

Visions from Within

**Writings from the Students
at Christopher House**





CHRISTOPHER HOUSE

Christopher House is a five-site family resource center that offers comprehensive programming to both children and their parents. Through child and youth development, teen parent support, literacy, counseling and emergency services, Christopher House provides a web of support for the entire family. This support produces invaluable results: healthy, happy school-successful kids, literate working parents, and stable, nurturing families.

Adult Literacy Programs at Christopher House

Literacy education is critical for families looking to improve their life conditions. Improving literacy skills not only helps parents get better-paying jobs, but also empowers them with the skills to communicate with their children's teacher, talk to their doctors or neighbors, read a prescription bottle, or fill out basic paperwork. We help individuals increase their literacy skills through the following: GED and ESL test preparation, classroom learning and one-on-one tutoring, family literacy services that promote library usage and literacy-rich homes, free childcare during evening classes and tutoring to meet the needs of working families, and transportation assistance as needed.

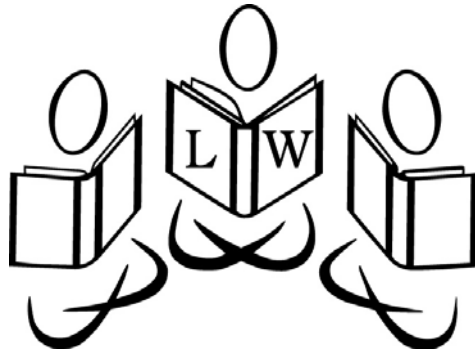
Director's Note

We are thankful to have such a unique and inspiring group of students in our GED class here at Christopher House. Joining our classroom from different parts of Chicago, each student brings with them a wealth of life experiences. Their collective stories deserve to be shared. As such, it has been our privilege to have Literacy Works join the GED class this spring and engage these students in creative writing through Writers' Circle. They have been given an opportunity to recount the world through their own eyes. This forum for self-expression has created a great springboard for learning. By recording our stories, we become empowered. By sharing our stories, we empower one another. Thank you to each student who participated in Writers' Circle and to Literacy Works for offering this great opportunity to Christopher House.

Amy Rhoades
Manager of Adult Literacy Programs
Christopher House

www.christopherhouse.org

“Visions from Within” is a result of Writers’ Circle, a 10-session writing workshop created by Literacy Works in partnership with Christopher House.



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

To fulfill its mission, Literacy Works provides workshops, trainings and direct literacy services to member and non-member agencies.

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A Few Words from Literacy Works

I had a wonderful time working with all of the talented writers at Christopher House. Their stories were truly inspiring, and I appreciated their willingness to share their work with each other, Alison, and myself. Thank you so much to all of the writers, to Christopher House, and to Literacy Works for giving me this opportunity! I am so proud to see everyone's works in this book and will be sad to see this workshop end.

Thanks again,
Shara Zaval
Literacy Works Intern

It was a pleasure working with the students at Christopher House throughout this Writers' Circle. I really enjoyed learning from such a diverse group of people. For many of the participants, it was the first time they had ever shared their stories. I truly appreciate their hard work and dedication, as well as their openness with the group.

Many thanks to Amy Rhoades and the staff at Christopher House for their support with Writers' Circle. Special thanks to Shara Zaval for her excellent assistance.

Alison Szopinski
Program Director
Literacy Works

*Writings from the Students at
Christopher House*

Writers' Circle, Spring 2008

Allison Parks

Cheryl Quinones

Claudia Arredondo

Curtis Edwards

Darche Brewer

Eugene Longino

Evette Gonzalez

Janette Laureano

Jessica Arce

John Bellinder

Juanita Morris

Karina Cortes

Kathleen Castillo

Larissa Gouge

Mike Brady

Natasha Sharp

Tonya Ranger

Zohra Bahri



My Sister

I admire my sister because she has always been there for me. She also helps me with my kids. If I am sick and I can't take them to the park my sister and I will go out together. She always helps me with my school work, such as math and reading. My sister goes to high school. She is eighteen years old. She is very smart, nice, sweet, and also funny. She goes everywhere with me, such as the park, shows, and walking around. We talk about everything together like ex-boyfriends, my kids, her friends. I look up to her a lot because she is my little sister and she is always there for the good and bad.

Life as a Teen Mom

I was a teen mom at the age of sixteen years old. I know how it is to do things on your own like waking up at night and putting your kids back to sleep, buying things they need like bottles, clothes, and shoes, being there all the time every day with no breaks at all. It is hard to be a teen mom because you lose your friends and sometimes family too. You have to work for your kids because nobody will help you. Sometimes your family doesn't want you because you are a teen mom.

My kids are Nicole and Jose. Nicole is six and Jose is five. I have a good time with them. We go to the park and I play with them. We take pictures together, we eat ice cream together, and we also have a lot of fun. I love being Nicole and Jose's mom. I know I was a teen mom, but I had fun being one.

Allison Parks

Why I Decided to Go Back to School

I have decided to go back to school because I push my kids to do well in school and stay involved in activities. One day my daughter asked me, “Why do we have to try so hard?” and “Why is school so important?” when I never finished. My daughter made me realize I should lead by example, therefore I went back to school for my children.

My Plans After GED

My plans after GED are to further my education. I originally planned to get my GED and continue to be a stay at home mom, but things changed. I heard of all these great opportunities Truman College has to offer after finishing the GED program, and I could not pass them up. I had to act on them and quickly before I lost motivation.

I plan to get my associate’s, then either get my nursing degree or go into child development. Then I plan to go back for a bachelor’s. It is not so much for the money but just to say “I did it” to all those people who said I failed and always will.

Someone I Admire

My son Jeremiah is the person I most admire. He was born with spina bifida which limits him to a wheelchair. He has never once complained or questioned his situation. He has gone through more physically and emotionally than I ever have, yet he goes day by day, still happy. Where most people would give up and become bitter, he continues to be strong and get involved in as many activities as possible. He never looks at things as he is limited but does try to do the best he can. He is such a great, happy, young man which is why I admire him so. I don’t think I could have the same positive attitude. He is what makes me grateful for life. My son Jeremiah!

Cheryl Quinones

Life as a Teen Mom

I was a teen mom. I had my first when I was fourteen years old. I was nineteen years old with three kids. I now have five children.

My life as a teen mom was very uncomplicated, but due to my ignorance I must pay now. I took each day as it came, not thinking of the consequences. I was so eager to have a baby, but realized how they grow up. Being a teen mom for me was not so difficult, but I had to grow up fast. I had no childhood. My childhood was raising a child.

Being a teen mom always sounds good and like a lot of fun, having someone to call your own, but it takes a lot of work in the long run. I was naive as a teen mom, but I had to grow up because my kids did. I pay now for a lot of my mistakes and immaturity as a teenager. I now have a daughter and hope to God she does not follow in my footsteps. I can not erase my past, and I don't regret it, but I want better for my children. I want them to be children.



Claudia Arredondo

Why I came back to school

I came back to school so that I can get my GED. Life is rough and every day it gets harder. In the real world money is a problem that'll never fade away. In order to be able to get a decent job, education is major. I have hope to pass my GED in order to continue my education and go to college. I came back so that I can move on.

Claudia

Since being at a young age till now my life's been a struggle. From a gang, fights, drugs, sleeping next to the devil and dancing to his tune, my life's been pretty much hell.

I wasn't in search for a heaven but an angel was given to me. An angel who helped me get closer to where I need to be. But the hole slowly dragged me in deeper and deeper till I left my angel in the light to end up in darkness.

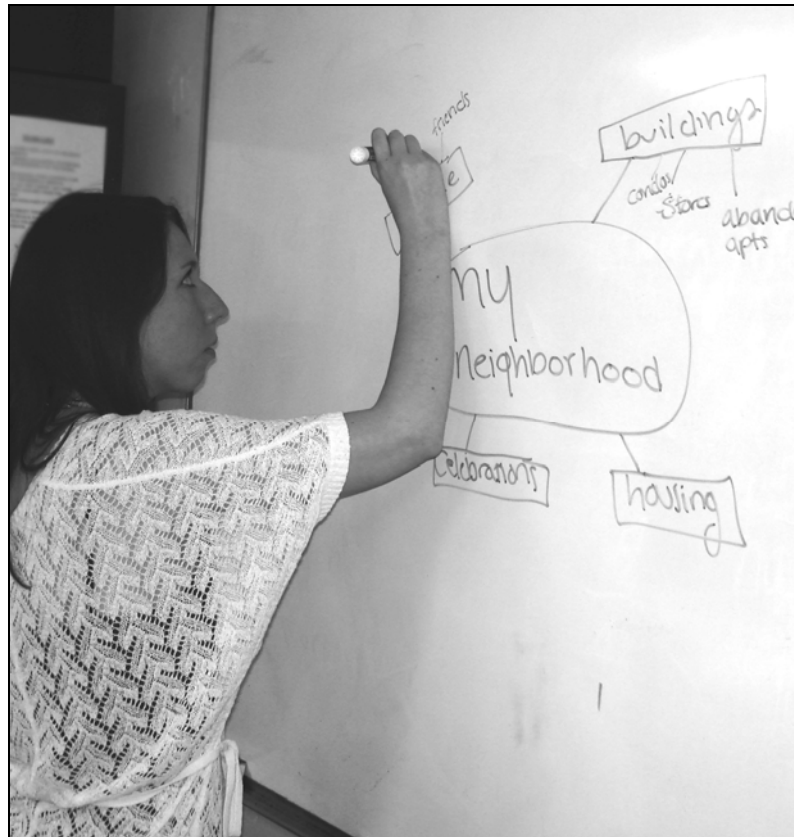
Choices: Why

In life we are given choices. There are bad choices and good ones. Whichever one we pick is what affects our life. At times it felt like all I had was forever and that my bad choices could be fixed. But at times the damage was too much. If I could go back I'd make different choices, but I can't. So now all I have is now. And now I choose wisely as to what not to do.

Claudia Arredondo

Someone I Admire

Someone I admire is my aunt Marcia. I admire her because she is a single mom and has it going on. My aunt started off working and she didn't graduate school. Now she has her GED and took some college classes. My aunt has 3 kids; she does it on her own and has two jobs. She has a new house, a truck, and just put my cousin in college. My aunt came a long way, from no baby daddy to living with rats to being young and dumb to being a good woman. An independent Latin woman with everything she's gained.



Curtis Edwards



Curtis

Black man, good person, caring, honest

Son of Evelyn and Curtis

Brother of Michael

Friend of Ron and Steve

Father of Little Evelyn, Tashiana, Baby Curtis,
and Walker Curtis

Who feels good...I'm getting myself together

Who likes to listen to music and go to the movies

Who thinks about his kids

Who wants to go to college and go up in life

Resident of Earth

Edwards.



Life as a Teen Mom

My name is Darche B. I was one of the people you would think wouldn't have kids. I always liked to come and go as I pleased, but that all has changed. I have someone other than myself to think about. It is so hard to have someone always depending on you. When I had my daughter I suffered from postpartum depression. Her father was really stressing me out. When you are young you think that when you have kids with someone you will be together forever.

I grew up in the system. I've been in it since I was four years old. I haven't seen my mother since I was six years old. I used to cry all the time. I used to hate her because she left me and my siblings. They asked her to do her classes, but she just gave up. That's one thing I've learned not to do. I don't want my child to go through what I've been through. I don't think it's fair. That's why I'm trying to do what I have to.

Darche Brewer

Eugene Longino



If I Could Change One Thing About Society

If I could change one thing about society it would be people's views of each other. I hate that people make assumptions of people before they actually get to know them. I don't think that the way you dress can say what type of person you are. I hate that the color of your skin is used to dictate your actions. Even today there are still biased people. Ignorance is society's greatest cripple. Some people choose to do the things they do every day simply because they don't know. Whether that thing is positive or negative really depends on who's choosing. Sometimes we just have to survive on what we know. This may be different based on your surroundings. The way I see it, you gotta do what you have to in order to survive. However, sometimes survival takes a little more for some people.

Growing up as a minority is very complicated. We already have things stacked against us. People expect us to do certain things. I am not pointing the finger at anyone. However, I know what it feels like to be harassed by police, expected to love chicken, expected to be a thief, a liar, violent, stupid, and just another menace to society. When you are told these things over and over, you start to believe it. At that point you become it. Stereotyping is injustice in the land of the free, the proud, and the brave. There is no justice in judging people before you know them. You don't get a trial, a hearing, or a say. It really is just someone's opinion. Even if you keep it to yourself, it still isn't right.

Life as a Teen Mom

I am a teen mom of a nine month old baby boy. His name is Ethan. He is my life. I love him so much. My life as a teen mom began when my boyfriend and I decided to have a baby. The reason was because we needed something precious in our lives to take us out of the bad things we were doing in life. My baby is everything to me. I love watching him grow from day to day, doing new things every day. It is just wonderful how you can bring something so precious to life that is a special part of you. I try to cherish every moment I have with him.

Being a teen mom has its ups and downs, though. For example, when he's sick it hurts me to see him down, but when I see his little smile it just brightens my day. I love being a teen mom because I know that I will have more time in life to watch my baby grow, even though I hope he doesn't go through that bad path in life. I hope God can give me the strength to help him do good in life and not to make the mistakes I did.

It doesn't matter how old you are or how bad your life has been, you can always make a change for those little ones. Being a teen mom showed me many things. For example, it showed me the meaning of life. Now I have a little person that needs me to be someone he can look up to.



Evette Gonzalez

Janette Laureano

Someone I Admire

The person I truly admire would be my mom. I admire my mom so much because she means the world to me! She has been there for me. She has been mother and father for me. That's why I admire her so much.

Another reason I admire my mother is because she backs me up in everything I do! The reason I respect her so much is because she'll let me know when I'm doing something wrong. Some moms will defend their kids and sugarcoat things. My mom will be straight up. She won't lie for me. She's very honest, whether I'm going to get in trouble or not!

Also, I admire my mom deeply because when I'm falling face first she's always there to guide me. She never lets me down. She's been through so much. She's my queen. I honor her so much. She's always there for people. If one of my friends needs a place to stay, she's right there getting blankets ready for them and everything. I love her so much.

I admire my mom as if she was an idol. To me, she is my guardian angel. She's always there for me. We both have an understanding. We respect our boundaries. I couldn't ask for anyone better. My mother is an angel.





Life as a Teen Mom

Who wants to be a mom at age sixteen? Well, things happen because when you really don't have anything, love is all you need and want. I fell in love at the age of thirteen never expecting that two years from then I'd be pregnant. Of course it was an accident, but one that could have been prevented. I never really worried about protection cause in my head I was almost positive that we knew what we were doing. But sure enough we weren't careful enough and I found out at the age of fifteen that I was two months pregnant. I was afraid to tell my family and friends and ashamed of myself. How could I do this to myself? By the time I realized that I was about to make life a hundred times harder, it was too late. I carried this child for nine months and found out it was a boy on January 4, 2005. I had a baby by the name of Damion R.

As soon as I laid eyes on him, everything from that moment on changed. I knew I was no longer living for me but for my baby boy. I knew it was my job to raise him and give him a better life than mine.

Being only sixteen and still in school with a newborn child wasn't very easy. His father was the same age as I was, and he was trying just as hard to do better for his son. I knew I wasn't going to be able to continue going to school. But I did, right until my babysitter failed me and I had to start staying home. For a long time his father and I took turns going to school and staying with the baby, but eventually I just stopped going and became a full time mom. I had to dedicate all my time to him. It was very hard to do certain things I did before I had a baby. Most of my lifestyle changed and habits were cut. Things seemed a lot more difficult and overwhelming, but my motivation for his future keeps me going on, and the help from his father levels everything out. Of course nothing is ever going to be the same or go back to how things used to be. I just had to get used to the fact that he's mine. I made him and it's my responsibility to make sure he's safe, loved, and well taken care of.

Jessica Arce

John Bellinder



The Loss of My Loved Ones

It all started when I was at the age of fifteen. My mother became very ill and was taken to the hospital. I, as well as the rest of my family, was very upset and worried about what was wrong with her. I am the youngest of six siblings and was always called the baby of the family. My mother was concerned about me and was worried about how I was while she was sick. She informed my sister to take care of me if something was to happen to her. Well, after a few days in the hospital, we were informed by the doctor that my mother had terminal cancer and would only have six months to live. As expected, we were all devastated. I felt like something hit me in my stomach. Unfortunately my mother died within three months, never having a chance to come back home with us. It took a long and difficult time to overcome this tragedy.

During the last 36 years I have lost many loved ones close to me. And each one was even more difficult and harder to overcome, but I will never forget them. I lost my grandmother, father, two sisters, and a very close friend, and the most recent loss of my niece Julie only two and a half months ago. She was only 29 years old and left behind her husband and two daughters, ages nine and five. Julie was not sick until just four days before she died. This was a very upsetting and unexpected death to the family. Most of my loved ones died before or by the age of 50 years old, with the exception of my grandmother and father.

I believe that with the help of others and your belief and trust in God, it does make a difference in the healing process, as well as to make life a little more worth living. The purpose of writing about the losses of my loved ones was to let my feelings be told, as well as to let others know that yes, it is very hard and difficult to go on through life. As time goes on it does seem to get a little easier to move on with your life, although you never forget them or the memories of your loved ones.





My Neighborhood

One thing I want to talk about is the good things that my neighborhood offers. There are a lot of programs that our children can benefit from. There is a field house and a baseball field right by the school. The church that we have in our community helps participants by offering a lot of activities to keep the kids focused, and we have a Boys and Girls Club. There are two parks and a soccer field, and also a water park. All these things are to keep our kids out of trouble. There are gangs and violence everywhere. Kids are easily influenced or you can call it peer pressure. Also, my neighborhood is by many businesses such as restaurants, grocery stores, banking places, and shows. I feel safe in my neighborhood because I know everybody. This is what my neighborhood offers.

The Color Blue

My favorite color is blue. Blue is a very powerful color. The sky is blue. The ocean is blue. To me, blue is a calm and cool color. When you come outside just looking out of your window you see the sky. In the morning you see light blue in the sky with some clouds. Also, you can see blue next to a bright sun. The ocean looks blue. Looking at the waves relaxes you. Kids love playing in the water. Water is one of the powerful sources on earth. This is why blue is my favorite color. It's a relaxing color.

My Favorite Season

The fall is my favorite season. I enjoy doing things in the fall because the weather is calm. I love how the leaves on the trees turn different colors in the fall. Also, because of the weather I get to do a lot of activities. In the fall the weather is just right for me. Not too hot, not too cold. You can go for long walks. It doesn't matter what you wear. Also, it doesn't matter what you do. When fall comes the flowers on the trees turn different colors such as yellow, brown, and orange. The grass changes color too. When the wind blows the leaves off of the trees it forms into a tornado. It's very beautiful looking at these different things. I like doing my activities in the fall. The weather is just right. You can do outdoor or indoor activities like going to the zoo, movies, shopping mall and just sight seeing. All these things are the reasons why I say that my favorite season is fall. Also, this reminds me that Halloween is coming and it's time for costumes and candy. My daughter loves it.

Juanita Morris

Karina Cortes



The Most Important Time in My Life

My name is Karina Cortes. I am seventeen years old and I have one baby girl. Her name is Marlene Catalina. She is eight months old. She is the most important part of my life. I buy clothes, Pampers, and everything for the baby. I can't forget anything. When my child was born, I felt happy and it was very good to have my baby. All my family was with me, my mom, my two brothers, and the father of my baby. Having my family together that day was very important to me. I love my baby a lot.

Why I decided to Go Back to School

I decided to go back to school because I think it is good to learn more and have my diploma. I want to have a good job for me and my baby. It is important for my future and also the future of my baby. I need to learn more because it is good for me and because my mother told me to go back to school.

What Brought Me to This Class

I am a student with full potential at Christopher House. I am trying to pass my GED. I was brought here for many reasons. One of the main reasons is that I didn't act well in high school. I have this opportunity to do better. Basically, I need more education. Without that it is so hard to achieve in life.

Another reason is that I am trying to be a better role model for my family. Most of us didn't get much education so I am showing them I can do it and get through this.

Having my GED will also benefit me in getting a job. This is really important right now because I believe that your family and friends or other significant people won't be there forever to support you financially. Doing this will help me be more independent. These reasons are what brought me to my GED class. It helps you change your life.

Kathleen Castillo

Larissa Gouge



Life as a Teen Mom

My name is Larissa Gouge. I am sixteen years old. My life was hard for me when I turned thirteen years old. I started not going to school, smoking, drinking, running away from home, not caring about my family, hanging out with gang bangers, and stealing. And then I met my boyfriend. We started going out and having fun. I would probably be in the same position I was in if it wasn't for him. He changed me so much after we moved in together. I stopped being bad. I stopped drinking, smoking, etc. I started to respect myself more. I started respecting my grandma, my family, and most of all, him.

After a while I got pregnant. We were so happy! I finally had my baby April 12, 2008. He was born at 10:26 pm. He was 9 lbs. 6 oz. I named him Fernando Jr. His first weeks home made me happy but so tired. What made me more tired was that I really didn't have any help.

It's hard for me to take care of my baby, especially when my boyfriend goes to work from 9 am to 7:30 pm six days a week. It's very hard for me all day because of the fact that I don't have too much help. My grandma takes care of him only when she wants to. If I ask her she'll say it's my responsibility, and I know it is, but I do need help. She does buy him a lot of things like clothes, blankies, and bottles. It's very tiring to me, especially financial support. The only thing that keeps me going is my baby. My baby is everything to me. Also, my baby's father is helpful and he takes good care of him. I thank God for my son and especially my baby's daddy. My son and baby daddy are the most important things in my life. They make me smile every day.



My Favorite Singer

One of my favorite singers is Dave Williams who sang for Drowning Pool and had a gigantic hit with the song “Bodies” before he died in 2002 from a stroke at the age of thirty. He died with a lot of his youth to give and could have done more in the music industry. He is one of my favorite singers because in a short time living he accomplished a lot in his life by having a number one song, a CD that went gold, and his own record label. People can learn from him because you can do considerable things in a brief amount of time.

My Neighborhood

I live in the Lincoln Park neighborhood. I’m only a few minutes walk from Christopher House. I have been living in the Lincoln Park neighborhood all my life. It is quiet and calm. There isn’t much violence here like in most neighborhoods I know of. Most things are near by like stores for shopping for food and parks to play in.

Mike Brady

Natasha Sharp

A Turning Point in Life

My name is Natasha and I believe this is a turning point for me. First unto God for repenting and to myself for forgiveness about shortcomings, faults and failures. My prayer is to be all God has called me to be in these last and evil days. I can pursue God's peace and understanding and direction for me and my two children, just to be a better Christian, mother, and wife to be. I am determined to pursue my education and to broaden my learning in God and life and to live holy to serve the living God Jesus Christ because I owe Jesus my life.



Why I Decided to Go Back to School

I have decided to go back to school because I want a high level of education and a good job. I've been thinking about going to cooking school. I visited the school to see what they offer. One thing I need is my GED. At home every day I'm always trying something new or adding something to my food. I enjoy to cook and eat. One thing I enjoy the best is seeing people happy with their food. I enjoy cooking and satisfying people's hunger.

A Cat's Life

I have three cats at home. The first one is Tigger. He is a 10 lb. 8 oz. cat. He likes to sleep a lot. But, he is a good, nice cat. He is loveable. Now we are going on to Fristy. She is 8 lb. 3 oz. She doesn't like to be held. When she doesn't want to be bugged she will mew or hiss at you. She is always fighting with the baby kitten. Now we go on to Tiger. He is 10 lb. 3 ½ oz. He is loveable, and he always likes to play with the other two cats. He likes to sleep with me at night. When they want attention from me they will mew at me and rub on my leg. They are my babies. I always talk to them. I will do anything for them.

My Neighborhood

Well, my neighborhood is not all that. There are too many people on drugs and alcohol. I feel sorry for these people because all they worry about is how they will get money to do their drugs or drink their beer. But, in a way this helps me to stay away from this kind of life. I used to be like this before, but by the grace of God he delivered me. Sometimes I do talk to these people. I try to encourage them. I let these people know that someone understands what they are going through.

Armitage Baptist Church

I have been going to Armitage for about fifteen years. This church has helped me out in many ways and the community. This church shows love and peace to the community. It has changed people's lives for the good. In the middle of Logan Square it was bad with gangs, drugs, prostitution, and shootings. The church has gotten involved in the community. They have love for people. They have helped slow down the crime rate in the community. Logan Square is still bad, but not as much because of Armitage. By showing the love of God and mercy, Logan Square is coming up.

Tonya Ranger

Zohra Bahri



Life as a Teen Mom

My name is Zohra Bahri. I am eighteen years old, and I have an eleven month old baby. Her name is Isabella. She means the world to me.

I got pregnant at age seventeen by the love of my life. His name is Bernard. When my mother found out I was pregnant she freaked. She told me that I had to get an abortion and if I didn't then I had to leave. One day I was at my baby daddy's house hanging out, watching a movie, and the doorbell rang. I went to answer the door and it was my mother with three big bags. In the bags were my clothes. I asked her what was going on and she told me, "Don't come back to my house, you're not welcome. I don't want a baby under my roof." And it hurt. Yes it did. I brought my clothes up and told my baby daddy and his mom what had happened. I thank God that his mom took me in. She told me I could stay. That woman is like my mother. She has been there for me. She's helped me out a lot.

My daughter, my baby girl, is almost one, and I look at her every day and thank God for bringing her to me. I don't regret having her. I'm not gonna lie. It is hard. It is very hard being young and having a baby. It's a struggle, but only GOD can get me through this struggle. Yes he can. I'm struggling, but when I look at my baby girl I tell myself she's worth the struggle. I'll fight an army for her.

I just want to let young moms know not to give up. Remind yourself that it's for your baby, and thank God that he blessed you with a bundle of joy. Our God can make miracles. Our God sent his beloved son to save us. I thank God every day for my life, for my baby girl, for my man, for everything and everyone. God changed my life. I thank you God. God is the only way. Go forward. You can.



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