Backwoods

--by Dorothy Ashman

Me (center with red blouse) with Phi Theta Kappa officers, chapter members, and advisors--after being sworn in as Chapter President, September 2019.
“Today as I reminisce, I still cannot understand how my parents made us feel like we were not poor.”

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I was born in the Island of Jamaica in a small rural area that was named “Backwoods” due to the poor economic status that the residents dealt with for generations. I am one of sixteen children for my father David Ashman (affectionately known as Uncle D who was revered by the community at large due to his vibrant personality and his kindness to all), and my precious mother Louise Ashman (affectionately known as Miss Elirah) who birthed fourteen children. Today as I reminisce, I still cannot understand how my parents made us feel like we were not poor. I knew we were not rich because in that era, to a child, only rich people owned a car or a truck and we owned none of those. We owned a donkey that we affectionately named “Needle” because of its spunkiness. That was our transportation from the gully in which my humble three bed-room home was embedded. One may ask how such a small house holds so many children but there is no right or wrong answer. To us that was home, and in that home, there was a family
that was held together by love, a love that transcends outside the perimeter of our humble home to encompass the whole village. As siblings we have counted about twenty-one other children who have come and gone in our home because our parents wanted to help them. This is where I got a heart that caused me to be emphatic to all people.

I am from a diverse ethnicity, having two Caucasian grandfathers one of whom I knew and who was my heartbeat as a child. I can still remember bringing his food to his home and it was my joy to just pull on his curly locks, see them stretch out and then curled right up again. My maternal grandmother is from the valiant fighters, the Maroons, who were escaped slaves who ran away to the mountains from their Spanish-owned plantations when the British colony fought the Spaniards for Jamaica and won in 1665. My paternal grandmother whom I do not know was of Indian ethnicity. I think of myself a being a little of everybody and the integrity that my parents instilled in me makes me who I am today.

This integrity started in the home where we were taught the principles of hard work and we realized really early that good things only come to those who work. That considering, when each of us was about three years old, we were assigned duties according to our age group. We had no running water in our house and therefore we didn’t have any flush toilet. My dad, being a farmer and a carpenter, built the best latrine, also known as an outhouse. This is an unattached small building, mostly made from old zinc as the upper structure atop of a deep hole. A seat was built on top of the hole and my dad considerately cut two holes through it. The one for the adult was big (and we were warned not to sit on that one for fear we would fall through it into the mixture of human excretion in the deep hole). The small one was for the children.

Very early I had that duty to get a bucket of water and rag and wipe the seat very clean. To temper the putrid scent, we would mix the most disgusting cleanser, usually used to clean
hospitals and throw it in before cleaning. We had no face mask, so we used a piece of rag to cover the nose. After that comes the red dye my father harvested from a tree in the woods by boiling the bark in an old pot. We had no gloves so every weekend we had red fingers. After that it was a thick layer of the red wax polish my mom bought in the marketplace, when she went to sell the crops we grew on the farm. Then came the coconut brush. Yes, it was made from dad cutting a dried coconut, crossways, in halves and digging out the white fruit which we grate and used as milk after mixing it with water. He then used a dinner fork to scrape in the fronds to make it soft and that was the brush which was used to shine the wood according to my mom’s standard, which is, “Until I can see my face in it.” That’s how I learned to clean.

My father could not read and write until he had a nervous breakdown in his sixties and was home for three years and taught himself to read from the Bible. Knowing his shortcoming, he made sure all his children went to school and learned to read. It was this knowledge that gave me the drive to hone an education for myself. How could one do that when my house was nearly void of books and they, my parents, being so protective of their eleven girls they would not let me go to the library which was only a few miles from home. In those days, that was nothing for a kid to walk. I would have walked ten miles just for a book. My only other choice was the Bible which was prominent in my home but when I was tired of that, I was grateful that I had a dictionary and I would sit inside and watch my siblings playing and enjoying themselves who deigned to call me “house rat” when I did not go to play. What they did not know was that I lived in a happy world of words and until today, I might not have the vocabulary of a genius, but I still play with words in my head. Maybe one day I will write a very BIG book.

So, to get my education I had to walk at least four or five miles to go to school (sometimes barefoot), skipping the hot tar by walking in the brushes on the side of the road. That
was common so I never worried sometimes but there were days when I would hide and wear my one church shoes until someone stole them and I had to meet the wrath of my father’s belt. It’s all good because that gave me integrity. I learned from early that if you impress a teacher by learning you get things. All I wanted were books and in primary school I got a few to borrow from them. In Secondary school I wonder today why I did not join the school library. Rather, I would secretly borrow my friends’ books and take them home and read them, sometimes overnight and finish it on the sometimes-treacherous bus ride from home to another parish where my school was. Because I was so quiet and always reading, the bus driver, Soljie, would reserve me a standing position right behind his seat, and yes, no one could stand there until he passes my stop and I was not there.

I never mentioned that we had no electricity so I would read by the light of a lamp which was fueled by kerosene oil. It was not always a nice thing dealing with the soot in my nostrils, and many were the nights when my day would come and put out the light and send me to bed. When I was able to save enough to buy a flashlight, his game was over. I would read by moving the beam from line to line under the sheets. There were days when I would retreat to finding a secret place among the banana trees and cut some trash and stay there and read for hours. This stopped when I fell asleep one evening and when I woke up to hear my siblings calling my name and I panicked because I could not remember where I was in the pitch-black field. Due to the setup of the educational system in Jamaica, I did not go to high school, but I craved an education so much that I would do any course that was offered in whatever field I could study.

As a teenager I moved to Kingston, the capital of Jamaica to make a change in my life. No one knew that I was bursting with ambition and I was determined to be somebody. I lived with my sister and her husband for a while but I am also radically independent so I was gleeful
when a lawyer saw me going to the labor department to seek a job and offered me a job to clean his office and carry letters by foot to different lawyer’s offices and courthouses in the area. I passionately dedicated myself to my job. Yes, he had a flush toilet to my great satisfaction, so I applied to that latrine cleaning skills I had learned, and everybody was using that toilet which I used as my prayer closet at lunch time. I can remember finishing my task early in the morning and coming back to the office and watched the secretary type all the legal documents. There was an extra typing machine (the one you move by a handle) and I would measure how she typed all the documents by spaces and in no time. I was inspired to go to typing class at Fitz Henley typing school. I did not earn a certificate because I could not afford to finish but I had honed the skill I needed so that the secretary trusted me to help her type. When she resigned, my first work to my boss was that I was going to look for a person to take my place. I did not give him the chance to put someone else where I wanted to be, and so it was. I worked with several lawyers as secretary for about twelve years and then I got married.

In the interim I was planning to attend college and was so happy but only to find out that I was pregnant. I refused to do an abortion as many had informed me to do, and so fulfilled my fear of becoming a “baby Mama,” a term that I never wanted to bear due to its negative connotation it evokes in my culture. I thought then that when I got married, I had reached the cusp of life but to my dismay, I lived a miserable eight year period and went through domestic violence of unprecedented measure. This was the reason why I migrated to St. Maarten to effect a change in my life. When I went there, in my country’s terms, “I had to start from scratch.” This means that I had to forget the level of job I had reached and reverted to using the latrine again, washing and ironing people’s clothes and cleaning houses to maintain myself in a foreign land.
I started going to the Good News Baptist church where I became a member and that church remains dear to my heart. The pastor protected me until he could have my husband join me. He was an example of a loving gentle soul who loved people unconditionally. I lived in St. Maarten for years, and my marriage did not make it. By then I had a 16 and 8-year-old girls to care for on my own. I remember that my husband left us the day after I resigned my job to fend for myself and the girls with no money and a sick child. My faith in God is strong and so, I prayed for a vision.

I had lived there a few years illegally just like people from all over the world who flocked to an island of about 35 square miles which is shared by the French and Dutch. I lived on the Dutch side and my love for that island still stands. My children, though both born in Jamaica, call St. Maarten home. When I took my younger daughter there, she could not go to school, so I bought a “Hooked on Phonics” set and taught her to read from it. She did not go to pre-school or kindergarten but by the time she got into first grade through the help of my friend Mavis who was a teacher and loved her. She had surpassed the capacity of a good amount of the children in her class which she joined half way in the term. She was named by the teacher as her helper. Today my daughter is a retired Navy woman in the United States. When my husband left, I asked my pastor for a classroom in the church so that I could teach children in the afternoon to read and write. There were many children there who were not eligible for school and I was offered a classroom that had a chalkboard. That is how Holy Childhood Foundation was started. I can remember purchasing a box of white chalk and I had one student for three says per week for two hours. Within one month he was doing so well I got his brother. They did so well that in a few months they were able to pass a high school entry test. That was encouraging to me and as more parents heard about me, I accepted their children and effected changes in their lives, not
only educationally but on a social and spiritual level by also incorporating their parents to be active in their lives. Today some of them still keep in touch as they took different pathways in life, to the point where some have master’s degrees and flourishing businesses. I did earn a two year study diploma in preschool while living in St. Maarten.

I transitioned to America in 2003 with my daughter who was now 14 years and I remain grateful that she could have got into school and obtain her high school diploma. The rest is history. She, unlike my other daughter who is a bookworm, does not love books, so she was determined to go into the Navy against my fears, and she did. I am a proud mom considering the progress she has made. Transitioning was not easy, but I am fearless, so, proverbially speaking, I took the bull by the horn to make changes in my life and my children’s lives. By this time, my older daughter had moved on to Canada to live with my sister and pursue a college degree. I started working in the United States firstly by taking care of the elderly in their homes, sometimes staying on the job up to 2 months without leaving. I did childcare and I have a security license which I have not used in fear that I would be offered as job to use a gun because I have a phobia for guns. I ran with the guys after hurricane Katrina hit Louisiana and did construction as well as they did. Unfortunately, I was always paid less. At first when I arrived in Louisiana, I lived in an abandoned house with 4 or 5 men whom I did not know. My safety rested in the hands of one of them who was a friend of mine who really lived up to his promise and today we are still friends. We were lucky the house had water but no electricity, so we lived by candlelight and flashlight. The buses were free at that time and so, when I did not work, I would take it from point to point and see the disaster for myself. It was from that vantage point that I was able to see how disastrous the hurricane was in that state.
I was able to get a Tax ID number and my entrepreneurial obsession kicked in and I opened my business of house cleaning. It wasn’t the easiest job but after a while I had the keys to my client’s house to go in and clean to my convenience. Through a friend I was able to purchase a car and that makes life much easier. I remember that I had only one suitcase with my clothes. I was always ready to run if I was promised a job. With this kind of connection, I had the opportunity to volunteer and there was not a dreary day. I moved back to New York and did any kind of job I got until in 2013 I got a Social Security Number and became a legal Green Card holder and I immediately registered at Capital Community College and became a Certified Nurse Aid and had my first legal job. I assumed that that salary would keep me afloat and registered at Hartford Adult center to get my high school degree. I was required to attend only one day per week to check with my leader but the computer was not my friend, (and still isn’t) so I would sometimes work my 7:30 – 9:30 a.m. morning job, attend class sometimes five days per week, sometimes only to get a resolution from the kind teachers there and be on my merry way to my 3:00 to 11:00 P.M. job. My hard work paid off and I graduated as the valedictorian to my surprise in 2015. Immediately after I got that, I was knocking on Manchester Community College’s doors to see what I could study. I had no clue. A very nice lady told me that she thought I would do well in social services, and I said yes. I knew not what that meant so I had to ask Google my new best friend for the answer.

Upon my acceptance, nothing else mattered but my books, and a library anywhere became my second home. I remember my friend telling me that he thinks that they should change one of the libraries to my name based on how often I told him that if he need me, I would be there. I surprised myself with my grades and when I got the letter that I was on the Dean’s list, I was on Cloud 9 and called all my family members. As if that wasn’t enough, I got an email
from Phi Theta Kappa (a title that I had to consult Google about again because I could not pronounce it nor did I understand who they were). I was inducted in Phi Theta Kappa, with member #20932388 on October 16, 2018. I continue to serve alongside such valiant champions, enjoying every moment. On September 7, 2019 I was inducted as the president of this highly esteemed group whose core is volunteering. Under this great leadership, I have been given a platform and it is my sincere pledge to the society, my school and the community to serve with diligence and effect change in any place that it is needed using any medium that is available.

Us again! September 2019.
Me helping out at the PTK voter registration drive, fall 2018.