

My Journey: From Struggle to Strength

My name is Cynitria Therien, and I serve as the Education and Employment Director at Faith & Fostering. My life is living proof that when faith meets community and determination, the cycle of poverty can be broken and a new family legacy can begin.

I grew up in the Martin Luther King neighborhood of Shreveport, Louisiana. My mother, a single courageous woman raising eight children, worked long hours as a domestic worker, cooking in kitchens, janitorial work, doing whatever it took to provide for us. My father labored in a steel mill and later pastored a church. Still, a minimum wage in the 1990s and early 2000s rarely covered even our basic needs.

I was a good student, but survival came first. At one point, I thought more about whether we'd have dinner than about college. Secondary Education was not a priority for me.

Then everything changed. Three months before high school graduation, I learned I was pregnant. Fear gripped me. How could I care for a baby when I barely knew how to care for myself? I remember crying out to God: *"Lord, I don't know what I'm doing. I can't raise this child alone. I give him back to you—please show me how to provide for him."*

Inspired by my sisters who were starting college, I decided to enroll too, even though I had no plan and no clear direction. With financial aid and sheer determination, I began classes at Southern University at Shreveport. I studied Early Childhood Education while doing hair to earn income and relied on those same community networks for rides when I had none. My mother faithfully babysat my son so I could attend class, her contribution meant the world to me.

Our family home sometimes became unlivable, too cold in the winter and too hot in the summer, so my son and I had to leave from time to time. We didn't have a place of our own and moved from couch to couch until things improved. It was the wider community of family, and neighbors who lifted us up, offering temporary shelter, meals, and encouragement when the road felt impossible. Their care gave me room to breathe and the courage to keep moving forward.

Because of their sacrifice, I graduated with an Associate's Degree in Early Childhood Education and Child Development. I secured a job making \$8 an hour, but I knew I needed more. At 24, I finally earned my driver's license and bought my first car. I used SNAP benefits to help feed my child. I worked full time, raised my son, and attended Wiley College at night to earn a Bachelor's in Business Management. At times it was very difficult but I persevered. Shortly after obtaining my degree, I was able to purchase my first apartment.

Life slowly stabilized. At the age of 29, I married, welcomed another child, and I inherited three wonderful boys. Yet the call to grow didn't stop. I returned to school and earned a Master's in Education, increasing my income by 50% and finally breaking the poverty line for my family.

Today, my children are second-generation college students. They will never have to start from where I started. The poverty that once defined our family no longer sets the boundaries of their future. Through it all, I see the hand of Christ—faithful to answer the prayer of a frightened teenage mother and to provide everything we needed, often through the hearts and hands of His people.

Journey Forward

I cannot tell this story without honoring the body of Christ—the community that carried me when I could not carry myself. It was family, neighbors, church members, and extended family who showed me what it means to be the hands and feet of Jesus.

That same spirit is the heartbeat of **EQUIP's Journey Forward program**. If you've ever felt like the odds are stacked too high, remember this: you do not have to do this alone. Just as the Lord used my community to lift me, He can use **Journey Forward** to lift you. We will help you find the resources, the relationships, and the faith to stay the course and finish well.

Your future is bigger than your past. With a caring community around you, you can break cycles, build a legacy, and become the catalyst for change in your family and beyond. Let EQUIP's Journey Forward walk with you towards a brighter future.