



Literacy Volunteers of America

Essex & Passaic Counties

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New Jersey Association for Lifelong Learning Adult Learner Writing Contest

Category: Memoir
Title: Rising Above
Student Author: Barry Batts
Tutor: Valerie Miller

Carl Miller, I was born and raised in Queens, New York City. Due to family neglect, I never had any formal schooling. At 55, I have struggled hard for the good place I am in life. I am currently working with my tutor to improve my reading and writing. You will understand more about me when you read my short memoir. It felt good to put it on paper.

Rising Above

My name is Carl Miller. I want to tell you a story about my life and how I got to this point in my life. First of all, life is good for me now, but it wasn't always that way. Being born in the United States and being a child growing up you would hope to have good parents—a mommy and a daddy. But that was just a dream for me and my siblings. There were seven of us children born to my father and mother but there were seven others born to my mother by other men. Life for me was not easy growing up.

When I was a little boy I remember looking at television shows in the 60s and how it showed loving families. But we never saw that in our family. Why couldn't we be like the families on TV?

I remember my father was in the U.S. Army and he would come home on leave to spend time with his family. My siblings and I would try to dress in the best clothing we had at that time to impress dad. Little did my father know that we were hungry, we had not eaten for two days.

I remember one Christmas Eve when my mother had beaten us and left us home for a few days alone in the house with no food while she went to her boyfriend's house. But when my mother knew my father was coming home she would beat him home and tell us kids to lie to him and tell him we were in school. It seemed like he believed us.

We lived in my uncle's house but we had to sleep on a damp basement floor. My mother was getting public assistance to help take care of us and my dad was sending us an allotment check once a month to help take care of us. But my mother would give the checks to her boyfriend and we went without. I remember one morning we were so hungry my brother and I snuck upstairs as my sister looked out at the side door to see if anyone was coming. We snuck into the kitchen. We looked into the bottom cabinet as we slowly and cautiously opened the squeaking door. We looked and decided to take a can of corn from the back of the cabinet so it wouldn't be so obvious among the other canned goods. My brother ran downstairs with the can but I wasn't as fast. I got caught by my uncle and he told my mother on me. I tried to lie and say I went upstairs to see what time it was, even though I couldn't tell time. My mother beat me so bad and for some reason she was biting my hands like they were a piece of meat.





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It seemed like I was always getting beaten for things, I never knew why. I remember one August evening when my grandmother came over to our house. We had just seen our father that day. She was very mad. She was screaming and cursing at me and I did not understand why. My mother grabbed me and she and my grandmother tore my clothes off me. There was an extension cord nearby and I hoped they wouldn't see it, but they did. Each time it hit my bare skin it burned. I thought they were enjoying it and the only reason they stopped was the neighbors banging on the front door threatening to call the cops because of my loud screams.

My mother never registered me and three of my siblings for school, so that is why I never went to school as a child. To make the neighbors think we were in school my uncle would take us out in his car in the morning and over to his mother's house. Some of our neighbors began to wonder if we were in school. But sending us to my grandmother's house, where we would sit in her backyard all day, allowed us to stay hidden from the school authorities in New York City, one of the greatest cities in the United States. My mother lied to them and told the authorities that we had moved down south, and they believed her. So they never came looking for us after that. But it seemed like no one really cared.

My father left us. I hoped he would have come back and taken us with him, maybe to his mother and father's house in North Carolina, but I guess that was wishful thinking.

I had to grow up fast, starting with a paper route, raking leaves and shoveling snow around the neighborhood. When I got old enough, my first real job was cleaning a motel and working in factories. I had to grow up very fast in order to make sure my younger siblings would not suffer. They had to eat and have a clean bed to sleep in and clean clothes to go to school in. So I had to start quick, and it was worth it: My siblings were very successful. They made me proud. So we got something good out of a sad childhood upbringing when no one else cared and the authorities didn't look for us.

My mother kept having different boyfriends but they always were married men. She kept getting pregnant, bringing more hungry mouths to feed. Then the men would leave and go back to their wives. It was bad enough for us but the babies had to eat and needed diapers.

Mr. and Mrs. Robinson, who lived in one of the houses where I raked leaves on one of my routes, took a special liking to me. They were an elderly couple with no children, so they treated me like a son. They would give me an allowance for the chores I would do for them. As soon as I got it I ran to the supermarket and bought groceries, baby formula and diapers for the babies because their daddies would not. My mother gave her friends some of the children born out of wedlock, but the rest stayed with us.

So you see why I had to work hard to do whatever I could. It made me a strong person. When I fall, with God's help I get back up. We were children living in a damp dark Laurelton, Queens basement: forgotten about. But my siblings and I did not become statistics in the penal system. I put my own interests aside to take care of my family and helped get them all off to a good start.

Thank you, God, now I can concentrate on myself. I know that every child has the right to an education, but I missed out due to my mother. I somehow taught myself to read and write, at least enough to get by. Now I am studying with my tutor who volunteers to help. My goal is to someday get my GED.

So in closing, everything my parents failed to do we did better. To my siblings: we are determined. To my parents: you tried to keep us down and hold us back: you lost!