



Being born and raised in Detroit comes with its own set of challenges, especially when you have a mom who battled a drug addiction. Her addiction is what caused me to be separated from her and taken into kinship care by my biological grandparents and my aunt. I was raised by my grandparents until my early teen years. By mid-teen, I was blessed with the opportunity to be placed in kinship care under the guardianship of my maternal biological aunt. By the age of 17, my adoption was finalized and a few weeks later, my mother transitioned from the world.

Growing up, I experienced severe trauma and abuse.

However, I wasn't aware of the magnitude of those experiences because I was surrounded by the goodness of my grandparents. At the time, I didn't understand how much love and protection I was receiving from them. While under the care of my aunt, I didn't understand the sacrifices she had to make as a single Black woman to provide for me and raise me. All I knew was what I felt, love, and they did what they felt was best considering the circumstances put upon us.

Love is one of the most important things needed to supercharge and sustain yourself through life. Love is what helps us grow healthy and thrive. Not everyone has the privilege of experiencing love in a healthy way. For those of us who have lived experiences in foster care or any out-of-home placement, we may not have received the proper paternal love and care from our parents or caregivers growing up.

My kinship experience was an environment where I learned life skills, ran track and field, fell in love with art, graduated high school, and grew into young adulthood with support from my aunt. She showed up for me, attended my track meets, and cheered me on while traveling to different schools. She always encouraged me to try different things. One day, my aunt told me, "Don't ever give up. Your resilience will take you far." Resilience to me is a form of self-love because it gives a person the ability to endure. There comes a point in life where we shouldn't allow trauma and abuse to be one's identity anymore. I believe that through intentional inner work and by creating your own chosen community or family of love and support all young people can work towards saying, "Yes, I experienced x, y, and z, but I have survived that and now I'm thriving."

Resilience has given me the ability to establish boundaries and grow into a phenomenal woman. I surpassed the harder outcomes, statistics, and labels that are often associated with my life experiences. Graduating from Western Michigan University with a bachelor's and master's degree propelled my experience and ignited me to work toward achieving my purpose in life. I established an organization on campus called Her Untold Stories Heard (HUSH) to create a safe space for women to share their lived experiences and evolve through their truth. Healing is a lifelong journey. My adverse childhood experiences have provided me with the ability to access my firsthand experiences to help countless

other individuals become more whole, healed, and better versions of themselves through art, therapy, mentoring, and being an example.

I hope through my testimony that you see that through the balance of courage, kinship support, and most importantly, love, all things were made possible for my life to be what it is today. I'm a true believer that love is resilience, and resilience is self-love. Resilience provides the ability to sustain yourself through any life experiences, and love aids your growth in becoming your most authentic self.

Your ability to change your perspective about who you are today and the impact that your trauma has on your future is the most powerful and rewarding gift you can give yourself. It's your responsibility to do the hard work to heal and not become hardened or lost by your circumstances. We are all deserving of a peaceful and thriving life despite our past. You matter. And if no one has told you today, you are loved!



Ashley Watkins learned how to turn her pain into purpose and build a firm foundation within herself built on love and faith. Ashley Watkins is a clinical therapist, poet, author, speaker, and artist. She loves being free spirited and helping others. She has a gift to see through people's masks and help them free themselves by providing a safe space of truth. She is a graduate from Western Michigan University. She has worked with multiple positions as a social worker and served as an intern in the juvenile system. She has been an advocate for foster care youth and still works as a consultant with JBS International Inc., to ensure the voices of young people are integrated into child welfare systems change efforts. Ashley has built a strong belief in God that is an example of how love is displayed.



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