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St. Petersburg Times
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May 25, 2011

Thanks to Derrick Brooks, a worried girl becomes Dr. Natasha Spencer

By Natasha Spencer, Special to the Times

Editor's note: *Natasha Spencer's view of the world has changed since she was 12 and living in Tampa's Ponce de Leon area. Here's an edited version of an essay she wrote about her experiences.*

There is a little girl getting ready for school. She dresses, brushes her teeth and rushes downstairs to eat breakfast.

After packing her backpack, she steps outside. As she takes a deep breath, she is overcome by a feeling of despair.

She wants so much to break the mold and conquer the fears that have burdened her for her entire life. As she walks to school she thinks about her future and the options that are typically present for her to choose.

To her left, she watches as young girls bloom into women too soon. So many girls around her are becoming pregnant or have children.

Her heart beats for more.

To her right, she watches some of her friends shy away as they drop out of school. They are lost and frustrated, so they began to drown in a wave of crime and what many call thug life.

Her heart aches in sorrow.

She looks behind her and views once-innocent faces snatched away by a life of addiction to drugs and alcohol.

She is dying inside and praying for something better.

Her head is filled with so many thoughts that the entire day of school passes her by in a flash. She feels so confused thinking about a future she doesn't want.

But she doesn't see a way out.

In the midst of her daily turmoil, however, she always looks forward to a stress-free afternoon at the Boys and Girls Club. She just wants to be a little girl with the childhood she imagines, you know, like the Huxtables.

One day, as she looked beyond the double door entrance, something was different. Everyone was bustling around and talking about someone unfamiliar to her.

Eventually she found out that some guy named Derrick Brooks had come to visit. She learned he was a football player for the Bucs. She decided that maybe she should meet him.

She shook his hand and immediately thought that he most certainly didn't look like a football player; he was not that

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massive. But since he didn't look that frightening either, she stuck around, conversed about life and played video games with him.

After the day was over, she walked home and it was the first time she didn't have a headache by the time she reached the door. She smiled as she went to bed thinking about her afternoon.

However, she still believed that tomorrow would be no different from the previous days and she had to figure out a way to be different on her own.

She had no idea at the time that her life changed that day.

That 12-year-old lost little girl ended up going on her first trip on a plane to Fort Lauderdale with the newly formed Brooks Bunch. She also had the privilege to accompany Derrick to Washington, D.C., and Atlanta.

In addition, she went to amazing South Africa and several Western states.

Her life was new.

She finished high school in the top 10 percent of her class while lettering in three varsity sports. She earned a Bright Futures Scholarship and attended Florida State University for her undergraduate degree.

While she was at FSU, he made sure that things went as smoothly as possible, giving her a scholarship every semester and keeping watch from afar. Derrick was always just a phone call away. Knowing that meant the world to her.

Four years later, she graduated cum laude with a bachelor of science degree in exercise science.

After teaching in Thailand, thanks to a Fulbright Fellowship, she entered the FSU College of Medicine. Again, Derrick found a way through his charity work to give her a full sponsorship with the assistance of a very generous donor. She did not have debt at completion.

Last weekend, she received her M.D. from the college.

Now she believes that every day is a blessing and always looks forward to the next - unlike when she was 12. She may have had doubts about the presence of God back then, but now revels in blessings with complete faith.

That girl, of course, is me. Derrick gave me hope and an extra hand that I desperately needed at that time. He led by example and now I have another dream: to one day be to someone what he has been to me.

Natasha Spencer is moving on to her residency at the University of Alabama Medical Center in Birmingham, Ala., and will specialize in obstetrics and gynecology. She eventually hopes to establish a practice in her hometown of Tampa.

St. Petersburg Times



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