that with that comes differences of opinion. Her open-mindedness permits her to accept those differences. Finally, Simone's outspokenness allows her to stand up for herself. This is largely due to her increased confidence. She credits education for these transformations and is quite happy with the person she is today. Though Simone has demonstrated growth in these areas, her maturation has been limited. She may no longer be the shy, insecure person she once was, but she still does not appear to make sound life decisions as one might imagine.*

### **Here's What I Gathered**

*I conducted three interviews with Simone. In the first interviews, there were several inconsistencies in Simone's stories. It appeared that she was giving me what she thought I wanted to hear, but as the relationship built she began to come clean which cleared up several of the inconsistencies. For example, I found that the close family she described in interview one wasn't close at all; that the commitment to education described in interview one wasn't there.*

*I submit that Simone does not do well with change. As you proceed through her life story, several incidents demonstrate her resistance to change. First, as a child she was opposed*

*to making new friends. She only wanted one friend and withdrew if anyone else tried to enter her circle. Second and third, she acted out when she was bused to a new elementary school and when she went to high school; she acted out in both instances because of the new environments. Fourth, she had a hard time adjusting to life when she became a single parent. She developed resentment for her family because of their lack of support. Finally, she consistently had difficulty ending relationships. She had a hard time letting go. Simone's resistance to change further explains her willingness to tolerate a hostile family environment and abusive relationships with friends and lovers. She would rather tolerate toxic relationships than welcome change and move forward.*

*Earlier I described a mask of loneliness that Simone wore. Behind the mask is a very needy person. This neediness is further demonstrated in her need for sex at any price. I'm not sure if the Simone I recently met with is beyond that neediness. She is trying to fill a void. I don't know if that void has started to be filled or if that neediness is still there as indicated by her hasty decision to marry a man only a few short weeks after meeting him. Simone seems happy today, but Thomas already has begun to exhibit behavior consistent with domestic violence. He is clingy and controlling. Even though Simone has acknowledged vast self-discoveries, she still uses her Christian upbringing to justify her submissiveness to a controlling husband. I hope history doesn't repeat itself because Simone did not take the time to get to know this man before committing her life to him.*

*Simone is 47 years old, yet at this point in her life, she only displays maturation in limited areas. We see this as she moves from the soft-spoken child she described herself as earlier to the outspoken adult she professes to be today. Perhaps she had not yet progressed to that outspoken woman when her child was being abused, or when her friends were taking advantage of her. The mask for loneliness I mentioned earlier is like a deep hole for Simone; a hole that she has consistently tried to fill throughout her life through friendships and relationships. The reality of Simone's situation is that she brings that hole with her no matter where she ends up and emotionally will continue to pay for the void until it is filled.*

## Marilyn's Story

*Marilyn was the last participant I interviewed. She was referred to me by one of the other participants. We played phone tag for a while, and I was beginning to wonder if we would ever meet. I had been through several prospective participants who didn't work out and was feeling a bit weary. Finally, we spoke and scheduled our first interview. We planned to meet at the public library. The morning of our meeting, I arrived at the library early to find a private place to talk. Thirty minutes after our scheduled meeting time, Marilyn had not yet arrived. I was puzzled because I had confirmed our meeting the day before. I was starting to feel like my search for another participant would continue. I called her cell phone, and she informed me that one of her children had a dentist appointment that lasted longer than anticipated and asked if we could push our meeting time back. I said that would be fine so she suggested we meet at her home one hour later. I am so glad Marilyn is included in the study. In hindsight, I would hate to have missed out on the opportunity to meet a woman with such a rich story.*

*My first impression of Marilyn was that she had a strong, take-care-of-business attitude which was emphasized in her demeanor. At five-feet-seven, Marilyn was a heavy-set woman. Her natural hairstyle was cut into a short boyish style, which many women on the go, wear today. In an earlier conversation, I learned that Marilyn is a 38-year-old single mother of five. The two oldest are her biological children; a son and daughter (ages 16 and 18) and she adopted three siblings, two boys and a girl (ages 4, 5, and 7). Prior to the adoption, she became the foster mother of the three siblings when they were only three months, eighteen months, and three years old. What a testament to the big heart she must have! Marilyn and I met a few days after my birthday and at the conclusion of our first interview, she sang a rendition of Happy Birthday that nearly brought me to tears. She has a voice to die for.*

*Upon my arrival to Marilyn's home, her bright smile softened her demeanor as she invited me in. The strong demeanor I noted as I approached her appeared to dissipate. Instantly, I felt welcome. I felt like I was in the home of one of my dearest friends. Marilyn's modest home was beautiful. Upon entering the home, a quick glance revealed an open floor plan. I noted the living room to my left, the kitchen and dining area to my right, and a narrow hallway straight ahead which led to the bedrooms and bath. Marilyn's living room furniture consisted of a matching burgundy sofa and loveseat and a burgundy chair which were all situated in the middle of the room. The floor model television sat against the wall at the entrance of the house. Two curio cabinets were on one wall and housed many miniature figurines and family pictures. The walls were lined with other pictures of the children and religious pictures of Jesus that indicated Marilyn's strong faith. The living room flowed into the kitchen and dining area. The modest kitchen contained oak cabinetry and beige laminate countertops. The dining area held two tables. The smaller kids' table served as the place for the children to do their homework. Marilyn and I met at the larger table. It was a round oak table that held a greenery plant and four napkins and placemats. It was there that Marilyn began to share with me a life that has been filled with calamity and despair. I constructed Marilyn's story around various topics throughout her life span. The topics surround her troubled*

*childhood, mending relationships, her lifetime struggle with school, her home life, her socioeconomic status and societal views, and her healing process.*

*Marilyn's story is set from her treacherous childhood days to the humble adult life she leads today. By the grace of God, she has experienced a great transformation over time. We will watch this transformation unfold as we proceed through her story. She is strong in her faith and gives God the glory for her life. Therefore, I thought it would be appropriate to open Marilyn's story with her belief in God because it is a recurring theme throughout the story. We'll see this in later sections, but here she reflects on God's blessings upon her life.*

The Book of Lamentations says the mercies of God are new every morning. As I look back over my life, I can see how God's love has guided me. Even though I've done wrong, He never left me alone. He forgave me. And He kept on blessing me.

Paraphrased, Lamentations (3:21-23) says, this I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope.

It's because of Your mercy that we are not consumed. Because thy compassions faileth not, they are new every morning. Great is thy faithfulness! God has truly been good to me. I could have been dead and gone. There have been so many times in my life that He could have taken me, but He spared me. I first came to know Him when I was a child. My grandparents took me to church. I may have been young and didn't understand much of what the preacher was saying, but I listened and I know what helped me. That's why I believe children should be raised in church. The Bible says to train up a child in the way that he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it. They might not understand everything that's said but something will stick. I knew my grandparents trusted Him and in my own childlike manner, I knew I wanted to get to know Him better. I wanted to trust Him and feel close to Him too. As I got older and started experiencing tribulations, I recalled what I learned as a child. I'm not sure I fully understood the magnitude of it at the time, but God's grace has become clearer to me as I've gotten older. It hasn't been an easy road. God saved my life. There have been many heartaches

and disappointments along the way. But God has been good through it all. I know that now, but I didn't always know that. God had to prune me, and mold me, and shape me into the person He wanted me to be. And I'm still not there. I have much work to do still. He's given me the vision and plan. I just have to stop procrastinating and follow through. Here's what God brought me through.

*Although Marilyn doesn't mention one particular moment when she comes to believe in God, she discloses that God has always been present in her life; from her childhood when her grandparents first introduced her to God to her current relationship with Him. She has always been aware of His presence and her bond with God has developed over time. I believe what Marilyn is describing here is cultural. As a people, African Americans have always relied on God. As enslaved people, God was a source of hope to bring them out of slavery. When fighting societal injustices, God was a source of strength and encouragement. When trying to make ends meet, God was a source of trust and provision. Marilyn and other individuals may vary in the extent of their relationships with God, but there is typically an underlying relationship nonetheless. In other words, religion and spirituality are ingrained in African American culture to some degree.*

### **Troubled Childhood**

*While she admits to being a torn and confused child, Marilyn has accepted the adversity she experienced in her early life. Raised by her grandparents, they were all she knew as far as parents were concerned. It wasn't until the age of five that she was devastated to learn the identity of her real mother. Subsequent to this colossal revelation, Marilyn's childhood was riddled with rejection from her parents, developmental delays in school, and molestation. She seemed to experience a general sense of trying to find her place in life. It is hard for me, as an adult, to envision how I would deal with situations such as these, and it is inconceivable to fathom how a child could process such. But this was Marilyn's reality as a child, and she had to endure. It was during those times that Marilyn drew on her relationship with God. She met him during her evening quiet time on her grandparents' porch. In subsequent sections we will see how she met Him at church and through her singing.*

I grew up in the south. I lived in the backwoods country with my maternal grandparents. We lived on a huge farm. We had a big garden in the front, a big hog pen, and a big chicken coop. I would run free through the cotton fields or play in the yard. I used to play in the chicken coop. Or I'd go down to the lake in front of our house. It was down the hill in the front. My grandfather would take me down there, and we would dip

minnows. That's the way it was back then...I was born in 1968. So to me life was good. I was free. I didn't know my grandparents were my grandparents in the beginning. They were all I knew, so I thought they were my parents. I was the only child with them so my grandparents spoiled me. Every Saturday when my grandfather got paid, we went into town to shop. Everybody thought I was a spoiled child because I got everything I wanted. It's true, everything I wanted, I got. And that's probably why I'm overweight, because back then a person could get three hamburgers for a dollar, and if I asked for it, I got it. Some of the other kids expressed animosity towards me, but they still played with me. I let them play with my toys, and when it was time to go, I packed up my toys and went back to the country with my two older grandparents.

It wasn't until one evening when I was about five years old that my life seemed to be turned upside down. It was late, and I was asleep. I woke up to screaming, yelling, and crying. I went into the other room to see what the commotion was, and there I saw two women fighting. My grandmother was trying to get them apart. I later learned that the two women were my mother and her sister. I don't know why they were there, and I later learned that they always got into altercations with each other. They could come together for a while, but they always left mad. I'm not sure what that was about. Anyway, the following day the fighting was over, the women were gone, and the house had returned to its normal quiet state. I don't know where the women went, but they were no where to be found. It was then that my grandfather explained to me that the lady fighting was my mother. My first thought was that she couldn't be my mother because Grandma was my mama. Even though I called her Grandma, it didn't register to me to think that she wasn't my mother. Remember I was five years old, and she was all I knew. He explained that

Grandma was my grandmother. The lady fighting was my mother, and Grandma was actually her mother not mine. I was really confused. If she was my mother, why didn't I live with her? And where was my father? Why wasn't I with him? That was the beginning of my wondering if I were good enough. What was wrong with me that neither of my parents wanted me? It was something that stuck with me. I didn't say much about it though. I just lived with it. I wondered why I wasn't with her. I went through life with that complex even though I was happy where I was. I became very good at pretending.

Nevertheless, I continued to live out in the country with my grandparents. Soon after that I started school. The bus would come get me and take me to school. Everybody knew each other out in the country so the bigger kids helped take care of me. Once I started school, I started learning that I had more family. I learned more about my father's family. I met some of my daddy's sisters who introduced themselves to me as my aunts. At first, I wasn't very receptive because I didn't know them. But I eventually opened up to them. They took me to meet my other grandmother, my father's mother. So I started spending more time with them and getting to know them better.

My grandfather also told me my mother had another baby...a baby that lived with her. I know a little boy would always come out to the country to play with me, and I knew he was said to be my brother, but it still never clicked with me. In the back of my mind though, I began to wonder, why am I here and they're there? Why did my mother have THIS baby with her and not me? What was wrong with me? As I got older, it became more hurtful. The rejection intensified. Then my mother had a third child (another boy) who also lived with her. They both lived with her, and it seemed like she hated me for some reason. So imagine, there I was; a child thinking my mother hated

me...that's hard to grow up with. I was an adult before I could begin to process and understand it. As a child, I spent lots of time in the country, and I had a great deal of time to think to myself. Many nights I would lie on the porch and look up at the stars. I knew God had something in store for my life. He always had a drive in me to say, I am above this. I'm going to make it. He kept me during this time.

I went to school when I was six years old. I started in the first grade, and I was way behind. I didn't know anything. I didn't understand why other kids were so knowledgeable and I wasn't. Other children had help at home. They had parents who cared about education and I didn't. Both of my grandparents were illiterate, so I didn't get the phonics I needed like the alphabet or counting. I had not been taught anything at home. Once I entered school I felt it. I quickly realized it was because I didn't have people around me who could teach me. So I had to learn everything on my own. My teachers were very understanding. They gave me extra help and tried to get me on the same level as the other students, but it wasn't enough because I was coming from not knowing anything. There was a deficit. I just went with the motions. My whole thought process was delayed. It wasn't like I was born with something that caused me to be delayed, it was life. It was living with two older people who didn't know how to read and write at all. Therefore, I didn't get the boost and the head start that other kids got. I struggled through school all the way up. I still struggle. Shortly after I started school, my grandmother's health took a turn for the worse, and she had to go live in a nursing home. The family didn't want me to live in the country alone with my grandfather, so I had to go live with my mother. I was not happy about that. I wanted to stay where I was.

Life wasn't good in my mother's house. Her boyfriend was abusive, and I hated him being around. He beat her and molested me. Whenever she left the house, he would come and fondle me. It was never intercourse. He would put his hand down my underwear and I hated it. The molestation went on for three or four years between the ages of six and ten. I always felt like my mother knew what he was doing, but because she hated me, she would leave me there with him so he could mess with me. She didn't protect me. I never talked to her about it, so I'm not sure if she knew. We have to have a major discussion and that topic will be included.

Nevertheless, I continued to struggle in school. My mother was not the kind of parent to sit down and help with homework, so I really didn't have anyone to help me. I always felt inadequate around the other students because I needed special help. I did well when they separated us into small groups, and the teachers came in to help us. I felt good about that because I was doing well on the lower level, but when I got back to the big classroom, I felt out of place. I made it to the fourth grade without being held back. I had to repeat the fourth grade which was another disappointment for me. I felt defeated. In my mind, everything had failed in my life, and school was no different. Everybody else was moving on, and the kids were teasing me because I failed. My mother finally got tired of her boyfriend hitting her so she left him and moved to another city. Fortunately, I was able to repeat the fourth grade at a different school. Failing takes away from your self-esteem so it was yet another damaging item to my heart. Needless to say, I made it through that too.

I never wanted to live with my mother because I didn't think she wanted me there. I did everything I could to please her. I told myself I was going to be the best child I

could be. Nothing was good enough though. My two little brothers were bad. They gave her all kinds of problems. It seemed like she was always harder on me. It seemed as though she wanted me to be bad too. I was not the type to run the streets, so I didn't go out much and stayed at the house. This seemed to upset her because she said I never gave her any space. I was always hanging around. I never understood that. She always made hurtful comments to me, but I always showed her respect. My goal was to make it to eighteen so I could get out of there.

As I got older and continued with school, I realized that other kids had parents who cared about education and I didn't. My mother's idea of education was that children had to go to school, but that was about it. I had to go to school because I had to get out of the house. I was going to school. There was no question about that. But that was the extent of it. I was on my own and if I didn't understand something, she wasn't going to provide any help. To her that's what school was for. Students go there to be taught. That's how I grew up and unfortunately that's how I am with my kids today. I know it's not right and I realize the shortcomings I bring with me from the past. I'm trying to change my behavior, but sometimes bad behavior is so hard to overcome. I'm trying to change because I want to be there for my children.

*Let me take an aside here to introduce Marilyn's children. She has two sets of children. The two older children (ages 16 and 18) are her birth children. The three younger children (ages 4, 5, and 7) were adopted through the foster care system. We'll learn more about the circumstances surrounding the children's births and adoption later. For now I'd like to speak of the children to illustrate Marilyn's behavior toward their education.*

When my first set of kids were growing up, they would come home and ask me questions about their schoolwork. Some lessons I could help them with, others I couldn't. But I didn't have the patience. I resorted to the same mindset my mother had and felt like

children go to school to learn. If they weren't learning anything when they went to school, why go? I'm trying to be different with my second set of kids, but it's a habit; a rut that I'm in. I teach them to do their homework as soon as they get home. I have my duties, and they have theirs. When children go to school this is what they learn. When children come home, this is what they learn. I'm trying to commingle school and home life, but I'm not sure there are enough hours in the day. I know psychologists say we don't spend enough time teaching our children, but in my mind that's what the teachers are for. They are trained to teach students. I'm not trained to teach. It's like one more curse I've brought from the past.

*It appears to me that Marilyn has done a great deal of soul searching regarding her children's education. She admits that she has the same mindset as her mother, but she doesn't want it. She seems to be fighting an internal battle. It is as though she doesn't agree with her own feelings, but doesn't quite know how to change them. It is too late for her first set of children, but there is still time to make a positive difference in the lives of her second set. I believe Marilyn has processed the idea that she wants her children's childhoods to be different from her own. I'm just not sure she knows how to make that happen. Perhaps she should partner with her children's teachers to learn what she could do as a parent at home to help her children in school.*

*To say Marilyn endured a tumultuous childhood would be an understatement because it is obvious that she did. The four issues I would like to highlight here are the revelation about her mother's identity, her parents' rejection, specifically that of her mother, her developmental delays in education, and the molestation at the hand of her mother's boyfriend. I am still not sure Marilyn has gotten over the shock of her real mother's identity. She loved her grandparents unconditionally and faced continuous rejection from both of her birth parents, yet she seemed more resentful towards her mother than her father. These feelings will be further explored in the next section. Marilyn was delayed when she started school because she had not received the basic fundamentals prior to entering school. Her delays did not result from limited physical or mental capacities, but rather from life situations. She grew up with two illiterate grandparents who could not prepare her for school. Nevertheless, Marilyn would face a lifetime battle to overcome her delays. The molestation she experienced at the hands of her mother's boyfriend was horrible and probably could have been avoided. It is unfortunate that Marilyn never told her mother or any other adult who may have been able to help her. Instead it was yet another event she internalized. I believe she internalized it because that is what she was accustomed to doing; that was her comfort zone. She wasn't used to adults standing up for her. Other than her grandparents, she did not appear to have other adults she trusted*

*to protect her. Marilyn actually lived through some emotional and physical suffering that would break most people. She made it through her suffering, but she did not come out unscathed. I believe she did the best a child could do to cope with her issues. Unfortunately the residuals from those issues filtered through into her adult life. We'll see more of those residuals as we get into Marilyn's adult life.*

### **Mending Relationships**

*I labeled this section Mending Relationships because I feel the mending is not yet complete, but rather is an ongoing process. The adversity from Marilyn's early life has torn apart many of the relationships surrounding her. I am speaking of familial relationships such as Marilyn's relationship with her parents, specifically her mother, and her parents' relationship with each other. I also feel it is important to mention her relationship with God. While Marilyn's relationship with God does not require mending per se, it serves as a catalyst to assist in the mending of the other relationships.*

My mom made some harsh comments that made me think she didn't like me. She was never very nice to me. Our relationship was already strained since I didn't want to live with her anyway. I was really upset with her when she allowed her boyfriend to disrespect my grandfather. I was about nine years old, and she spanked me for something. I told my grandfather, and he went to say something to her about it, and she let her boyfriend push him off the porch. And you could imagine then. He pushed my grandfather, and as I watched my grandfather walk away with his head down, I just cried and cried. I wanted to go with him. I hated all of them for sure. I was so upset with her that I ran to my aunt's house. I told her I wanted to go with my grandfather, and my mother overheard me. I will never forget what she said to me. I remember her words vividly. She said [with attitude] 'Well take your ass on then. I didn't want your ass no way.' Those words played over and over in my head. They really validated what I already felt. My aunt stopped her in her tracks and told her she should never say something like that to a child. She tried to apologize but the words were out and had done the damage by then. It took me a long time to forgive her for that. I really felt abandoned and didn't want

to speak to her for a long time. I was stubborn too. There were times when I wouldn't speak to my mother and brothers for weeks at a time. My mother called me the devil's child. I didn't care what she said. Many kids would curse their parents and confront them, but I never disrespected my mother that way. All I wanted to do was turn eighteen, so I could get out of that house.

My grandparents used to take me to church, and I learned that children should honor their parents. My mother and her siblings were not churchgoers. When I was little, she took us to church. We got baptized, but that was the end of it. After that, she stayed at home, but I would get up and go to church. She didn't have to tell me. I got up, I got myself ready, and I went. I had a teacher who I got attached to who didn't live very far from me. She and her family went to a church that had a youth department, a choir, and activities for children. These activities had faded out of my church, which mainly consisted of older people. She and her husband would come pick me up every Sunday morning so I could go to church with them. No one had to say Marilyn get up and go to church. No one had to make me go; I did that on my own. My brothers were different. They didn't want to go and she didn't make them. If she didn't go, they didn't go. They didn't have to. They didn't go, and now she's feeling it. It's all scriptural though. You reap what you sow.

I think I enjoyed church because I liked to sing. I remember going to this church one night. I think it was Vacation Bible School, and we had to sing. They wanted me to lead this song so I did. I was so nervous because I had never done anything like that before. I was scared. I wasn't used to performing in front of people, and I didn't have any confidence. I did such a good job that they wanted to make me leader of the Sunshine

Band, one of the children's groups. Everybody said I had an awesome voice and that was my gift from God. But I didn't know. Ever since I was born I could just sing. I never had voice lessons or anything and people would say I had the voice of an angel. So when people kept saying it over and over throughout my life, I started to think 'maybe there's something to this'. God put me here for a reason. People would ask me to sing to them because my voice was so comforting. They would ask me to sing to them all the time. I always enjoyed singing, but it seemed like my mother never liked it so I kind of shied away from it with her. When a child feels like her mother doesn't like anything about her, she tends to get away from it. I was only that way with her though. And now as she's getting older, she says I never sing to her. Well I never thought she liked my voice, so I didn't bother singing to her. She thinks I'm mean. She doesn't understand what I've been through. I'm the way I am because of my life, and she doesn't get it.

God has been directing me to sit down and talk with her, and I plan to do that. I plan to go home for her birthday and help her with some personal business. While I'm there, we'll talk and get everything out in the open. I have to. It's been a long time coming, and there are so many issues we need to discuss. God is telling me that we need to start being real. This world needs to start being real. I have worked through the animosity I felt towards her, but there is still a wall there. I need to bring the wall down. I think the thing now is that she's wondering why I'm so distant, and I need to explain to her why I am the way I am. It's hard to explain because I feel animosity towards my father too, but it's very different with my mother. Both of my parents' health is failing, and they both want a relationship with me now. My mother has had a double amputation on her legs. Now she feels like no one is there for her. She doesn't have any help. I want

to be there for her, but she wants me to move back to the south and that's not happening. I'm not relocating my family. I have offered for her to come here, but she doesn't want to.

She came to visit me a few years ago and stayed about three months. I have a very busy life, and I was constantly on the go while she was here. This upset her because she's at the point where she wants a relationship with me now. She cried and threatened to leave because she felt like I didn't have time for her. She felt like I didn't want to work at our relationship. I tried to explain to her that my life is just really busy. I intentionally made it that way so I would not have time to sit and be idle. She was upset about that. She left and has never returned. I believe that's why she won't move out here because she thinks I won't pay her any attention. In her mind, she's trying to build a relationship with me, and I'm pushing her away. But what she doesn't understand is that I'm grown, and I've made a different life for myself. She wants time back and time can't be made up. We can't go back. We can't change the past. If she wants a relationship from today forward that's fine, but the past cannot be changed. If she wants to do something for me, she can be there for my kids and have a connection with them. But our connection is gone. I'm a firm believer in the concept of reaping and sowing. She doesn't understand the consequences of her actions from the past.

My mother and father have unresolved issues with each other because of the way their relationship ended. There's like a love/hate relationship between them. They both blame each other for their failed relationship. After all these years, they have never dealt with their issues, and I paid the price for it. It all started with my mother becoming pregnant at a young age. Her life changed forever. She was a beautiful woman with long

hair all the way down her back. Everybody was jealous and envious of her. My dad was handsome too. They were like the two beautiful people of the town, and they ended up together. Everybody said they made an attractive couple. The way my mom tells it, I was conceived because she misunderstood her health education teacher. She thought a woman couldn't get pregnant right after her menstrual cycle. According to her, she had sex and got pregnant the first time. My father didn't take care of his responsibilities. He denied the baby which hurt my mother, so she just went on with her life. I'm not sure they ever got over each other. My father ended up marrying one of my mother's friends. They have kids and everything. I'm sure my mother wasn't too happy about that. I believe she resents me for looking like him. There have been times when she was sitting on the porch and I was working in the yard, and she would look at me and suddenly make mean comments like 'You look just like your damn daddy.' I think I'll always be the object of her wrath when it comes to him.

When I was an adult, my mother told me that the reason she didn't keep me was because there was various gossip about her, and she didn't want to expose me to it as a little girl. I didn't really understand that and one day my aunt told me something that shed light on my feelings about my mother. She told me that my mother really did love me and wanted to keep me, but my grandparents took me away from her after I was born, and they wouldn't give me back to her. So, this information relieved pent up anger in me because I felt like at least she wanted me, but I was kept from her. I never really bonded with my mother. Even though she carried me for nine months, I didn't feel the bond because I didn't live with her afterwards. I didn't feel that with either of my parents. So now it's like I'm a distant person. I do not let too many issues get to me. My parents

don't understand that. They think I'm just a mean person, but I'm not mean. It's just that I don't have that bonding like most mother/children do. I'm a stand-alone.

*The relationships I would like to discuss here include Marilyn's relationship with her parents, specifically her mother, and her parents' relationship with each other. I thought it was ironic that the animosity Marilyn felt towards her parents was so lopsided. She resented her father, but not nearly as much as she did her mother. Perhaps it speaks to the unconditional love a mother is supposed to have for her children. This love was definitely lacking for Marilyn. I believe she wants her mother's love, and her mother is trying to reach out, but there is such a strong history of hatred and resentment the two can't seem to connect. Marilyn says that she has dealt with the animosity she felt towards her mother, but their relationship lacks closeness. Therefore, I'm not sure she has really forgiven her. I believe there is still some unaddressed resentment. Marilyn realizes she will have to confront her mother about the issues of rejection and abandonment Marilyn felt if their relationship is to be nurtured. While I believe time heals some wounds, Marilyn and her mother's issues run so deep they may require intervention from God. Thankfully, Marilyn is not opposed to such. Currently, she is planning a trip to the south. She plans to have a serious heart-to-heart talk with her mother to truly bury the demons of the past. The demise of her parents' relationship is something that can never be undone. Her parents have moved on with their lives and married other people. I believe Marilyn has made peace with that, but she felt rejected by both parents for so long, I do not think she has moved beyond the years of hurt to healing. In my opinion, Marilyn needs God's help with this. She has to look deep within herself for forgiveness. She needs to practice the forgiveness she believes in as well as the love of God she professes to have. She should realize that mending her relationship with her mother will also foster her mother's relationship with Marilyn's children. To me, a grandmother's love would be a wonderful legacy to pass on to them.*

### **Lifetime Struggle with School**

*Because Marilyn's upbringing caused her to be delayed in school, school was always a challenge for her. She struggled; therefore, school wasn't fun for her. Rather it was a source of frustration. She wanted to succeed in school, but lacked the confidence to believe she could do it. She resolved to simply doing the bare minimum to graduate. She had neither the tenacity nor the encouragement to strive for anything beyond that. She viewed school as an obstacle she needed to overcome and in her mind, graduating from high school meant she had succeeded. I believe Marilyn's educational outlook would have been different had her circumstances been different. She was eager to move forward with her life and didn't feel like education needed to be a part of it. She did not have the foresight to see how she would limit herself if she did not continue her education. She graduated many years ago, and is currently enrolled in college as an adult. Unfortunately she still feels the sting from her educational history. Marilyn's lifetime struggle with school was multifaceted. It centered around her educational limitations, familial distractions, and avoiding God's plan for her life.*

I struggled so much to get through school. I just did what I needed to do to make the grades and get to graduation. My grades weren't all that bad though. I remember making average grades, but I was still in the reading class. I always struggled with reading so I had to leave my regular class and go to the reading class. I finally tested out of the reading class in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. I was the only one in the reading class who passed the test which was an indication that I was now reading at my current grade level, and I would no longer need to attend the reading class. I was so excited that I didn't have to go to reading class anymore. I felt so smart. I had finally broken the barrier. From that point on, I attended regular English and math classes with everybody else. I wasn't trying to be a scholar or anything. I think it had a lot to do with desire. I really didn't desire to be a scholar. At one point I did, but then it came to a point where I felt like I would fail at it anyway, so why even try. I just wanted to graduate. I resolved myself to do what I needed to do to get out. So that's what I did.

It's sad that I thought about school like that, but I didn't have parents who pushed me. I still think about that today. Why didn't I have parents or family members who were scholars? There was no one who had made it through high school, gone to college, and made something of their lives. That's what I wanted for my family, but it didn't happen. My father graduated from high school, but my mother didn't. She got pregnant and back then pregnant girls had to leave school, and she never went back. I'm told she was smart though. Neither of my brothers finished high school. They both later received their GEDs. I graduated, but we didn't have that drive. We didn't have anybody behind us pushing us to get through. Attending college was never mentioned. Graduating from high school was good enough. That was like the threshold for my mother. If her children

graduated from high school, she was proud. She didn't see the need for us to go to college, to persevere, and push forth. But I guess God places people where he wants them to be for whatever reason. So this is what I got and this is what I'll work with. I guess that's where self-motivation comes in.

*As we will see at this point in Marilyn's story, she uses a box metaphor to explain the behavior of some Blacks. She believes Blacks were placed in a box and left to grow only to a certain extent. She submits that Blacks didn't have the freedom or the space to be whatever they wanted to be. They didn't know what it was like to be educated. They were kept away from the finer items in life like homes and cars. In her opinion, the box is a theoretical representation to illustrate the ramifications of being suppressed. She believes some members of society want to keep it that way. Marilyn faced circumstances similar to those illustrated in the box metaphor.*

Black families lack the major factor that leads to the American dream, education. People say Black people are lazy and don't want to work, but look at where Black people came from. Some were able to overcome and move forward, but many didn't. I think it goes back to the way we were treated as a people. We were brought over here, and we weren't pushed to pursue education. White people didn't want Blacks to learn anything. They wanted Blacks to always be ignorant so they could get over on us. Unfortunately, many Black people still have that mentality today. Some people pushed and persevered and others just stayed there; more remained complacent than pushed forward. A preacher once said a person can put a big fish in a medium-size tank and that fish will stay the same size unless he is placed in a big tank where he can grow bigger. That's what happened to Black people. We were put in this box and that's as far as we can go. Some people are happy being in the small box. They're not trying to step outside of that box. They're in their comfort zone. They aren't used to having big houses, nice cars, or even a good education. We didn't start off with those items. We started off small and a certain group of people made sure we stayed there. And true enough, some of us had the drive,

people like the Freedom fighters or Harriet Tubman. They knew our people were not receiving proper treatment, and they wanted more. So they persevered and they got more. But the freedom fighters are just a drop in the bucket compared to this whole nation. That's something that people do not understand to this day.

Some Black people believe our children should be able to be doctors, lawyers or whatever they want. And they can. But several people have a barrier where they feel like there's a threshold...a glass ceiling as to what our children can achieve. There was a television show on last year where this Black girl attended a prominent Black college. She was smart and wanted to be a lawyer. A professor at the college told her about all the areas in the law profession that fell under a lawyer, but he never encouraged her to shoot for the top. This is 2007 and we still have that. It's still here. I'm even guilty of it. My daughter wants to be a doctor, but for some ungodly reason I have this feeling that she can't be a doctor. Why can't she? She is as smart as a whip. She can be whatever she wants to be.

So I acknowledge my shortcomings in that area and I'm working on myself too. I realize that it's within me. It's within my culture. It's within what I was taught, the way I was raised, and how I was conditioned. So when my daughter says she wants to be a doctor, I bite my tongue. I shut my mouth. I don't make the type of remarks to her that I was told. I don't make comments like 'you're nothing. You can't be this. You can't do that.' I don't make those comments. I encourage her to be the best she can be. I encourage her in her studies. I encourage her to be a doctor. However, when she makes careless mistakes I remind her that she can't make simple mistakes like that when she's a doctor because she will be dealing with people's lives. I'll make observations like that,

but it's a constant struggle. It's an internal struggle...an evil spirit that I actually have to fight.

*Marilyn used a box metaphor to explain her thoughts regarding the educational limitations of Blacks. It is true that some African Americans do still feel the limitations of those restraints. As I contemplated her view of the box, I admit that I understand her viewpoint to a certain extent. My view of the box is explained at the end of this section. The complications that arose from Marilyn's life situations largely contribute to her character and the way she raises her children. Even though she wasn't encouraged to be the best she could be, she tries to be the opposite with her children. She admits that it's not always easy for her to do so. In many respects, Marilyn is a victim of her own circumstances because her circumstances shaped her thinking. She wants better for her children and wants to believe they can pursue their lifelong dreams, but constantly fights an internal battle to overcome her thoughts.*

*I want to interrupt the story at this point to explain the circumstances surrounding the births of Marilyn's two children because their births validated Marilyn's outlook on education. She remembers striving for her high school graduation. She thought if she made it to graduation, she would be fine. She could move on with her life. After graduating from high school, she was eager to start a new life; a life that did not include education. She wanted to start a family. However, after many life experiences, Marilyn realized education needed to be a part of her life. It would be the only way she could pursue her dreams of becoming a social worker.*

I admit I made bad decisions regarding life, love, and education. I'll tell you more about those decisions later. I am reminded of those decisions as I pursue my educational goals. It took everything I had to graduate from high school, and I can't tell you the relief I felt from that accomplishment. I was ready to move on with my life though. I wanted to get a job, have some babies, and live a nice life. I wanted children because I wanted someone to love me unconditionally. I never had that before. I thought I had found that love with my high school boyfriend, Randy. Yeah, you heard me right. I said boyfriend. I didn't have many, and Randy was my first serious relationship. Unfortunately, he turned out to be one of those bad decisions I mentioned earlier. We met in my junior year of high school and continued to date after graduation. Our relationship was progressing well, and he later became the father of my two birth children.

My original plan after high school was to go to the Air Force, but I never made it there. I wanted to have children; that was my focus. My overwhelming need for unconditional love seemed to tug at me because I never felt loved. I had a father who wasn't there and a mother who told me she didn't want me. She didn't keep me when I was a baby, and I heard negative comments constantly. I felt like nobody loved me, so I wanted kids. I wanted someone to love me unconditionally. Hence, I started having babies. I was nineteen years old when I had my son. I gained weight with the pregnancy, too much weight. Therefore, the Air Force was out of the question.

After my son was born, I really didn't want to go to a four-year college. In my mind I didn't want to go, but attending college was always something in my heart. Instead of a four-year college, Randy and I went to a career college to study computers. It was a quick nine month course where they taught the basics of computers and how to use various software applications like Lotus, WordPerfect, and a few more that we were learning back then. I think I went just to have something to do, not stand still or be idle. We both graduated with a certificate in Computer Operations. Shortly after that, I started truck driving school to drive semis. I completed the home courses, and when I was ready to start driver training, they moved the campus. So when that fell through Randy and I moved to the mid-west. My daughter was born about a year later. At first I really didn't seek out any education. Randy and I had two children, so we were working to take care of them.

Since I always wanted my children, I was committed to providing for them. I didn't care if their father was around to help me raise them or not. It would be ideal to have that, and fortunately I did. But to have a baby by this man and think that he would

always be with me wasn't my focus. It wasn't something that crossed my mind. If I had to do it alone, I would. It was the idea of having the baby to save me. That's the way I saw it. My children saved me because the devil kept playing this recording in my head saying 'Why are you here? Nobody loves you. Nobody wants you.' So my kids saved me. Not from suicide because I never wanted to harm myself. But I always had thoughts like I would be better off if I weren't here. I wouldn't kill myself, but I wished God would take me away. After having the kids, I had something to live for. I knew I had to raise them, and they would love me unconditionally because I was their mom.

*Marilyn was a bit of a lost soul for a while after high school. After starting her family, her plans to go into the Air Force failed. Thus she needed to find new direction for her life. She decided to focus on her family. She didn't want to continue education, but quickly realized it was necessary if she wanted to provide a decent life for her children. Familial distractions came easy for Marilyn since she was not thrilled about reentering school anyway. Desperate to figure out what avenue to take in life, Marilyn gave school a try. She would drop in and out several times before settling into her current student status. Marilyn struggled with school as a child and continues to struggle as an adult student. Here we peek into her adult educational experiences.*

I worked for a while, but after a few years I decided I wanted to get back into school. I needed the education for a better job. Randy and I were still together, but after seven years, we were having problems. I started at a four-year institution, but when my relationship fell apart, I was distracted so I quit going. Just like that. I stopped going. I didn't withdraw from the classes so I received all F's. I had no idea how that decision would come back to haunt me. I'm still trying to try to pull those F's up. Even though I have pulled myself out of it to a certain degree, I still have to make a certain grade point average to avoid academic probation or suspension.

Once my relationship fell apart, I was alone with two kids and working was more important. Money was more important, so I let school fall by the wayside. I knew I

needed more than a minimum wage job to make it, so I went to Career Paths College. I always wanted to go into the medical field, not as a doctor or nurse because I can't stand all that gory stuff. But something like medical transcription or billing and coding would work. I did well at Career Paths but once again my past haunted me when I got to medical terminology. I wasn't good with root words and adding different prefixes and suffixes to understand the words. So again, I just did the bare minimum. I didn't put forth effort. It was like a hit or miss. When I learned that none of the credits would count towards a college degree, I stopped going to Career Paths.

I enrolled into Urban Community College (UCC) because those credits would count at Capital City University, which is where I ultimately wanted to go to get the four-year degree. I was a bit more focused because, by this time, I knew I needed to get my education. I also had a new beau, and it wasn't long before I thought I was in love again. I put forth more effort in school, but I still wasn't completely there. Another reason I chose UCC was because it was cheaper and it was a good start to get transfer credits. I was majoring in business. Unfortunately, my new romance didn't last. Again I was distracted by the breakup. I know it sounds crazy to lose focus because of a man, but it's hard to get through a breakup with someone you're supposed to be in love with. So I just let it [school] go and took a rest for a while. I guess that was my mindset back then. When I finally decided to go back to school, I was ready to achieve my ultimate goal.

God had been gently nudging me towards the field of social work because there are so many career paths to explore. It also fit well with the other visions he has given me. It all works together. Everything that happened in my life was leading me to the field of social work. I just didn't know it. God gave me a four-part vision. The areas included

my health, my education, my singing career, and my non-profit organization. He was constantly giving me direction, but I was doing my own thing. Now I see. And it's true what they say. When God gives you a vision, write it down so later on you can see when all the pieces of the puzzle start coming together. So now I'm at Capital City in the social work department. I'm going full-time. Going back to school was hard for me because I find that when I'm away from education, I forget what I have learned. I lose my thought process about what I already know. I was forgetting how to spell words. So it was hard getting back into the swing of being in school. I've never really had great study habits, but it makes a difference now that I'm serious about college.

I'm also trying to make adjustments for my instructors. They're very different at the four-year institution. I try not to compare, but it's hard not to. They seemed to be more nurturing at the community college. I think they understand non-traditional students better at the community college because there are a greater number of older students who work and attend school. The community college seemed to realize that we have more than school going on in our lives. Their structure is different. But the four-year colleges, they gear totally towards the traditional student and that drives me crazy. I've had good relationships with my instructors, but they seem to have a hard time adjusting to a 38-year-old single mother in their class. I don't think the professors comprehend or even understand that I have responsibilities outside of school, and I'm not interested in partying and drinking or whatever. College life is geared toward the traditional student. One end of the spectrum is that the classes are structured like high school sometimes. There are these young professors who seem to make allowances because they know the students are going to play around and not get their work done and sometimes that angers

me. They need to realize that older people are in the classes and don't want to be treated like kids. The other end of the spectrum is when professors act like their class is the only class students have to focus on. That doesn't work for me because I have all these other responsibilities.

Technology has been another challenge for me. I was familiar with the computer years ago, but I was away from them for a while so I kind of lost it. For a long time, I didn't have a computer so I was really behind on the software and stuff. I had to get my daughter to help me type a letter. Most university business is conducted via the computer today. Most of the classes use the computer...everything. Homework is done on the computer. It's turned in through the computer. I had to use the computer for research. That was all new to me. It was hard too because I had time limits to get this done. It was just way over my head.

*Marilyn spent a great deal of time avoiding God's plan for her life. I refer to this as her "wilderness time." Despite receiving a specific vision from God, she didn't set out to follow it. Rather she continued to do her own thing. It's taken a series of bad decisions and financial hardships, but she is finally in a place where she is ready to follow His guidance.*

*Marilyn's lifetime struggle with school was multifaceted and centered around: educational limitations, familial distractions, and avoiding God's plan for her life. Marilyn didn't come from an education-oriented family, so she didn't learn to value education. There was no appreciation for the role education played in one's life. I believe Marilyn wanted education but didn't have the wherewithal to persevere beyond her circumstances at the time. Once she started having children, Marilyn's familial obligations distracted her from education because she needed to provide for her children. While this did not necessarily contribute to her lifetime struggle with school, I believe she used it as an excuse to move away from education. I think she could have worked around school, but I do not believe she wanted to. Her children were an easy distraction because education wasn't a priority at the time anyway. She didn't feel she needed education in her life. Marilyn has spent a great deal of time following her own path in life, and avoiding God's plan for her life. I believe her "wilderness time" is over. Now I feel that she is in a place where she is open to follow God's plan for her life.*

*The box metaphor mentioned earlier lends itself to the educational limitations discussion. Here is my view of the box metaphor: Many people remain in the box because the box is all they know. The box may exist, but individuals need to look outside of the box. It is no longer enough to peek outside of the box and watch others pursue the American dream of education and a prosperous life. As a people, African Americans must be willing to climb outside of the box, move outside of their comfort zones, become engaged, and make choices that reap good consequences. This type of thinking calls for a different mindset. Opportunities are more plentiful today. There are various avenues to enter higher education. African Americans are exposed to and offered many more educational opportunities today and must begin to create new educational legacies for their children. Yes, it is often difficult to overcome the limitations, but it is not impossible. On the other side I will say that societal thinking does need to change. We need to address the injustices of our society and make policy changes that address those injustices.*

### **Home Life**

*As one might imagine, Marilyn's home life is quite hectic. She is single-handedly managing a home, five children, school, and activities for the children and herself. That's a lot on one person's plate. Marilyn actually likes to remain busy. It keeps her mind occupied. I believe idle time was an enemy to Marilyn in the past; it was when the devil was able to get to her. Now she prefers to fill her time with activities and various responsibilities. Needless to say, time management is key. Here we learn of the activities that fulfill Marilyn's home life.*

The child protective services division of human services is designed to protect children from unsafe or unhealthy living environments. Certain circumstances require children to be removed from their homes. When this happens, the children are placed in foster homes temporarily while the case is investigated. In some instances, children are permanently removed from their homes and made eligible for adoption. Foster parents are individuals who have registered with human services and have been approved to provide temporary or long-term care for the children. Foster parents receive a stipend while caring for the children. If the children become eligible for adoption, it is not unusual for foster parents to adopt children they have cared for.

I was a foster parent for several years prior to getting the three children I later adopted. Previously, I resisted infants and toddlers because I wanted school-age children

so I could work. These three were different. I started caring for them in 2003. Their ages were three months, eighteen months, and three years old. It was uncommon for me to take them, but the social worker kept coming back to me with the same group. That particular Tuesday God said, 'take them'. I took them in and I've had them ever since. One of the first places I took them was to church. I was surprised by some of the reactions I received. I thought everybody would be happy to see someone with so much love who was willing to take these children into their home. Most people thought I was crazy. They couldn't believe that I was taking in such young children when my children were teenagers and just about out of the house. They said 'You're young and about to be free. You should be living it up and you're taking in three little kids. What is wrong with you?' So it was a mixed thing. A few people congratulated me. But it didn't matter to me though. I didn't need their approval.

The way I saw it, these kids were no longer in the system. They were in a good place. I couldn't understand how someone could be unhappy with that. But I realize it is selfish thinking on their part. I believe it is my mission on this earth to help somebody along the way. I hadn't really planned to keep the children. They were supposed to go live with their grandmother in Texas. I got attached after a while and knowing what the system was like, I couldn't envision them going back into the system. Especially not the baby I had had him since he was three months old. I couldn't see him being tossed from house to house, possibly abused. I couldn't see it. So I told the adoption worker that I wanted to adopt them. And it wasn't very hard. God put them with me. He put it on my heart to take them, and it was a perfect fit. They even look like me. So I believe they must

be meant to be with me. Whatever struggles I have to go through, God will see me through it.

So when I factor school into my home life, having three adopted children in addition to my two older ones makes a difference in my time. It's a lot of extra work. I couldn't do it without my oldest daughter. She's a big help with little household chores here and there. She's driving now so she can help with errands too. I study while the kids are at school or in daycare. I try to get my studying and house work done before they get home. I like to work early in the morning when it's peaceful. I put my gospel music on and do whatever I need to do. I go to school on Mondays and Wednesdays, so I try to use Tuesdays and Thursdays as my study time because the weekends are very busy with church activities and activities for the children. I have very little time for myself, and I don't have much time to spend on campus. I'm pretty much in and out. I don't have much time for extracurricular activities, but this fall I'm planning to enroll in some exercise classes at the gym on campus. I'm overweight, and it's time to do something about my body.

*The majority of Marilyn's time in her home life is dedicated to her children and school. Her older children are teenagers and typically take care of themselves. Her effort goes into the three younger children. I want to acknowledge Marilyn's big heart here. It is evidenced in the love she displays for her children. She took the younger children into her home as foster children at extremely young ages. After caring for them for a while, she couldn't imagine returning the children to the system, so she adopted them. For that I commend her; especially during a time when international adoption is so popular. Not only did she adopt domestically, she kept three siblings together. And taking care of three little ones is no easy feat, particularly for a single mother. I trust that Marilyn has such a heart for foster children because of her own upbringing. I believe she wanted to shower them with the love she desired as a child, but never received. The children account for much of Marilyn's home life. The rest of her time is devoted to school, studying, and a few church activities. Marilyn is a deaconess and she sings in the choir. I believe she is much more serious about her studies at this point in her life. She is finally on track to becoming a social worker. So factor in the three younger children, the two older*

*children, school, and church responsibilities, and it is no surprise that Marilyn spends little time on campus.*

### **SES and Societal Views**

*Marilyn has strong opinions about socioeconomic status, society, and the state of the United States. I believe Marilyn realizes her current financial situation largely results from decisions she has made throughout her life. She is not where she wants to be financially, and while she blames no one for her personal situation she believes life could and should be better for poor people in this country. She also believes there is a definite need to improve race relations and equality in this country. Therefore, this section addresses her financial status and White privilege.*

I would love to be in the place where I had the finances to do whatever I wanted to at any given time. I'm not there by far. I'm hoping this degree will make all the difference. It's like I'm trapped in a cycle; the same cycle my mother was in. She worked for a while. Then she was on the welfare system. She was getting food stamps and a check every month which was not designed for a child to have a nice life. It helped with the necessities, but there were times when we were hungry and didn't have anything in the refrigerator to eat. That's another thing I fault my father for because he wasn't there. He offered no assistance. If he had taken care of his responsibilities, I would have had pretty clothes and nice belongings too. But no, my mother had to struggle on the system. I don't know if it's because she just didn't want to work or if she felt the same way I feel because she didn't get an education. She was locked inside this box. She could only go so far and she didn't strive for anything more. I always resented growing up on the system because I got teased, I didn't have many possessions. The system is designed so that if you go out and get extra jobs they cut you off. It's like you're always in the place where there's just not quite enough to survive. Then, if you need the services again, it's hard to get back on, and some people just say forget it. They choose to live on the system and settle for what they're given. So that's what my childhood was like.

As an adult, I find myself fighting to get out of that same rut. I've had a hard time trying to support myself and the children. I would find jobs, but none of them paid good wages. I could barely make ends meet, and I soon ended up on welfare. I was not happy with the situation for my kids because I knew how I felt growing up on welfare. I knew I had to do something. I finally landed a temporary job at the post office. I was a transitional employee. That's when you're not an employee of the post office but you get paid almost like them, and you have more benefits.

Since I was only a transitional employee at the post office, I was advised to continue whatever income I had coming in because I could be laid off at any time. So until I got a steady job at the post office, I continued to receive welfare benefits. I was probably making \$6.50 an hour so it really wasn't so much money that I couldn't get welfare too. I actually told my two welfare technicians that I had a part-time job and told them how much I made. They never adjusted my income. I did my monthly status report and since I had already told them about the job, I put no change. But they knew. Both of them knew I was working on a six month tour. They knew I was working but they didn't adjust anything so I went on. Years later, a worker accused me of stealing money from the government. They said I falsely reported my income and made me repay a certain amount of money. I didn't feel that I had done anything wrong because I did report the change. It just wasn't recorded.

That was years ago and a lot has happened since then, but I still view my economic status as poor. I'm still on welfare, but I plan to get off when I finish school. I'm blessed because God provides, but I'm poor. I am by no means where I desire to be. In my opinion, there are greedy people in the world. And in this country, no one should

be poor. We shouldn't have any homeless. Everybody should be in a nice house and have at least one decent car. This country is too rich to be in the state we are in. We shouldn't have this health insurance problem. But the country is set up on the foundation of whoever has the most, has the power. The elite, the rich, and the wealthy make the rules and manipulate society. They rule and do what benefits them instead of sharing so everybody can come along on the same level. So to me, the United States is a rich country, but it's a sad country. We're poor in knowledge and wisdom, and we have a big deficit in love. There is no love. It's greed. The love of money is the root of all evil. That's why we have so much evil in this world because people are in love with money.

And what is it with these upper-class White men? In my point of view, they think they are god. Actually tall White men feel that they are the highest class there is; like there is none above them. They think they can do whatever they want, to whomever they want, whenever they want and that's just a lie. We've had these types of discussions in my anthropology class, and the White people did not see the privilege they experience in life. It's weird to me that they don't get it. It's hard trying to get them to understand that they live in White privilege. They don't feel the opposition. They think everyone is treated the same and that couldn't be further from the truth. I wonder how they would fare if they lived as a minority for a week. I think they would come back with a different understanding. But until they walk a mile in the shoes of a minority, they won't understand. They don't know our daily life. They don't know that when we go to the bank, they're probably alerting the guard to be on watch because we might rob it. They don't know that when we go to buy houses, we're discriminated against in various areas. We're often discriminated against when we're trying to get jobs. White people don't feel

any of that. They don't realize that some people try and they get a breakthrough. Others try but they keep getting knocked down and they give up. That's why there are people out there dealing with addictions because something dramatic happened in their lives that sent them there. They lost their faith. They lost their hope and they turned to their addiction to kill the feelings.

*In this section I want to talk about Marilyn's financial status and White privilege. I feel that one of Marilyn's greatest desires is to break the cycle of welfare in her family. She grew up on welfare and knows what she lacked as a child, yet her children are exposed to the same circumstances. I believe Marilyn is in a place today where she views welfare as a means to an end. To me, this is the main difference between Marilyn and Marilyn's mother. Her mother was satisfied with her situation and had no desire to get off welfare whereas Marilyn is not satisfied. She's not content being on welfare. She plans to gain financial independence once she graduates and obtains gainful employment as a social worker. Marilyn credits education for the appreciation she feels toward the differences and opinions of others. It is this openness that helped her put White privilege in perspective. She spoke of several class discussions with White males. As an African American, Marilyn is aware of the inequalities in society because she has experienced them, but it was enlightening for her to hear the White male point of view. This is an emotional subject for Marilyn as she feels misunderstood. She's feels judged and is frustrated by the attitudes of White men who tend to live an easier life imply because of their privilege. She does not believe these men are empathetic toward the oppressed.*

### **The Healing Process**

*Marilyn endured years of rejection, molestation, and abuse. But at this point in her life, she expresses feelings of peace. She is finally on the path that God has placed before her. She is taking steps to implement God's plan for her life. She is not where she wants to be financially, but she is in a much better place within. She has finally found peace. I believe two factors play an integral part in Marilyn's healing process: her reconciliation to God and her new outlook in life.*

I have endured a great deal of pain and rejection throughout my life. But it's made me a strong person. Living through those times gave me strength. There was a time when I didn't feel like I needed anyone. But that was a lie. After a few failed relationships, I finally found what had been missing. It was God. Although I've always known him, I was not in relationship with him. I found a church home, rededicated my life to God and

began to study his word for myself. My spirit man began to grow. I was learning more about the Bible, and it was more real to me. That's when I started to realize that I did need someone. I needed a friend somewhere. God has played many roles in my life...mother, father, brother, sister, friend, comforter; all those roles. But I still need that human form. There was a time in my life where I didn't have that, and my heart was hardened.

My feelings were validated by the behavior I saw happening around me. I watched people and the more I watched the more malice grew in my heart. People can say I love you or I'm sorry all day long. Those are just simple words that can come out of anybody's mouth. For me, action speaks louder than words. People can tell me they love me all day long, but if they don't show me any sign of love, their words mean nothing to me. I look at their actions and if they don't compare to what they're saying I don't want to hear it. So I had to ask God to soften my heart so I could love. I had to let go of all the anger, bitterness, and resentment because the malice in my heart was causing me to be angrier. Situations happen to us in life. Oftentimes when the devil means those situations for bad, God will use them for our good. And that's what happened to me. I was on a road to destruction. Even though I knew about God, and I knew right from wrong. The anger was driving me, especially when thoughts played over and over in my mind. I went years without crying. It's been a transformation over time, but now I cry at the drop of a dime.

For me, it's time to stop procrastinating. God has given me all these plans. I should be working on my weight and getting my body in order. I should be working on my CD and getting my songs in order. Once I finish my master's and get into my social

work career, I'm going to establish a non-profit organization to work with young women. I'm going to do what God has told me to do. He's given me the five-, ten-, and twenty-year plan. I'm the hold up. I have to get Marilyn in order and stop procrastinating. I've been letting the devil steal my joy because every time God gives me a vision, the devil does something to block it. I'm not letting him do that anymore. It's taken me a long time to get to where God wanted me to be. And now I feel at peace. I'm happy. I'm relaxed. I wouldn't change anything I went through because it shaped me to be the person I am today. And the person I am today is a more relaxed person.

When hard times come my way, I am no longer fearful. I know it's going to be alright because I can look back and see where God brought me from and what he brought me out of. In God's time, I'll have what he wants me to have. I'll be where he wants me to be. I didn't heed to God's word early on, but he kept tugging at my heart until I got there. And that's what he did for me. It got to the point where I was just sick and tired of being sick and tired. The sad part was that I was my own worst enemy. I wasn't doing anything and I knew it. I was sitting idle just like the devil wanted me to sit; like a bump on a log. I finally got tired of going nowhere fast so I kicked that door down when I was ready for my breakthrough. I've been through a lot, but now I can be a witness to someone else. I'm going to take what the devil meant for bad, and use it for good. I can witness to someone because I've been there. I'm going to keep my faith in God, keep trusting, and believing in him and make the devil look like a fool because what the devil thought would kill me actually made me stronger.

*Marilyn's journey in life has not been an easy one. She has dealt with issues that take many people a lifetime to overcome. I want to discuss the factors that contributed to Marilyn's healing process. I believe her reconciliation to God and her new outlook on life were major contributors. I was pleased to see that she reconciled to God. This*

*opened her eyes and her heart. She began to view life differently which was apparent in her new outlook. She was more forgiving, she began to focus on God's plan for her life, and she could finally recognize the enemy's hold on her mind. Walking in this knowledge is what will keep Marilyn on the path God has placed before her. I commend her willingness to share her story to help others. Many times we are embarrassed to share our life struggles with others. We tend to keep them to ourselves ignoring the fact that others can learn from our misfortune.*

### **Here's What I Gathered**

*When I look at an overview of Marilyn's story, two themes emerge: rejection and instability, and generational curses. Marilyn experienced extreme rejection from her parents as a child and this rejection followed her throughout her life. It caused her to have feelings of unworthiness and low self-esteem. I believe the rejection led to instability. Her early life lacked stability at home and her adult life lacked stability in her relationships. As a child, she was uprooted from the only home she knew and placed in a hostile environment in her mother's home. There she endured years of sexual and emotional abuse. Similarly, her adult life lacked stability in the areas of education and romance. She enrolled in and out of educational facilities only to withdraw when unstable relationships went bad.*

*Generational curses are behaviors passed from one generation to the next. They represent negative behaviors that tend to be cyclical in nature. The idea is to break generational curses so that future generations can move beyond their negative consequences. We see generational curses in several instances in Marilyn's life: having children out of wedlock, personal care for children, receiving welfare, and attitudes toward education. First, Marilyn's mother had children out of wedlock, so did Marilyn. Hopefully Marilyn is teaching her daughter to marry before having children. Second, the women in Marilyn's life have a history of not caring for their own children. Her grandmother did not raise her own children. Marilyn's mother did not raise Marilyn. This is one curse Marilyn is trying to break by raising her own children and adopting others through foster care. Third, Marilyn's mother received welfare and Marilyn fell into the same cycle. She is trying to break the curse through education. Fourth, Marilyn's mother believed education occurred at school and didn't provide any support at home. Marilyn has the same beliefs and often operates that way with her children. Unlike her mother though, Marilyn admits this behavior is wrong and is trying to change. Marilyn's mother's educational aspirations for her children did not extend beyond high school. Marilyn wants more for her children. She is trying to be an example for them by attending college.*

*Marilyn has come a long way in her life. In some instances she displays a greater sense of awareness and she has begun the change process. In other instances, her mind set is different, but the behavior that necessitates the change is lacking.*

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

### Research Questions

This study examined the lives of low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students to see how they made sense of their socioeconomic backgrounds, past educational experiences, and educational journeys. The overarching question was “How do low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students come to the decision to enroll in higher education?” Within this overarching question I explored the following questions:

1. How do low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students make sense of SES?
2. How do low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students make sense of education?
3. What role does habitus play in the educational journeys of low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students?

As I contemplated my research questions, I thought about the women who would have the stories I was seeking. I wanted to know how the women managed family, work, and school. I interviewed low-income, African American women who are single mothers working full- or part-time and have attended the community college full- or part-time for at least two continuous semesters up to completing a degree or certificate. I conducted at least three interviews with each participant.

I divided this chapter into three parts: discussion of the findings as they relate to the research questions, discussion of the literature, and recommendations. It begins with a discussion of the stories to see how these women’s life experiences responded to the

research questions. I do not have definitive answers, but I have a better understanding of what was taking place in these women's lives. I will answer the research questions in order with the exception of the overarching question. It will be answered last as the three exploratory questions regarding SES, education, and habitus provide the background for the overarching question.

*Research Question One: How do low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students make sense of SES?*

How these low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students made sense of SES was revealed in their stories. None of these women are as secure financially as they would like to be. However, they are very thankful for where they are in life. They all work hard to survive and to maintain and take care of their households. They all are working to change their situations. They believe education is the key to that change: the key to a new life. The findings that emerged focused on four areas regarding how these women made sense of SES: their early childhood, their current financial status, their woes with welfare, and their view of education as the key to a new life.

These women grew up in poor families. Oftentimes, low-income parents do not or cannot offer the academic support their children require; however, they can stress the importance of education in the household and help their children understand the role of education in one's life. Education was enforced in Tiffany and Victoria's homes. They received educational support in the form of monitoring to get to school. However, there was little to no academic support. None of these women's parents could offer them much assistance with school work as they had not earned a high school diploma. Even with limited academic support, there were positive attitudes toward education in Tiffany and

Victoria's home environments. As a result, these women realized the value of education early on. They understood the importance of obtaining an education and the impact it would have on their lives. Marilyn and Simone, however, were raised in households where there was no focus on education. They had a different outlook on education. They did not care about school. They viewed school as a chore. They wanted nothing more to do with education once they graduated from high school. It was not until later in life that they realized the importance of education. Now, they are both trying to make up for lost time. Nevertheless, all four women eventually pursued their educational goals. Although they took different paths, all four have realized the importance of education. Consequently they realized the effects a limited education can have on one's life. They plan to utilize education as a tool to enhance their SES status. They believe education will open them up to better paying jobs; it will remove them from poverty status thus changing their way of living.

These women will be the first to admit their current strained financial situations. They are not where they want to be financially. They have struggled to make ends meet. Tiffany and Marilyn both receive welfare. They are the two women with small children. The services they receive revolve around meeting the basic needs of their children. They receive food stamps, housing assistance, and daycare assistance. Victoria and Simone have grown children. They may hold menial jobs, but they work to support themselves. Tiffany has struggled as a single parent with two small children. Until recently, she was unable to work because she could not afford daycare for the kids. She had to go on TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), because she needed daycare assistance. She received TANF for several years and was recently able to discontinue the services

because both of her children are now in school. She has since gotten a job. Marilyn is currently receiving welfare assistance. She has five children and is concentrating on school for the time being. She plans to discontinue welfare once she is through with school. Victoria and Simone have used their jobs as a means to an end. Oftentimes, their jobs are barely sufficient to maintain their households. Simone has worked as a certified nursing assistant while in school. Victoria has held several jobs that barely made ends meet. Although she has a certificate in computers, she has not been able to find a job in her field. She has had to settle for what employment she could find. A few examples of the jobs she has held include a customer service person in a grocery store, a paraprofessional, and an accounts receivable clerk. None of these positions represent her career job, and she is simply biding time as she pursues her degree.

These women admit that they want a better life, and they're hoping to use their education as a tool to obtain that new life. Tiffany wants to provide a comfortable life for her children. Here she describes her idea of that life:

I just want to be comfortable. I don't want to be up at the top making millions...but I want to be comfortable. I want to have money set aside. I want to own a home. I want my children to have a good future. So, to me it's just stability. I don't want to be greedy. I don't want to be better than no one. I just want to be comfortable in life.

Tiffany wants to be able to provide her children's necessities. She wants to be able to feed them when they are hungry and buy them shoes when they need them. She wants to have money saved and not live from paycheck to paycheck. All of these women want financial stability and have high hopes for their futures. Currently, they are no where near that stability. All but one of the women has received public assistance at some point in her life. However, only one is currently receiving assistance. As we heard in her own

voice earlier, Marilyn is disappointed in the way the United States handles its poor. She is discontent with the treatment and believes greed drives societal thinking. She believes her financial status is linked to the rich and powerful people who make decisions that make them richer and keep the poor, poor. She feels that her SES status and that of other poor people will get better when rich policymakers strive to get everyone on a level playing field.

Three of the four women received some type of welfare assistance at various times in their adult lives. The fourth woman applied for assistance but was declined because of her income at the time. Women who receive welfare assistance are often confronted with issues of power. They face workers who stereotype and degrade them. These women resented being treated this way. No one wants to be degraded; to feel less than human because they need help. They are fed this ideology that the services are there to help them go to school and better their lives, yet when they begin to receive the services they are subjected to this type of treatment. Many times these women chose to discontinue services rather than continuously subject themselves to their caseworker's abuse. In this study, each of the women used different methods to deal with the way they were treated. Simone discontinued food stamp assistance after a welfare worker told Simone "the system" would have control over Simone's baby since Simone was receiving assistance. Marilyn challenged the bureaucracy of the system when a caseworker accused her of trying to defraud the welfare system by not reporting income.

Low-income women consider education as a way out of poverty. Yet programs such as TANF, do not consider some aspects of education as meeting the requirements to receive services. Tiffany experienced this countless times when her TANF caseworker

created a number of obstacles for her as she pursued her education. They would not acknowledge her online classes; they discounted her volunteer efforts after she earned her associate's degree; and she consistently was encouraged to go to work rather than further her education. She only needed the service for daycare and was thankful when her children became school-age. She was glad to discontinue TANF and rid herself of the hassles the system presented. The women in this study are trying desperately to end the cycle of poverty in their lives. Education is the tool they are using to accomplish it. This provides a partial answer to the research question because for Tiffany, her SES status was wrapped up in her education. One was a means to the other. Tiffany wanted to continue her education, but could not afford to do so without daycare assistance. She needed the financial assistance to pursue her education, but the welfare system was fighting against her. Tiffany persisted despite the system because she wanted to position herself to be more than part of the working poor.

For many low-income women, limited education equals limited income. Thus, they view education as the key to a new life; the avenue to economic prosperity. Here Marilyn expresses her sentiments regarding the value of a college education:

If you don't have a college education, you're not going to get the good jobs that you need to get you over that threshold to become more financially sound....I never wanted to be in this status but for some reason it was like a hold on me to be here [in this financial situation]... And I guess once I get my degree, I'll have the avenues to break through.

Marilyn is not alone in her thinking. This thought process was a theme among all of the participants. The value of education is no secret in our society. The theory is that education brings in more money. That may not always be the reality for some, but these women believe that education will open new doors for them. As we heard in Victoria's

story, she believes the degree puts one in a position to receive the better jobs. Yet despite the fact that she is pursuing her degree, she is still concerned about age discrimination and how it might affect her future. Simone wasn't quite sure of what she wanted to do in life, but knew that obtaining knowledge about something would lead to a better life. Tiffany values education and believes it will help her achieve financial stability for her children. She is most concerned with her sons' futures. She wants them to understand that education opens the door to a better life and is something that no one can take from them.

These women made sense of SES by drawing from what they knew. The areas presented here: early childhood, current financial status, woes with welfare, and view of education as the key to a new life represent these women's SES status of the past, present, and future. The findings from their early childhood signified the environment they grew up in; their past. This illustrated the stratifying effects of growing up in a poor environment. Regardless of their personal limitations, low-income parents need to help their children understand the value of education and its implications for a prosperous financial future. The two women who received this fared better in their elementary, secondary, and postsecondary educational endeavors than the two women who did not have this early influence. It may appear that education is the focus here, but it is important to note that for these women, education was a part of how they made sense of SES. Their SES was entwined with education. The findings from these women's current financial status and their woes with welfare represented their present. These women have not reached their desired financial positions in life. They do their best to make ends meet now, and look forward to finishing school and enjoying a life of financial freedom for themselves and their families. Their woes with welfare often hindered their plans, but

they fought to move beyond the hindrances and continued to strive for their goals. The findings that indicated how these women believe education will affect their lives represented their future because they view education as the key to a new life. To them it is a way out of poverty.

*Research Question Two: How do low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students make sense of education?*

How these low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students made sense of education was also evident in their stories. The findings that emerged revealed dramatic changes for these women which encompassed three areas: becoming new people, reclaiming their power, and creating educational legacies. These women credit education for making them different people. Education is helping them reclaim the power over their lives, thus inspiring them to create educational legacies for their children.

I believe the most profound finding here is what these women have learned about themselves. They have discovered newfound self-worth, developed a new social awareness, and are now open to diverse world views. Tiffany believes education is empowering and is proud of her accomplishment in obtaining her associate's degree. Simone has made several self-discoveries as a result of her education. She has increased self-esteem, greater awareness, open-mindedness, and is more outspoken. Marilyn totally credits education for her transformation. She feels better about herself and believes she can do whatever she sets her mind to do. She feels more a part of society, she feels more connected. She realizes people have views that differ from hers, and she can respect that now. She understands the ideology of people and how they feel and think. Here Victoria describes what education has done for her:

I strongly believe that everyone, I don't care what color you are...race, gender, what ever should get some kind of education, because it's out there for us. And the more we know the better we can be toward each other....I don't think I'm an insecure person, but it's made me realize that there's a lot of other people in the world that are different from me, young, old, Black, White, whatever. Education has made me more aware of my surroundings...by seeing different people, talking to different people, meeting different people....I no longer just look at things in my little circle....I think it's just making me more aware that I can think outside of my box. It's opening me up to different things, to different people, different feelings...I see that I'm not limited to do one thing. And again society makes us that way. If not society, your family, your husband, your kids...you're in your own little world, and that's all you do. That's all you do. So I'm seeing a bigger picture now. I'm thinking outside the box now. And it's a good feeling. It's scary, because again it's change and change is scary, but usually change is good....I can grow and not limit myself.

Education has helped these women better understand the world around them. Thus, they have developed a greater appreciation for their lives. They feel more confident in themselves and their ability to contribute to the world. Victoria wants to share her knowledge with others. Simone believes education commands respect and that educated people receive better treatment in society. After obtaining her associate's degree she plans to become more civic-minded. She wants to give back to her community. Marilyn wants to establish a non-profit organization to help young women in trouble.

These women are trying to use education as a tool to regain power in their lives. Throughout their lives, circumstances have caused them to forfeit that power. It was as though they were trapped in various situations and had limited control over their lives. Tiffany needed daycare assistance for her children and had to follow TANF rules even though they often conflicted with her educational goals. Victoria has had to endure futile jobs to make ends meet. Simone continuously has given her power to friends and lovers to avoid loneliness. Marilyn has relented to her own demons in the past. I believe these women are in a place where they are ready for a change. They are ready to take control

over their lives. They want their power back. Tiffany believes knowledge is power. Earlier we heard in Simone's own voice that education begets power and influences the way people treat a person. These women want to reclaim their power. They each want control over their own lives, but they are reclaiming that power at different levels. Tiffany regained some power by discontinuing TANF services. She is working on her bachelor's degree; she has a new job; her children are in school; and she has help from her fiancé on the home front. Victoria is biding time on her jobs until she finishes school. She is maintaining her lifestyle and staying focused on school. Once she earns her associate's degree, she will use that power to be more selective in her jobs. Simone operates in different levels of power at different times in her life depending on her needs. Marilyn has surrendered to God's plan for her life, thus controlling the demons of the past. She has the power and is finally in a good place.

These women's educational experiences have inspired them to create a legacy of education for their children. They want their children to value education as they realize it is necessary in today's society. Victoria's son has earned a bachelor's degree and is working on a certification for project management. Simone's son has entered a GED program and attends the same community college as she. Marilyn and Tiffany have school-age children. Marilyn believes that being in school along with her children helps foster an environment that encourages learning for all of them. She hopes that experiencing education along with her children will inspire the children to pursue a college education. Tiffany can relate to Marilyn's thoughts and shares her feelings:

I think it [education] is like the number one thing, because without an education you can't go anywhere....I want my bachelor's degree and master's degree because I think it looks good for the boys because they're seeing me do it. And I appreciate it more now...For me, I guess it just

means that I'm dedicated. I keep saying that all the time...dedicated, devoted, because it means a lot, not just for me, but for my children. I want them to see that mommy did this. I mean it's real easy for me to go out there and get a job and start working in this career and making money...but for the long run for them... I want them to walk in and see my diploma hanging up. I want that to motivate them, especially as Black boys. Growing up being a Black man- it's hard enough being Black as it is, but to be a man too, that's hard. I don't want them to be in the category of some Black men who are classified as not going to ever amount to anything or have nothing going for themselves.... I don't want my kids to be that way.... I want the best for them. I want them to value their education, because that is one thing no one can take away from them; their education. So if you have knowledge, knowledge is very powerful.

These women are learning that their education really does extend beyond them. It is more than just newfound self-worth or a better paying job; it is a new way of life. Tiffany and Marilyn want to help their children understand the meaning and importance of education. Victoria is committed to providing the same for her son, nieces, nephews, and other children around her. Creating educational legacies will enhance the women's habitus which will then be passed on to future generations.

These four women made sense of education by viewing education as a catalyst for change in their lives. For them, those changes came in the form of a new self-image, reclaiming their power, and creating educational legacies for their children. These women described feelings of self-worth and increased social awareness that they did not even know existed in them. They credit education for those changes and have decided to use education as a tool to reclaim their power. They realize a better life lies ahead and they want to move forward in that life by creating educational legacies for their children. They want their children to not only understand and value education, but to apply it to their own lives and pass it down to future generations.

*Research Question Three: What role does habitus play in the educational journeys of low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students?*

In Chapter Two, I defined habitus as one's internalized enduring system of beliefs, perceptions, and experiences about society that one gains from her environment (McDonough, 1997). It consists of four pieces: cultural capital, social capital, human capital, and economic capital. Habitus has a lot to do with who we become as adults; thus I believe habitus plays a dramatic role in the educational journeys of low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students. The findings that emerged largely relate to cultural capital; however, each piece is addressed in the manner it applies, or does not apply, to these women's lives.

Cultural capital includes the attitudes, beliefs, resources, and values that families transmit to their children as a means of enhancing class status and privilege (Paulsen & St. John, 2002). The women in this study were rich in cultural capital in some respects and lacked cultural capital in others. For example, when considering cultural capital in terms of religion and spirituality, these women fared well. Three of the women came from solid religious foundations and still rely on those beliefs today. Tiffany was raised in a religious family who loved and relied on God. She learned to trust Him early on and despite a few mistakes here and there has tried to live her life for Him. Victoria grew up in an environment where God was a source of wisdom, guidance, and provision. She too has not strayed far from that and tries to live a life that is pleasing to God. Despite a horrendous childhood, Marilyn met God early in life and learned to lean on Him for support. She credits Him for bringing her through some turbulent times. She disregarded His will for her life for a time but has found her way back to Him and is now following the path He has for her. Simone is a bit different. Her family appeared to be extremely religious for what seemed to be outside purposes but did not seem to practice the biblical

principal that love begins at home. I'm sure they loved their children, but the family seemed to be quite dysfunctional. Hence, Simone seemed to stray a bit. She has spent years trying to fill a void through other people. I believe she trusts God with her life on a surface level, yet she has not totally surrendered to Him.

Cultural capital in terms of education for these women was a different story. The women lacked cultural capital in this area. Their families simply did not have it to give. None of these women's parents had finished high school, so they had very little to offer in terms of education. Victoria's family knew education was important and wanted the best for her, but they did not know how to help her get to college beyond funding it themselves. They knew they couldn't afford it because there were other children in the home after her, so college was out of the question for her. She didn't know about financial aid and other funding sources that might have afforded her the opportunity to go to school, so she went to work instead. Simone's family never showed any interest in school. Simone and her siblings had to fend for themselves to get through high school. College was never discussed in their household, so Simone never imagined herself going to college. Marilyn's mother only stressed graduating from high school. She did not encourage nor did she try to persuade Marilyn to pursue higher education. Marilyn eventually found her way into college, yet even after entering college, she did not have the cultural capital to know to withdraw from classes when she decided to quit school. She simply stopped going and received F's for the semester. Although that was years ago, she is still dealing with the ramifications of that lack of cultural capital today. Tiffany was an exception here. She actually prepared for college. She took courses for college credit while in high school. She entered college right after high school and was on track

with her educational plan. In her situation, life circumstances caused her to get off track. So she did seem to have cultural capital to some extent. It is unknown as to where it came from.

Social capital consists of resources embedded in social relations and social structures (Lin, 2001). Similar to cultural capital, these women also experienced a deficit in social capital in that none of the women or their families had social relationships that could help them pursue education. All of these women's families were active in their churches; however, it is unknown as to whether their families' social networks through church extended to education because they never mentioned this. Social capital is all about surrounding yourself with people who have knowledge about college or can help you get into college. These women's families had limited education, so it is highly unlikely that they would establish these types of relationships. In addition, it is likely that their parents were intimidated by the educational system and did not pursue social relationships with or question teachers, guidance counselors, or other school personnel about their children's futures in higher education.

Human capital is increased knowledge and skills based on investments in education and training (Becker, 1993). All of these women are working to increase their human capital. Each has received some type of training, certificate, or degree at this point in her life. Simone earned a certificate in an employment training class. Marilyn and Victoria earned certificates in computers. Tiffany has earned her associate's degree. All of them are further increasing their human capital because they are currently enrolled in school. Simone and Victoria are working on their associate's degrees. Marilyn and Tiffany are working on their bachelor's degrees. While the women in this study have not

yet seen the benefits of their human capital in terms of income, their current enrollment status alone is increasing their human capital. And even though they delayed enrollment to enter college, they are setting themselves up to reap the benefits of human capital throughout the remainder of their lifetimes. Nevertheless, investments in human capital do not come without costs associated with it. The costs associated with education include tuition, books, fees, and other incidental expenses. All four women spoke of positive experiences regarding funding for their education. They are all receiving financial aid and have incurred minimal out-of-pocket expenses. Victoria is receiving a scholarship. When she first started school, she received money to assist with her household expenses. Tiffany and Marilyn have only had to purchase a few books. Simone has taken out a few student loans to assist with her expenses, and is intentionally striving to keep her loans to a minimum in order to avoid financial trouble in the future.

Economic capital consists of money or other resources with economic value (Portes, 1998). In this study, I approach economic capital from the standpoint of student price response as students from low-income families are often scared away from higher education because of the sticker shock of high cost tuition. These women have faced economic capital from this perspective. They have moved beyond the costs associated with education because they all are enrolled in institutions of higher learning. In addition to education-related costs of tuition, books, and fees, these women incur household expenses such as rent, food, clothing, car, and daycare. Such is the case for Tiffany and Marilyn as they have young children at home. Victoria and Simone have no children at home, so their expenses outside of school are limited to household items.

When we look at these women's lives holistically, we see that habitus played a tremendous role in the educational journeys of these women. It is virtually impossible for it not to. Habitus makes up a large part of who these women are. Cultural capital consisted of their foundations. Social capital comprised their relationships. Human capital included their investments in education and economic capital covered their financial situations. Each area mentioned here affected these women's educational journeys in some way, be it positively or negatively. Their lack of cultural capital prevented several of them from entering college immediately after high school. Their lack of social capital also hindered their educational efforts. Their human capital has not begun to payoff for them yet, but they should begin to see the benefits of their education when they finish school. The same applies to their economic capital. At this point these women have benefited from financial aid for school, but have not benefited economically in terms of their household incomes. So as we have followed their journeys, we have seen that habitus, in its various forms, is ingrained in these women's lives.

*Grand Tour Question: How do low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students come to the decision to enroll in higher education?*

How these low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students came to the decision to enroll in higher education was based on their educational foundations, personal responsibility, and societal injustices. Those were the findings.

The way these women were raised played a role in how they viewed education; therefore, it is important to explore their educational foundations. It is equally important to acknowledge the role of personal responsibility in relation to their life outcomes. I will discuss personal responsibility in further detail next. First, I will discuss the educational

foundations of these women. Tiffany and Victoria came from solid educational foundations. Education was stressed in their homes. They were encouraged to embrace education as the way to a better life. In Tiffany's story, we heard her reference her parents' emphasis on education as she recalled summers filled with educational-related activities. Similarly, Victoria recalled her parents' attitude toward education:

My parents were kind of strict on going to school. They really did emphasize that.... We all had to go to school, period. No matter what you did...you were going to school, period. Education was a big deal...so they were instilling that in us... They didn't get it [education]...so when we had the opportunity to do it...it was really, really enforced.

Simone and Marilyn grew up without an educational foundation. They lived with no educational influence, and they feel the repercussions to this day. Simone felt like her parents were too busy with church activities to see about the children's school work. As she looks back, she believes they did care about education but lacked the time to commit to it. Here Marilyn reflects on her educational foundation that began with illiterate grandparents and continued with a mother who used school as an excuse to get the children out of the house. She offered no support at home:

...I was way behind...I didn't have people around me that could teach me. So I had to learn everything on my own.... the other kids...had help at home. They had parents who were about education and I didn't... So it takes away from your self-esteem. But when you get older, you realize that these kids had educational parents and you didn't.... My mother...wasn't the kind of parent to sit down and do your homework with you....She felt like that's what school is for. You go to be taught your work and all that....I grew up in that so that's how I am.

Even though education was stressed in the homes of two of the four women, there was still a lapse in education after high school for all of them. Between the four of them, their time away from education ranged between four

years and thirty years. The lapse in education, however, did not seem to be related to the educational foundation of these women. Rather, the lapse had more to do with life situations be they financial or the birth of children. Decisions these women made also contributed to the lapse. Tiffany stopped out to fulfill familial obligations. The birth of her two children added to her hiatus. Victoria couldn't afford college and went to work. Simone was busy trying to find her way in life and was not interested in school. Marilyn was equally disinterested in school and was eager to start a family.

The two women with solid educational foundations, Tiffany and Victoria, are much sounder in their educational endeavors. Upon their return to education, they approached it seriously and have been dedicated to their studies. Simone and Marilyn had no educational foundation while growing up and seemed to struggle more with school. They had extended periods where they lacked focus. They did not concentrate on their studies; they were more easily distracted away from their studies; and they consistently enrolled in and dropped out of school. They have finally gotten to the point where they are now serious; however, it has taken them years to get to that point. This is where the concept of personal responsibility mentioned earlier comes in.

Personal responsibility is the manner in which these women responded to their individual situations, the decisions they made, and how they took control (in some cases) over their lives after various critical incidents. All of these women faced incidents throughout their lives, and they each took different paths to education. Tiffany built upon her educational foundation and continues to persevere in education after having two

children and battling the obstacles associated with social services. She has since obtained a job and discontinued social services. Victoria returned to her educational roots and dove into education after a sudden layoff from her job. She is maintaining her job while continuing her education. Simone turned to education in search of a better life even though she is still trying to fill a void in her life. She continues to work as a certified nursing assistant while pursuing her dream of earning a degree. Marilyn came full circle after years of wrestling with God and enrolled in college to pursue her dreams of becoming a social worker. She is working to implement God's plan for her life.

As indicated in their stories, the educational road these women travelled has not been without struggle. They have navigated many bumps. We picked up Marilyn's voice earlier in the story where she described a box metaphor as it related to the limitations of Blacks. Here I elaborate on the societal injustices that influenced Marilyn's thinking. Racism is about institutional patterns and practices that place White people at the centre of the organizations and institutions they have created, while simultaneously excluding African Americans and other people of color. Some Whites like to believe that race does not matter. They want to pretend that the presence of a select few African Americans in White-dominated organizations proves that institutionalized racism has ended. The reality is that the miniscule number of African Americans in high positions in comparison to the number of African Americans they supposedly represent only illustrates how Whites have learned to placate people of color. It is these institutionalized laws, policies, and practices that allow Whites to benefit from unearned privilege today. Life is often just the opposite for African Americans.

The metaphor that anyone can “pull themselves up by their bootstraps” is something to examine. The majority of Whites (71%) believe Blacks are responsible for their own situations in why they can’t get ahead. Thirty percent of Blacks believe it is racial discrimination (Pew Research Center, 2007). White Americans have been socialized to believe this because they do not see their own investments in Whiteness. They believe if one works hard to succeed in life, she will prosper. They do not acknowledge the influence of race and White privilege; an essential ingredient for ensuring White individual progress like going to college. People of color do not have this luxury, and as we will see in the discussion of literature the effects of racism extend to many facets of life. We will also see the long-term effect of racism.

Tiffany faced racism in school as a young child at the hand of a teacher. She was called a “black monkey” everyday she attended elementary school. Marilyn faced racism when a less qualified White applicant received a job for which Marilyn had applied. Tiffany consistently fought a social service system that encouraged her to pursue work with minimal education even though her goal was to obtain a higher level education to increase her employability. Throughout her career, Victoria faced racism in the workplace. She has always had to work harder to prove herself, work longer hours, and often received lower pay than her White counterparts. Victoria also experienced sexism on several jobs. She had managers and supervisors who devalued women. Experiences involving sexism were less frequent than those involving racism and classism. Victoria was the only woman of the four to report experiences of sexism. These examples are commonplace for African Americans. It is situations such as these that hinder low-income African American women from changing their socioeconomic status.

The way these women came to the decision to enroll in higher education was based on a combination of the findings presented here: their educational foundations, personal responsibility, and the way societal injustices shaped their view of the world. Their educational foundations shaped their thinking about education. This in turn affected the way they perceived higher education. Attending college was more of a priority to some than others, but life situations and decisions have put all of them on an educational path now. Their personal responsibility dictated how they responded to what happened in their lives. They each made decisions that would ultimately affect the financial futures. They each had different approaches to their situations, yet they all have come to the same point in life. They all came to the decision to enroll in higher education.

The societal injustices discussed here are important because they addressed attitudes these women face on a daily basis. The way these women handled these injustices spoke in part to how they came to the decision to enroll in higher education. There is more information on societal injustices in the literature discussion in the next section. For now I point out how these women faced these injustices and still made it to higher education. It is not easy to come from a life of poverty, live in a system that is designed for you to fail, and persist toward a better life despite all of that. These women have had to fight against the stereotypes of being African American and poor. They have tried to get ahead while dealing with attitudes of Whites who benefit from White privilege and don't understand the struggles of people of color. These women have had to battle these injustices all of their lives. Living through poverty, racism, and discrimination helped these women realize that something needed to be done if their lives were to change. Each has said that education is the key to a new life, so each chose to

enroll in college. To overcome these injustices and still make it into higher education and persist speaks volumes about these women. As indicated in their stories, the various educational paths of these four women are as different as the women themselves. Each of these four women has grand educational aspirations, yet neither has achieved all of her goals. Despite the obstacles they face, I'm confident that they will. For them, it is a matter of navigating the bumps in the road. They have each taken different paths down their educational journeys, and although their journeys are not complete, there is much more road behind them than lies ahead.

### **Discussion of the Literature**

The literature included in Chapter Two surrounded areas that affect low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students. I use this section to discuss some of the literature reviewed in Chapter Two and how it relates to the findings of this study. I begin with habitus. I then move to low-income women. I continue with information from non-traditional women and African American women. The literature pertaining to these two areas is intermingled according to the topic. I conclude with a discussion of social issues and how those issues apply to the lives of low-income, African American women.

McDonough (1997) defined habitus as the internalized system of beliefs, perceptions, and experiences a person gains from their environment. Habitus consists of several pieces including cultural capital, social capital, human capital, and economic capital. I mention this because various forms of habitus are intertwined in the lives of low-income women and thus surfaced in the findings. I will address each as the findings deem necessary. The literature pertaining to the familial environment of low-income

children was right on target with the findings. According to MacLeod (2003), issues that poor children face significantly shape their world views. All four women in this study were shaped by their childhood upbringing in some way. Tiffany and Victoria still live according to their childhood upbringing. Simone continues to combat the ramifications of her upbringing and Marilyn is trying to overcome the demons of her past. The children suffer when their socioeconomic situations dictate their educational paths at the elementary stage of their lives (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). I found this to be more relevant to Marilyn and Simone as their educational histories continue to haunt them.

Some of the literature referred to the effect a child's SES has on college preparation (Gandara, 2002; McDonough, 1997; Paulsen, 2001). Other literature emphasized the importance students' families' class status has on their cultural capital and their expectation for college (Dumais, 2002; Paulsen, 2001). Paulsen & St. John (2002) defined cultural capital as the attitudes, beliefs, values that families transmit to their children to enhance their class status and privilege. The lack of cultural capital was prevalent for each of the women to some degree. Tiffany and Victoria's families wanted them to further their education, but didn't know how to help them get there. Marilyn's mother wanted her to graduate from high school, but didn't provide encouragement to help her reach that goal. Simone's parents did not provide any source of encouragement related to education. Cabrera and La Nasa (2000a, 2000b) pointed out that low-SES students take fewer college prep classes than higher-SES student and a low percentage of low-SES students apply to college. I cannot speak to a comparison between low-SES and high-SES students because all the women were from low-SES backgrounds. I can say that all of their families' lacked the cultural capital to help them get to college.

McDonough referenced how poor students' families' lack of cultural capital hindered their ability to acquire information. What I did not find in the literature were the consequences resulting from the lack of cultural capital. For example, even after Marilyn made it to college, she did not know that if she walked away from a semester without dropping her classes that she would receive all F's.

In addition to SES, the literature considered the impact of social relationships and the investment in human capital. Lin (2001) defined social capital as the resources embedded in social relationships. He posited that social networks aid in the flow of information and enhances one's social credentials. Lin's reference to social capital referred to education and I did not find anything in the women's stories that supported this. The women had other social relationships in their lives, but none that seemed to help them in their educational pursuits. The findings relative to human capital were totally different from that of social capital. Human capital is a person's knowledge based on investments in education and training in order to increase knowledge, skills, and abilities (Becker, 1993). All of the women have invested in their human capital by enrolling in school. They believe that an investment in human capital will bring higher returns in the form of income. Three of the women delayed enrollment into college. The fourth entered right after high school, but stopped out and returned after a four year break. Nevertheless all of the women expect to realize a return on their investment in the future.

Thus far, the women have not had to endure many of the costs associated with investing in human capital (Paulsen, 2001). They all receive financial aid and have incurred minimal costs such as a few book purchases. Typically poor students are cost conscious about the financial costs of school (Fitzgerald & Delaney, 2002). They are

tuition-sensitive because family contributions to college are limited or nonexistent (Paulsen, 2001). This was the case for Victoria as she did not enter college after high school because her family could not afford it. Simone admitted that there was no discussion of college in her home, but did not specify if it was due to lack of finances. The other women did not mention the cost of education beyond the fact that they are receiving financial aid.

According to research on low-income women, education helps low-income women earn higher wages (Boldt, 2000; Karier, 1998). This was a common belief among all the women. They viewed education as the key to higher income and each dreams of earning more money when she finishes school. Karier reported an increase in wages with each year of college completed. I did not find this among any of the women. Tiffany has earned her associate's degree, and is now pursuing her bachelor's degree. Therefore, she has not yet experienced the increase in wages Karier reported. The other three women have earned certificates, and none of them have seen increases in their wages. It is unknown as to whether their lack of increase is because they are still attending school.

Kates (1996) posited that low-income women gained financial independence after education. While these women believe their financial independence is coming, none of them have yet achieved the financial stability Kates described. As these women attempt to transition out of poverty, they face obstacles that hinder their efforts. Valadez (2000) reported the frustration a group of African American women experienced while trying to escape welfare and prepare for jobs. Similarly, the women in this study discussed societal and institutional issues they were confronted with. They had several stories surrounding the obstacles and barriers of overt racism and gender oppression stated in the literature by

Johnson-Bailey (1998) and Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (1996). Johnson-Bailey and Cervero spoke of the power relations based on race, gender, class, and color that African American women face. Each of the women described unpleasant experiences connected to power relations. Tiffany faced racism in elementary school when a White teacher called her a Black monkey. Marilyn faced it when she was bypassed for a job given to a less qualified White applicant. Tiffany, Simone, and Marilyn faced it with their welfare caseworkers. Victoria faced it with her sexist supervisors. She was the only woman to report gender oppression. Despite unpleasant experiences in the past, these women forged ahead in education. Their transition, however, was not easy.

Bowl (2001) explored the transition into higher education for African American women. These four women quickly admitted anxieties they experienced around entering college. Needless to say their anxiety was not unfounded. Victoria wondered how she would fare in classes with the younger students. Tiffany was anxious about re-entering school with two children and how she would manage the various roles of mother, student, and employee. Marilyn resisted re-entering education although various paths she took in life continued to take her there. Simone was so confused about where to go in education that she declared a string of majors before settling on her current one. It took a lot of self-discipline to adjust to being in school. She had to teach herself how to take notes, how to study, and how to cope with her learning disability. The payoff for these women's early anxieties has been in the new women they have become. Rifenbary (1995) described a sense of achievement, increased self confidence, and self worth among non-traditional women. Three of these women echoed that. They reported newfound self-esteem and awareness of the world around them. Tiffany was the only one of the four who felt like

she had regressed a bit; mainly because of her grades when she compared life in school before and after children.

Horn and Carroll (1996) used seven characteristics to classify non-traditional: delayed enrollment, part time, financially independent, worked full time while enrolled, had dependents, single parent, did not obtain high school diploma. They further identified whether their participants were minimally (one), moderately (two or three), or highly (four or more) non-traditional based on these characteristics. All of the women in this study are highly non-traditional because they possess four or more of the characteristics presented. I mention this now because non-traditional characteristics had a direct or indirect association with persistence & attainment (Choy, 2002). Such has been the case for these women. Each of them delayed enrollment or stopped out because of some type of non-traditional characteristic. Tiffany stopped out because of life situations with her children and family. Victoria delayed enrollment because of her financial situation. Simone and Marilyn delayed enrollment because they were single parents who needed to take care of their children. Even though these women delayed enrollment early on, they all have done a good job maintaining their persistence with education.

We have read the life stories of these four women. We have heard intricate details of their successes, their failures, their good decisions, as well as the bad. Now I would like to conclude this discussion with literature pertaining to the condition of our society and what that means for low-income, African American women who are single mothers; women like the women in this study. A recent survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (2007) reported that Blacks feel more hopeless today than in the past twenty years. Three thousand eighty six people were interviewed by phone. Of this number,

1,077 interviewees were Black. The report included opinions from Blacks and Whites and covered a wide range of areas that ranged from Black progress and identity to politics in the Black community. For the purpose of this discussion, I will explore the results as they pertain to earnings and education for Blacks.

The poverty rate for African Americans was 24.3% in 2006, down from 32.5% in 1980, yet it is still three times higher than the 8.2% for Whites (De Nava, Proctor, & Smith, 2007). So what does all of this mean? When asked about the economic gap between Blacks and Whites, 43% of Blacks say the gap has gotten wider, while a nearly equal percentage (41%) say it has gotten narrower. In contrast, three times more Whites (61%) say the gap has narrowed than 19% that say it has widened (Pew Research Center, 2007). The reality is that in 2006 Blacks earned 61 cents on the dollar to what Whites earned. This is a mere increase from 58 cents on the dollar in 1976 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Whether the gap has narrowed or widened is irrelevant, the question is why does the gap exist? A part of the reason is the discrimination Blacks face. Pew Research Center reported that 67% of Blacks say they face discrimination when applying for a job, 65% face the same when renting an apartment or buying a house, 50% say this about shopping, and 43% say it about applying to a college. Whites generally do not believe Blacks face such bias.

In 2006, 19% of Black adults 25 years and over had completed college, up from 4% in 1970 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Increased levels of education have other effects in the Black community such as births and incarceration rates. For example, the number of births to unmarried women significantly decreases as the women's educational levels rise. In 2005, 83% of black births were to women who did not complete high school.

Among high school graduates, the number dropped to 66%. The number further decreased to 28% among college graduates (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). When looking at low-income African American women who are single mothers, it is important to note the absence of the children's fathers. Many of them are incarcerated. Though this does not apply to the children's fathers in this study, it is important to acknowledge the overrepresentation of African American males in U.S. prisons and their consequent absence from the home. African Americans make up 12% of the population, yet one-half of all inmates in federal facilities, state prisons, and local jails across the United States are Black. One out of every fourteen Black adult males is currently in prison or jail. One of every three African American males in their 20s is either in prison or jail, on probation, parole, or awaiting trial (Marable, 1999).

The four women in this study have a total of ten children: eight are boys. Thus, the effect of missing fathers in African American homes is detrimental. With so many men behind bars and so few in college, it is difficult for young Black men to have role models to encourage them to go to college; especially those from single-parent homes. Edelman (2007) makes this point in an essay in the National Urban League's *The State of Black America 2007*:

Too many absent fathers leave too many poor and minority children in families headed by single mothers struggling financially and straining to hold their households together. With frayed or sundered extended family networks, few single working mothers have the time, support or energy to nurture and guide their children, read to them at night, help with their homework, take them to a health clinic or advocate for them at their schools. They are too busy merely trying to survive.

Single mothers do what they can to raise their children. Even that sometimes is still not enough. African American families need to return to the village concept; it takes a village

to raise a child. We need to instill the value of education in our children and demand that they make something of themselves.

The women in this study viewed education as a means to enhance their SES. They wanted to create positive legacies of education for their children. The ultimate effect of education on the lives of these women is unknown. The findings indicated that these women are not where they want to be at present. Notwithstanding themselves, these women have persisted. Despite societal injustices, these women have persisted. Their persistence toward obtaining their goals is to be commended. They have persisted regardless of dealing with factors like financial aid and GPA, and integrating family and college life (Goldsmith & Archambault, 1997). In their early college endeavors, Simone and Marilyn would have been considered non-persisters according to Goldsmith and Archambault because of their lack of integration into college and their lack of commitment. They have since turned it around and have been persisters for several years now.

### **Recommendations**

This study included the narrative experiences of low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students regarding their socioeconomic background, past educational experiences, and their educational journeys. Their experiences prompted recommendations for four areas: social service departments, K-12 school districts, community colleges, and low-income, non-traditional African American women. The section concludes with recommendations for future research.

### **Recommendations for Social Service Departments**

The welfare system designed to provide avenues for women trying to build better lives for themselves and their families creates obstacles for these women instead. Several of them had negative experiences with welfare workers who stereotyped them. The workers withheld pertinent information from these women. The workers degraded these women and made them feel inadequate because they were receiving assistance. Many of these workers abuse their power. Currently, these women are forced to tolerate such behavior because they need the services and the worker is the medium through which they receive the services. Most often the women are appointed one case worker who handles all aspects of the women's assistance. If these women had an avenue to report abuse confidentially, the women would not have to suffer the consequences of reporting abuse of power. Based on these findings, the following recommendations are directed to social service departments:

1. Revise policies to utilize education as more than an avenue to make low-income women part of the working poor. Instead, develop policies that assist low-income women in obtaining the education levels that will help them acquire jobs to overcome poverty.
2. Provide sensitivity training for social service employees.
3. Create or revise policies and procedures so clients can report abuse of power confidentially.

### **Recommendations for K-12 School Districts**

The findings revealed the importance of early intervention. Marilyn and Simone have struggled with education from childhood through adulthood. Children like Marilyn

and Simone could benefit from a proactive approach on behalf of K-12 school districts.

The following recommendations are presented to K-12 school districts:

1. Provide counseling services and partner with social services to identify factors that may affect the academic performance of children from low-SES backgrounds. Utilize Maslow's hierarchy of needs to assist the children.
2. Hire an adequate number of counselors to meet the needs of the students.
3. Provide sensitivity training for teachers and administrators to recognize children in distress.

### **Recommendations for Community Colleges**

The findings revealed various psychosocial issues the women faced such as poverty, racism, sexism, and low self-esteem. Many of the women are first-generation students who bring all of these issues with them as they enter higher education. These issues may affect their academic performance as well as their retention. They often do not know how to maneuver on a college campus. Therefore, community colleges must provide a welcoming environment for them. Based on the findings, the following recommendations are presented to community colleges:

1. Create an environment that welcomes low-income, non-traditional African American women. The environment should help the women maneuver the community college system including advances in technology as many non-traditional women reentering higher education may be technologically challenged.
2. Develop a resource directory. Utilize Maslow's hierarchy of needs to assist the women and partner with various social service organizations to refer women

when they have non-academic related issues (i.e. housing, childcare, food banks, mental health, etc.).

3. Utilize research on the developmental processes of non-traditional students to provide insight for training for faculty and counseling staff.
4. Teach low-income women how to address their educational problems.
5. Assign counselors to assist the women with issues of racism and sexism they face on campus and in life in general. Help them overcome self-esteem issues.
6. Construct an orientation that teaches non-traditional women (specifically low-income women) how to create a path out of poverty through meaningful employment; to research companies about possibilities for advancement; to inquire as to why so many prospective employers only have minimum wage jobs to offer; to question why the jobs seem to be divided along race, class, and gender lines; and to critique their positions in society.
7. Establish peer support groups to help the women avoid feelings of isolation. This would provide an avenue for these women to share their experiences, to listen or be empathetic, and to encourage one another.

#### **Recommendations for Low-income, Non-traditional African American Women**

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are offered to low-income, non-traditional African American women who desire to enter higher education:

1. Pursue your educational dreams regardless of your past academic experiences. Do not let your past dictate your future.
2. Select a college, determine the admission requirements, and create a plan to achieve your educational goals. Consider beginning with a community college as

community colleges offer more academic and support services to non-traditional students than four-year institutions.

3. Investigate funding opportunities to fund your educational pursuits.
4. Network with other African American women to form support groups during your studies.
5. Establish a support group with family members who can provide encouragement, a listening ear, and babysitting services when necessary.
6. Overcome negative family legacies of illiteracy, molestation, abuse, and lack of finances. Do not let these issues deter your educational aspirations. Create new legacies for your children and family.

#### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings revealed the importance of how issues of poverty shape the world view of poor children. Therefore, several of the recommendations in this section are geared toward early intervention. The following recommendations for future research are based on the findings:

1. Quantitative study on elementary school-age children from various SES backgrounds to identify issues they face at home and at school to see what effect non-academic issues have on academic performance. Follow-up with qualitative study to delve into the issues identified in quantitative study.
2. Qualitative study implementing a counseling program with school-age children from low-SES backgrounds in attempt to explore issues the children face and recommend early interventions.

3. Longitudinal study on a set of low-SES minority students and a set of higher-SES minority students from the seventh grade through twelfth grade to check their college preparedness and identify factors that assist/deter college preparedness.
4. Study of non-traditional African American women students who did not complete their studies to see what factors influenced their decision to drop out of school.
5. Follow-up study on the women in this study after they have met their educational goals to see how education has impacted their lives.

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## **APPENDIXES**

**Appendix A: Letter to Participants**

APPENDIX A



School of Education  
1588 Campus Delivery  
Fort Collins, Colorado 80523-1588

December 15, 2006

Dear Students:

My name is Adrian H. Douglas and I am a doctoral candidate at Colorado State University. My dissertation topic is "A Narrative Inquiry into the Lives of Low-Income, Non-traditional African American Women Community College Students." Growing up in a low-income family with dreams of going to college, I realize the obstacles one must overcome to obtain a higher education. I want to hear your stories. As a result, I have designed my doctoral dissertation, for Colorado State University, to share your life stories about socioeconomic status and education.

— has approved my study and allowed me to recruit students such as you to participate voluntarily in the study. I will take every step possible to ensure complete confidentiality. I will use any information that you give for research purposes only.

Please review the attached flyer and contact me if you are interested in participating in the study.

I greatly appreciate your help in the completion of this research project!!

Professionally,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Adrian H. Douglas".

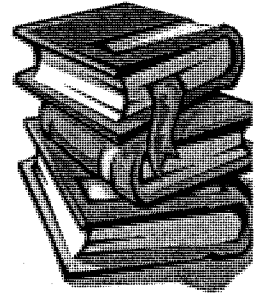
Adrian H. Douglas  
Doctoral Candidate

**Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer**

## APPENDIX B

### A Narrative Inquiry into the Lives of Low-Income, Non-traditional African American Women Community College Students

## SEEKING SUCCESS STORIES FROM NON-TRADITIONAL, AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS...



Did you grow up in a low-income family and now have a success story about your life like I do?

Are you age 25 or older?

Are you a single parent who has been enrolled at the community college full-time for at least two semesters or have obtained a certificate or Associate's degree?

Would you like to share the story of your return to education with others who may benefit from your experiences?

*If you answered yes to all of the above questions...*

**I want to find out what it is like to make it on your own as a single mother enrolled in higher education and what brought you to the decision to enroll in the community college.**

I am a doctoral candidate at Colorado State University. I am interested in learning from single African American women who grew up in low-income families, how you made the decision to come to college. I am interested in meeting women like myself.

If you have a success story like this to tell, please contact me for an informational meeting to learn more about the study. The informational meeting will be held at a time and place convenient to you and will last approximately 20 minutes. The study calls for four additional interviews that will last 60-90 minutes each and will also be held at a time and place convenient to you.

**YOUR STORY IS VERY IMPORTANT!!!!**

*If you would like to share your success story...*

Contact Adrian Douglas at \*\*\*-\*\*\*-\*\*\*\* OR Email me at \*\*\*\*\*@\*\*\*\*\*

**Your participation is voluntary and will remain confidential. If this work is published, your identity will be disguised.**

Research is supervised by Dr. Timothy Davies, Colorado State University, \*\*\*-\*\*\*-\*\*\*\*

**Appendix C: Consent Form**

## APPENDIX C

### Consent to Participate in a Research Study Colorado State University

**TITLE OF STUDY:** *A Narrative Inquiry into the Lives of Low-Income, Non-traditional African American Women Community College Students*

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Dr. Timothy Gray Davies  
Professor and Interim Director  
School of Education  
ED208 Education

**CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Adrian H. Douglas  
School of Education  
Doctoral Candidate  
ED221 Education

**WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?** The CO-PI is interested in collecting data that explores how low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students come to the decision to enroll in the community college. Therefore, I am inviting you, a low-income, non-traditional African American woman who is a single mother working full- or part-time, have been a student at \_\_\_\_\_ full-time for two continuous semesters, or have completed your studies at \_\_\_\_\_ to participate in the study. You should be 25 years of age or older.

**WHO IS DOING THE STUDY?** The PI for this study is Dr. Timothy Gray Davies, Professor and Interim Director, School of Education at Colorado State University. The CO-PI is Adrian H. Douglas, a doctoral candidate at Colorado State University.

**WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?** The purpose of this study is to examine the lives of low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students to see what you think about your socioeconomic background, past educational experiences, and educational aspirations.

**WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?** The CO-PI anticipates collecting data from low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students enrolled at \_\_\_\_\_ in \_\_\_\_\_. You will determine where the interviews will take place. Your interviews will be conducted over three to four months. The entire study should take approximately one year to complete.

**WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?** You will be asked to meet with the CO-PI, face-to-face or by phone, for a 20-minute informational meeting to learn more about the study. You will also be asked to take part in four additional (tape-recorded) interviews. You will be interviewed in a face-to-face format by the CO-PI. The interviews will typically range in time from sixty- to ninety-minutes each for a total of six hours and will be tape-recorded for accuracy. You will be asked questions (attached) that focus on what low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students think about socioeconomic status (SES), what low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students think about education, and how low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students think their family backgrounds impacted their educational aspirations.

Page 1 of 3 Participant's initials \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**ARE THERE REASONS WHY I SHOULD NOT TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?** The primary reason you could be excluded from volunteering in this study is if you do not meet the characteristics of the subject population or you volunteer to remove yourself from participation in this study. You may also be excluded from the study (by the researcher) if you fail to show up for the first, second, or third interviews as data from these interviews are necessary to answer the research questions. Failure to show up for the fourth interview (if necessary) will not result in exclusion since the fourth interview will be a summary discussion of the first three interviews.

**WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?** There are no known risks associated with this study. It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researcher(s) have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks.

**ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?** You will not obtain any direct personal benefits for participating in this study other than being able to tell your story and have someone listen. However, by understanding the questions posed in this study, perhaps community college leaders can have a better understanding of the lives of low-income, non-traditional African American women community college students who enter the community college on a full-time basis.

**DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?** Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**WHAT WILL IT COST ME TO PARTICIPATE?** There is no direct cost to you for participating in this study.

**WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT I GIVE?** You will be identified by a pseudonym in the interviews, transcripts, and all documents in the final report. No one other than the PI and CO-PI will see the information. We will keep all data from this study in a locked file cabinet in the School of Education. After three years, all data will be destroyed. We will keep private all research records that identify you, to the extent allowed by law. You will not be identified in the written materials. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other identifying information private.

**CAN MY TAKING PART IN THE STUDY END EARLY?** Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**WILL I RECEIVE ANY COMPENSATION FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?** You will not receive any compensation for participating in this study.

**WHAT HAPPENS IF I AM INJURED BECAUSE OF THE RESEARCH?** The Colorado Governmental Immunity Act determines and may limit Colorado State University's legal responsibility if an injury happens because of this study. Claims against the University must be filed within 180 days of the injury.

**WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?** Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact the principal investigator, Dr. Timothy Gray Davies at \*\*\*-\*\*\*-\*\*\*\*. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact Janell Meldrem, Human Research Administrator at 970-491-1655. We will give you a copy of this consent form to take with you.

**SIGNATURE**

Your signature acknowledges that you have read the information stated and willingly sign this consent form. Your signature also acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing 3 pages.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of person providing information to participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Research Staff

**Appendix D: First Interview Protocol**

## APPENDIX D

Table 2. First Interview Protocol – gathering a focused life history

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### Interview One Protocol

- 1) How would you describe your view of your family environment when you were a child?

Probe: Tell me about your family life?

- 2) How would you describe your view of education when you were a child?

Probe: Tell me about your childhood academic experiences.

- 3) Describe your parents' attitudes regarding education.

Probe: What was their educational level?

- 4) How would you describe your view of SES as an adult?

Probe: Tell me about your family life?

- 5) How would you describe your view of education as an adult?

Probes: Tell me about your academic experiences as an adult. What is your educational philosophy?

- 6) Is there anything else you would like to add about your way of viewing SES, view of education, beliefs about parents and education?

**Appendix E: Second Interview Protocol**

## APPENDIX E

Table 3. Second Interview Protocol – gathering details of various experiences

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### Interview Two Protocol

- 1) How did you come to be a non-traditional student?

Probe: What was it like coming back after taking so much time off?

- 2) Tell me what it is like for you as a non-traditional student?

Probe: What are the attitudes of your immediate family members? Extended family? Friends?

- 3) What is campus life like for you?

Probe: Tell me about your relationships with administrators? Instructors? Other students? Campus Organizations?

- 4) Describe for me a day in your life as a non-traditional student.

Probe: How do you handle the multiple roles (i.e., student, mother, employee)?

- 5) What are your educational aspirations?

Probe: How do you feel this college experience might impact your future?

- 6) How has your college experience affected the way you feel about yourself?

Probes: Confidence level? Knowledge & skill levels?

- 7) Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences as a non-traditional student?

**Appendix F: Third Interview Protocol**

## APPENDIX F

Table 4. Third Interview Protocol – reflections on the meaning of those experiences

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### Interview Three Protocol

- 1) What does it mean to you to be a non-traditional student?
- 2) What changes have occurred in your personal life as a result of being a non-traditional student?

Probe: Describe what has not changed? How would you describe the reasons for no change?

- 3) What changes have occurred in your academic life as a result of being a non-traditional student?

Probe: Describe what has not changed? How would you describe the reasons for no change?

- 4) Given what you have shared about your life, how do you understand SES?
- 5) Given what you have shared about your life, how do you understand education?

**Appendix G: Fourth Interview Protocol**

## APPENDIX G

Table 5. Fourth Interview Protocol – summary discussion

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### **Interview Four Protocol (if necessary)**

This interview, if necessary, will be an additional member check. It will include a summary discussion of the first three interviews.

**Appendix H: Field Notes**

**APPENDIX H**

**FIELD NOTES**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Interview # \_\_\_\_\_

General Observations:

Environment:

Changes in participant disposition:

Reflexive thoughts: