

A Starlight to Life



**Writings from Women at
The Learning Center**

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Writers' Circle, Summer 2007

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I have truly enjoyed my time working with this wonderful group of women at The Learning Center. I really appreciate their hard work and openness throughout our writing workshop. I admire how they created a supportive and respectful environment for each other. Many thanks to the women for sharing their stories. I have learned so much and continue to be inspired by their dedication.

A special thanks to Sister Monice Kavanaugh and staff at The Learning Center for all of their support with the Writers' Circle, and to David Marques for the beautiful photography.



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Why I Decided to Go Back to School

I decided to come back to school because I felt that I was missing out on something. I wanted more for myself than just sitting around the house all day. I dropped out of school in the 10th grade and when I stopped going to school there were so many things going on around me that I could not concentrate on what I needed to do. The reason for me coming to The Learning Center was so I can get my GED and further my education and move forward with the things that I need to do.

My Neighborhood

I was born and raised in Chicago. When I was about 3 years old I stayed on 23rd and Hamlin and I went to Paderewski Elementary School. At the time, we stayed in a mostly Hispanic neighborhood and we had a lot of problems. If there wasn't racism it was something else. We stayed there for almost 7 years. Then we moved to 16th and Central Park. This neighborhood is ok. Some of the people are nice, but when you come outside you see people buying drugs, standing on the corner or someone is always fighting.

21 but only 20

My birthday is in a week and I can't wait till I turn 21. It will be more fun and I could always get in the 21 and older parties. I won't have to worry about buying liquor because I prefer not to drink but on occasion. I will have my share of responsibilities as an adult. I got in the juvenile system on the west side for growing up a little too fast. I didn't know the true meaning of responsibility- something that as an adult the courts don't take lightly.

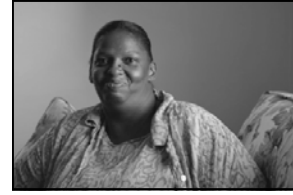
So 21...I have good things happening for me being the age that I am. I'm moving into my own apartment...low income...a few days before my birthday. I have a great friend I've known for a while. I'm still in school...no kids...I have a good relationship with my family and friends. I am a good person and I am working and saving. Things are going good before my birthday. Hopefully they continue to look up. My hopes and dreams for 21 are to have more things: more opportunity, more jobs, more success.



Melissa Brown

Irma Frazier

My Life



My name is Irma Jean Hall Frazier. I am going to tell you about my life. I know that some people don't want to read it and some people will. I am going to write it anyway. I want to help someone who is going through something that I have also been through.

I can remember when I was five years old and one day I was standing up a tree in our garden when this bucket fell out of the tree and hit me on top of my head. I thought I had to go to the doctor to get stitched up, but I didn't have to go. My grandfather and grandmother stopped the bleeding, and I did not need brain surgery. This is just one of my many testimonies.

The next thing that happened to me was when I was about 12 years old. I went to a movie with some friends. I got out of the car to go get something to eat and when I got back I didn't remember where the car was. I got in a car with a man that I didn't know. He took me to another city and state called Como, Mississippi and he had a gun. Yes, I was scared because I didn't know what he was going to do with me. So I tried to stay calm. Then he said to me that he was more afraid of me than I was of him so he took me back home to Memphis and dropped me off at this restaurant. At this restaurant there was this kind old man who took me back to my mother's house unharmed. This is my second testimony.

The third thing that happened to me is that I had two children at the age of 14 years old and 16 years old. Then I got married to a man that I hardly knew because he was in the army and he was going to Germany for his last year. I got married at the age of 17 years old. Before I could go over to Germany I got sick so I couldn't go on the 16th of August 1977. I thought that my parents didn't want me to go then. I thought that the Lord was trying to tell me something but I was not listening at all. I went to the doctor and then went on to Germany. It was not a pretty picture. He was abusive and started calling me out of my name...he was just nasty and said awful things about me. When he got out of the army he was still abusive.

When my husband got back from Germany around 1978-1979, we got into a real bad fight. He was tearing up the house that my aunty gave us. Then he got so mad that he wanted to kill me. He dragged me out of the house in the driveway and out into the street and threw me down and held his foot on my neck. He wanted every car that drove up to run over me and kill me. I thank God that one of my neighbors stopped his car and got out and told him to let me go. When he let me go I got up and ran down to my mother's house. After this happened we broke up.

In the last week of May 1979, my second child was killed at the age of two. She was hit by a car. They caught the man that did it but they had to let him go because they didn't have any witnesses. The only witness they had was my three year old daughter. In 1980 I had a third child and she was the split image of my second child and I kept wanting to call her by the name of my second child.

In 1980 I also had two jobs. I was going back to school from 1980-1989. I was in another abusive relationship at this time with a married man. He was a Vietnam veteran. He used to have flashbacks many times. I woke up with a butcher knife at my throat. I stayed in this abusive relationship. I could not leave because he knew where my parents stay, my aunt stay and my cousin stay. I didn't know about the shelters back then.

At the end of 1989 my mother got real sick and died. At this time my boyfriend let me go to take care of my father. From 1990-1995 I had my own place. In 1995 I had three deaths in my family. In February of 1995 I lost my uncle the first week, then I lost my father the second week, and the third week I lost my boyfriend. In January 1997 I got sick. I was passed out for about 10 months in that year. Then, on November 3rd of that same year, I had to go to the hospital and I stay there for about 3 weeks. I had to have my gall stones removed. From the rest of 1997 to the present I have had no more pain.

After my father died I decided to make a change. It took me some years to do it, but I did it. Now my life here in Chicago is going great. I have met this wonderful God fearing man and we are going to marry some time this year. I have an uncle and some cousins here. My daughter is going to move up here and pretty soon my whole family will be up here. I have two more daughters and six grandchildren and some friends who want to come visit me too.

This is my testimony and I thank my God for this.



Tauheedah Cooper

Respect

Respect to me is the meaning of life.
Respect is the heart of a baby when it's developing
in its mother's stomach.
Respect is what people will kill for.
Respect is the meaning of love.
Respect is the heart of a fight...winning or losing...
stopping without conclusion.
Respect is what tires you out at the end of the day.
Respect is what makes you pray.
Respect is what built a nation.
Respect is why people hate waiting.
Without respect you couldn't have a bright conversation.
Respect is who you are most of all.
Respect makes you shine like the stars.



A Person I Really Admire

I really admire my best friend Rashad. The reason I admire my friend Rashad so much is because we come from the same hood, and we both had it rough. Now he's in Rockford doing well. He's doing construction with his pastor, he's teaching me to believe, he gives me strength to carry on. It seems like no matter what the circumstances are he's always there for me. There is no mountain I wouldn't climb for Rashad. It all boils down to that he's how I'm trying to be and I'm not mad because he's out of the hood and made it before me. I'm glad he made it out of the hood so that's why I admire him.

The Person I Treasure the Most

The person I treasure the most is myself. The reason I treasure myself the most is because I'm smart, unique, and loving. Most of all, I'm a strong young woman. It's like no matter how many bruises I've got on my body and no matter how many people try to steal my joy away, I'm still a treasure.

Understanding

Sometimes we do things because we don't understand.

We'll never look at the situation like we can get through the trials and tribulations, man.

Most of the time we worry a lot.

Little do we know worrying makes you weak when you speak.

We blame everyone for our problems.

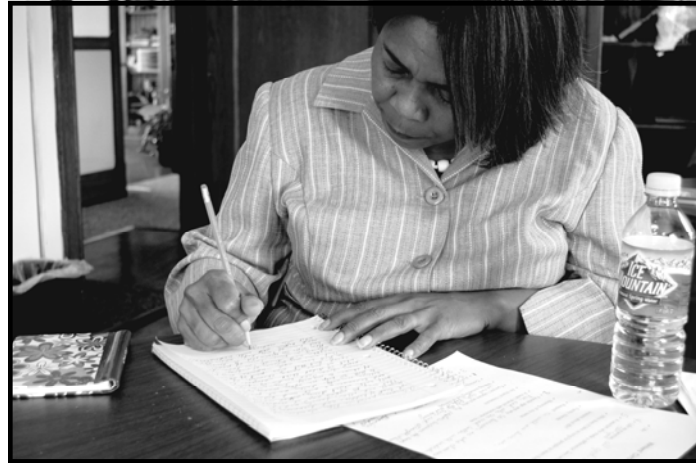
Majority of the time it's because we're the weakest link.

I learned that to become a woman you have to respect yourself as one.

Put God first. Do as you pray. Do it, be it, and become it when you have the understanding of being a woman.

Why I Decided to Go Back to School

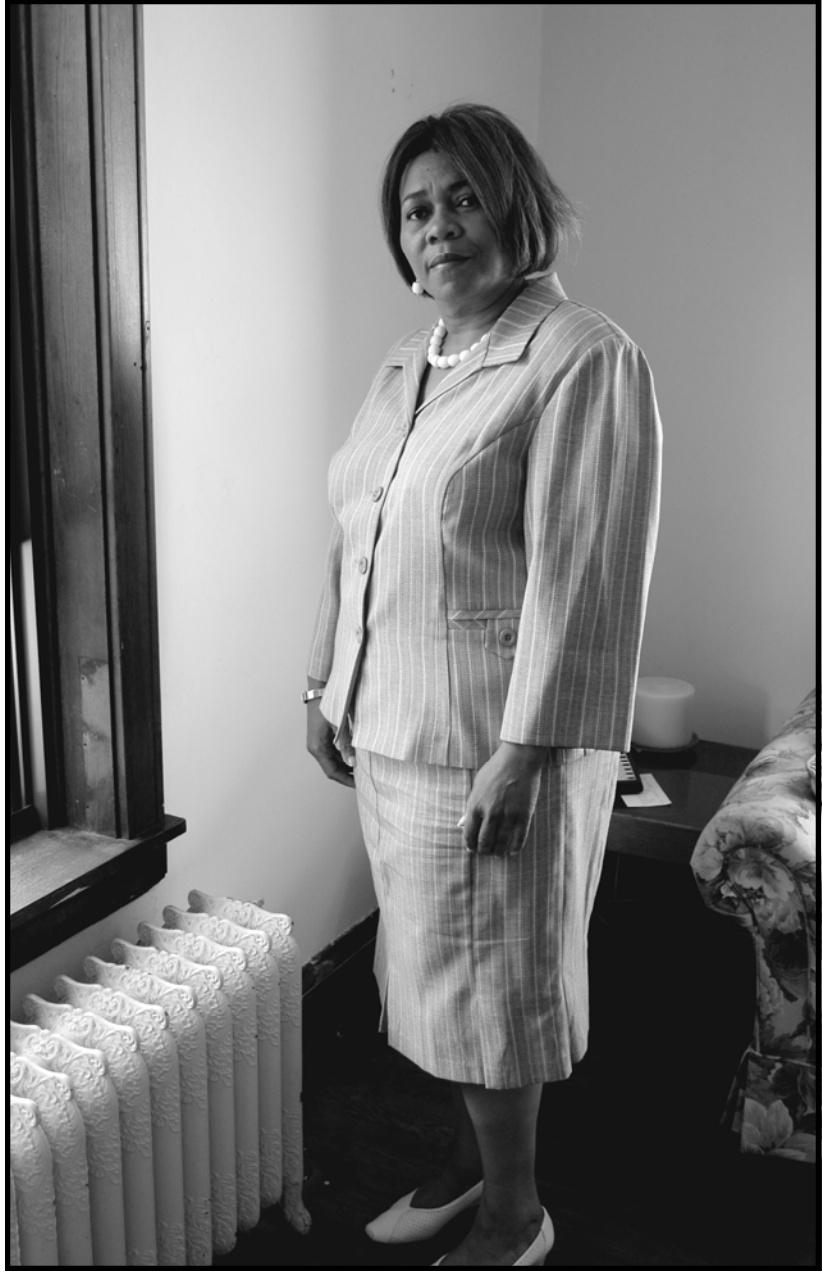
I'm Arizona. I've been here at the Learning Center one year now and it has been the best thing for me in many years. I have come a long way and I'm thankful to all who are here. God sent me here to help me to help others, but I needed to be able to read better.



A Turning Point in My Life

A turning point in life is when I got tired of hiding and lying to myself and others, family and friends. That was 15 years ago. I medicated myself with street drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes. I was so sick and tired of killing myself daily so I prayed to God to help me after many years of abuse to myself - trying to get away from all kinds of fears. I didn't think anyone knew what I was going through or even cared, but that was part of abuse too. So God heard and answered my prayer. That was my place of refuge and safety and trust. Always a true love of peace.

Now I am 50 years old and living in the best time of my life. I'm able to read better and can understand what I'm reading. I believe I will be able to write a book on love and freedom for all who are coming out of a dark place of fear and self denial towards joy and happiness when you are free from darkness. As a woman you will find someone you should know-that's the woman you were meant to be. A whole woman with nothing missing or broken. Remember, she's someone you should know.



Almina Jasarevic

A Turning Point in My Life

My life wasn't easy at first. It was hard. I came to Chicago from Bosnia in 1995. There was a war going down there. I saw so many people dying. Loved ones passed away in front of my face. I was only 7 years old and moved up to Chicago to get away from the war. When we came here it was very hard for me. No family or friends. I couldn't speak English. I remember I used to come home crying how hard it was for me because I had nobody to talk to, hang out with, have a life that young woman should have: sleepovers, birthday parties, etc.

Well then after a while I made friends and started hanging around. I had it good until I hit 16 years old. I caught my first case and it broke my family's heart. Something they never thought would happen to me. They never knew that their only daughter in America would do something crazy. My first case was for a car I stole and I blew it up. They gave me a probation officer (p.o.). I was still doing what I was doing before- I guess I didn't care for my family's feelings. Soon to come they found out I gang bang and kept getting locked up.

My p.o. sent me to Jumpstart and made me realize. She helped me out with going back to school. Also, I stopped and saw the light when my main friend was killed, my best friend Jose. He was shot 6 times, killed on the spot on Hamlin 58 when he was hanging out on the block. It killed me inside. When I got the phone call I knew I had to change, keep going to Jumpstart and just stop all this. I started being there for my mom, dad, and brother. They were the only ones I needed to worry about cause they are the only ones in my life I would never want to see hurt- or then to go through all that ever again! I wish I could go back and change everything around and just fix my mistakes and I never want to hurt them again like that in my life. I changed my whole life around. Do school and do me and my family. I never want to hurt them like that again and all I really want to say is I love them to death and sorry for everything.

Also, RIP Jose Lopez. You are missed.





Why I Decided to Go Back to School

I decided to come back to school because I realized as a young woman I should become more responsible. As a woman many people think little of us and have the tendency to put us down, especially as a Latina. I want to be able to show my parents that one of their daughters decided to leave the gang life and face reality. I realized that standing on the corner with my friends was not going to get me anywhere. I realized that I had a different more positive view on life. I felt different. I knew I was putting my parents through lots of pain.

The reason why I decided to take my GED was because I realized I was put on this earth to be someone. I realized that drinking and smoking weed weren't going to get me anywhere. Yeah I drank but the reason I drank was because I was going through depression. I went through depression since I was 12 years old. I would try and tell my mom about it but she said that I was just looking for attention. I've started feeling lonely because all my sisters went their own way. I was so used to being all together. I missed them but I realized that it is a part of life.

Then what made me even lonelier was I lost my boyfriend to gang-violence. And on top of that I got the blame for it. My life was miserable. I felt worthless. I felt unintelligent. I felt really like I didn't have any reason to be on this earth. But I changed. Moving back in with my parents changed me to a more positive person. I now believe I have a purpose. I cherish and respect my life now.

My Neighborhood

The violence in Little Village is terrible. Mexicans fighting Mexicans, blacks fighting blacks. Every day a young man gets killed and for what? A worthless gang sign. Many young Latinos join a gang and probably don't realize what they just did. They joined and made the commitment to basically kill another Latino. The violence is everyday here in La Villita. Representing something that isn't worth it... Latinas not realizing that they are dying over colors. I've been in that position. My boyfriend died because of that worthless sign. Classmates of mine I have seen one day and the next I hear that they got shot. It saddens me. I wish I could speak out and make young Latinos and African Americans think twice before joining a gang. I want to help. I've been there, I've done that and I lost someone I really cared about. I wish I could show them the true meaning of life. My three cultures- in every one of them there are young kids dying. I wish I could stop it. It hurts me to hear about all these kids dying.



If I Could Change My Neighborhood

If I could change my neighborhood, the first thing I would do would be to change the way my people treat each other. I would want them to understand that no one has the right to take another human being's life. They need to see what they are doing to each other. Understand that Latinos should be united and stand together through difficult times...I would change the park where my little nieces and nephews play... Stop the drug dealers from selling drugs in front of the kids... Stop the alcohol from being sold to minors. I would try to change the way we act, the way we speak to our elders...Give respect to one another...Change our environment to a place that we can walk through without having to be afraid. I want to make the little kids enjoy life and know that what they see the street gang bangers doing isn't the life they want to live. I would want to change all the garbage laying around to a nice clean ground. Changing my neighborhood will be a difficult task because most of the gang bangers only care about themselves.

Mary Gold Willis



Life as a Woman

Life as a woman for me has its ups and downs. Women have to keep this lady-like image. I don't understand why a woman wouldn't want to be a woman. You have some that want to be men. I love being a woman because being a woman means you're special in everyway. Being beautiful on the inside as well as the outside. Staying pretty on the outside sometimes is painful...like nails, hair, tans, etc...the old saying "beauty is pain." Nevertheless, the inside beauty is more important: attitude, character, and how you carry yourself let others know what kind of person you are. It's very important that you bring out the best in yourself. Respect yourself and others will respect you.

Why I Decided to Go Back to School

I decided to come back to school because life is not getting any easier. My main purpose of returning to school is I really need my GED to get anywhere. So often in any other school you must have your high school diploma. I want to go to college to get more education for a job. I have decided to go into the medical field because I enjoy helping people.

My Neighborhood

I was born here in Chicago. I grew up on 19th and Albany. When I was 4 years old I attended Pope Elementary School for 6 years. I graduated from Pope school. The neighborhood where I grew up was nice. I met my best friend when we were in 6th grade and right now we are still best friends. We used to run around and have so much fun in our old neighborhood. Sometimes we go to the old hood and we see some of the people we grew up with. It's still kinda quiet here as far as I can see.

One day my mom decided that we needed to move. She looked around and found a home for us on 16th and Millard so we moved and we have been here for 30 years now. The neighbors and neighborhood is great and quiet. Sometimes things happen, but the neighborhood is ok. My mom lives on the first floor, my brother lives on the 2nd floor and I live in the basement. It's nice. I have no complaints.

The thing I would change in my neighborhood is that there are these two abandoned buildings. By being abandoned sometimes the people from other neighborhoods go into the buildings doing God knows what. It makes us a little uncomfortable sometimes. So I'll be glad when the time comes and they start fixing the two buildings.

“A Starlight to Life” is a result of Writers’ Circle, an 8-session writing workshop created by Literacy Works in partnership with the Learning Center.



Literacy Works’ mission is to fulfill the promise of a basic human right: the right to read, write, and interpret the world.

We accomplish our mission by training volunteers to assist children, youth, and adults to comprehend, analyze and question the world they live in; empower themselves to develop their own skills, talents and gifts; and transmit to others the value of reading, writing, and critical thinking.

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