

BLACK, PREGNANT, AND SHAMED

ONE MOTHER'S ACCOUNT OF HER EXPERIENCES WITH 3 HIGH RISK PREGNANCIES

Can you imagine suffering 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for 8 months? Imagine severe morning sickness, lack of sleep, and isolation in a room for weeks at a time. This is my never told tell-all book of my experiences. Welcome to the story of my three pregnancies.

I am Mrs. California United America and I have written this story to help my community of African-American Women.

Pregnancy is meant to be exciting but it can be nerve wrecking. A woman's labor should be beautiful and not just a task that makes you rush to the finish line. It is normal to feel extremely happy and the next day extremely moody due to the hormones experienced during pregnancy.

This book is written to provide support to women with high risk pregnancies who have had a child born prematurely. Each pregnancy is as different as it is unique. Through the pain, anxiety, and happiness this book will help guide you to the finish line.

Gain insight into *Glo Preemies* Founder, Ashley Randolph-Cooley's experience as a 3-time high risk pregnancy mother. Each of her births led to a premature birth with children in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). Her stories will give you valuable tools, resources, and inspiration to support you through your high-risk pregnancy and for a lifetime after.

By

Ashley Rachelle Randolph-Cooley

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This book is dedicated to:

My mother who I will always love and cherish. I wish that you were here to see this book published. You will always be the light in my life.

My father made sure to teach me how to stand my ground.

My husband who I love for eternity and beyond. Thank you for always supporting all my ideas and staying up with me while I continue to work towards my dreams in life.

My beautiful three children who made me the woman I am today. Aiden, London, and Jamie remember your mother always loves you and I am always so proud of everything you do.

My grandmother Mary Ann who helped my mother raise me and continues to be my guardian angel on earth.

My Uncle Lamar who always believed in me and knew that one day I would change the world.

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Introduction

Congratulations! You have begun the process to reduce your anxiety while having a high-risk pregnancy or trauma filled NICU stay. I created this book to guide you in feeling less isolated and anxious during your miraculous labor . You will learn about resources, tools, and effective communication methods that can help navigate your pregnancy and assist your life thereafter. I successfully gave birth to three children born prematurely and each one has been a different experience. In this book I will give you a tell-all account of what happened during my pregnancies to help support mothers who are on bed rest or are just nervous about having a premature birth.

After my second pregnancy in 2014, I became an advocate for NICU families and founded a business called Glo Preemies. Glo Preemies is a special program that supports, empowers, and beautifies families with children in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. I have led and spoke nationally regarding research studies on racial disparity in the NICU and co-created Health Professionals CEU educational systems. I am an Advisory Board Member for a racial disparity in the NICU research study at California Perinatal Quality Care Collaborative based at Stanford Medical School and a Special Education Instructional Aide at Fortune School of Education. My studies also include certification as a Labor and Delivery Doula at the same hospital that I delivered two of my children at specifically because I wanted to support other mothers in my community. As a Board Member to multiple NICU organizations and Credential Programs, I am also the co-founder of the Alliance For Black NICU Families.

This book will help support you at times where you may find yourself feeling lost and alone. Being a high-risk pregnancy mother is scary and can leave you restless. After reading my stories I hope you will feel more connected and able to understand that some of life's scariest moments can lead to a lifetime of beautiful memories. You will gain insight into understanding your rights to quality medical care, learn ways to overcome common forms of discriminatory racism you may be experiencing , and resources to get through each day of your pregnancy.

The information that I am sharing in this book has helped thousands of women across the globe. These stories have never been told collectively in their entirety. This book is the first of my three-book trilogy titled "Success after Premature Births". After reading all three books you will see how I began my journey with high risk pregnancies and turned my stories into an impactful successful career while giving back to my community. My goal is to provide you with inside tips and tools to help you and your child enjoy a healthy and happy life.

PART I: Ready or Not

March 2010

On a fresh spring morning, I was running around City Park in New Orleans, Louisiana, training for a cheerleading tryout at Xavier University. I was ending my junior year and the goal was to finish my senior year as a Biology Pre-Medicine Graduate and Cheer Alumni. I usually would never run, especially since I passed out once when I was 14 while running the mile during Physical Education classes and later received a heart ablation at UCSF by the age of 15. Since that time, I hadn't even thought of running but during these last two weeks I felt invincible like I could accomplish anything!

After running for roughly 20 minutes I started noticing that I did not feel very well. My stomach began to turn, and my muscles became riddled with more pain than usual. I decided to walk back to my car which was about another mile away and return to my dorm to sleep the day away.

The next morning, I woke up at 7:45 am feeling very nauseous. I went to the bathroom and it became "toilet time". I had never vomited so much in my life. I knew that I was not feeling good and now I was thinking I may have had food poisoning. I called my local campus doctor who is on our school site and she instructed me to come in for a check-up. Within 15 minutes I was dressed and I was there! I walked in, filled out the sign-in sheet and intake form. I couldn't remember when my last menstrual cycle was, so I had counted back 4 weeks and placed it on the form. The doctor called me into her office and instructed me to go to the bathroom and urinate in a specimen cup. I did that and waited back in the office not knowing the result would be one that changed my life forever.

The doctor and I had a very close relationship. She was a middle aged African-American born woman, born and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana. It seemed like I always had to see her because I was either getting a yearly TB shot for college or experiencing illness from the summer hurricane weather. She took great care of her patients. The students who were interested in becoming doctors were able to learn something new everytime we would go see her, whether it be the latest medical invention or new scientific breakthrough. Just the pressure of how much she wanted each of us to succeed made my walk into her office uncomfortable and stomach wrenching.

As she walked back into the small office area, her body language changed. She continued to read the diagnosis and avoided making eye contact with me and smiling like she normally does. My hands got sweaty and I began to feel a wave of nausea again. After a few minutes of going over my file without speaking, I began to wonder if she could just spit it out already because I wanted to get it over with. She looked at me and said "Your last period was around April 15th, correct?" I told her yes, as I nervously shook my head. She took out a tiny

round cardboard that had numbers and dates on it. She took one marker and put it on April 15th. She showed me and said “According to this you are around 4 weeks pregnant.” I was speechless. She began talking about how there was no family housing on campus and that I should start looking for off-campus housing before I can’t hide my pregnancy anymore. She gave me a list of off- campus housing resources that would help. I thanked her and began a slow walk back to my dorm. I found out I was pregnant during the week of my college cheerleading try-outs. All I could think about was how I knew my life would change forever.

Chapter One: Pregnant In College

Imagine a world where support was always given to young women who just found out about their pregnancy. That would be the ideal situation. It is never that easy to get acceptance for bringing a new life into this world. Between the ages of 16 – 25 a young woman will change drastically. She will not like the same thing at the age of 20 that she did at the age of 16. It is because of maturity and personal growth that we become who we are, know what we like, and understand why we do the things that we do. Pregnancy can be like a storm; interrupting your everyday life, pouring rain down on your current hopes and dreams, and leaving a muddy mess that you feel could leave you ruined.

Finding out I was pregnant was not easy. I knew my family was going to be devastated. I knew that my future was not going to be perfectly planned like my mother and I had planned it. I had no contact with the father of my child because both of us decided to get new numbers in the middle of these last 4 weeks and we did not have any contact during the term of my pregnancy.

Here I was pregnant, in college, and alone in a different city and state by myself with the decision of my future in my own hands.

Announcing to The World

The first person to know about my pregnancy was a good friend of mine who attended Xavier University of Louisiana with me. I was a nervous wreck and can remember feeling chills down my spine. We stood in my dorm doorway as she asked if I was going to have dinner with her in the cafeteria. I told her I wasn’t feeling good and mumbled that I just found out I was pregnant. She was shocked but also instantly excited. She asked to come into my dorm and that’s when she revealed she had just found out she was pregnant too! My heart was so relieved to now have a friend of mine to go through this pregnancy with. I decided not to tell my family until I was too far along in the pregnancy to have an abortion. I didn’t want them to change my mind. My close friend decided to tell her mom and she immediately went back home to have her daughter where she could be supported by family.

The Cycle

At 6 weeks and 2 days I began to bleed. I was under the impression that I was going to lose the baby. I continued with going to class and trying my best to power through sleepiness that I always seemed to have around lunch time. I managed to go through 2 days of a little more than light bleeding when I went to the bathroom and noticed a heavy flow. I was scared and immediately grabbed my car keys and went to the closest Emergency Room nearby. It seemed like hours went by before the ER doctor came back with my hormone levels and told me that it looked like I may be having a miscarriage. He told me not to worry and to let it pass and everything would be ok. I spent the next 5 weeks with consistent light bleeding until it completely stopped out of nowhere. I continued wondering why I was having irregular bleeding while pregnant. Eventually the doctors told me that I was bleeding due to leftover blood that was in my cervix and needed to shed out. Although it didn't make sense to me, I would never question a doctor's opinion.

All Day Sickness

Hyperemesis Gravidarum (HG) is a horrible condition that affects roughly 60,000 pregnant women a year. It causes severe nausea, vomiting, weight loss, and electrolyte disturbance. Mild cases are treated with diet changes, rest, and antacids. More severe cases often require a stay in the hospital so that the mother can receive fluid and nutrition through an intravenous line (IV).

At 6 weeks pregnant I became so sick I could barely sing a full song before the next wave of nausea. The sickness was so bad that I had to drop out of college before my 3rd month of pregnancy. I was so nauseous I could barely get out of bed without vomiting.

The doctors gave me the common medication used to treat nausea in women called Zofran but it didn't work for me. I went to my regular scheduled 4 month appointment and was told by the receptionist that the doctor would no longer be seeing me. I had already used a taxi to arrive at the appointment and was very upset. I began to inquire why the doctor would not see me and she told me that the doctor was not comfortable having me as a patient because I was so sick and felt I was a liability. I turned around and proceeded to walk out the door devastated. Once I was outside the front door I called a taxi to take me back to the dorm while I silently cried in the back seat to myself avoiding any further attention.

I ended up having to switch doctors after I became 4 months pregnant because my initial OB/GYN could not figure out why I was so sick and did not want to risk providing care to my baby. This was a very traumatic event for a new pregnant mom like myself. It was that moment I knew I would have not received that same lack of care if I was of a higher income status.

From 5 months until the time of my delivery, I spent 15 days a month in a hospital receiving IV treatments due to being dehydrated from vomiting every 15 minutes. I lost 20 pounds during my pregnancy due to the severity of my condition. No medicine would work and food cravings didn't make it any better. I was miserable and I just wanted it all to end. What I did not know was that the only way the sickness would stop would be by having my baby's birth.

Food or College

At 3 months pregnant, I was told that I had to move out of the dorms due to my decision to follow through with my pregnancy. Thankfully, at the time I was finishing my junior year and was able to afford living off campus. I found an adorable 1 bedroom apartment in Metairie, Louisiana. By moving off campus, my schedule would no longer accommodate dinner at the cafeteria. I talked to some of the mothers that I met around my apartment complex to locate a solution. They introduced me to a program called SNAP or Food Stamps. *SNAP* helps low-income people buy the food they need for good health.

I had never heard of a food assistance program called SNAP and was eager to get approved for it since I was now eating for two and living off campus. I went to apply at the food stamp office the following day. At 8 am I awoke bright and early and made sure I researched online what papers I needed to take with me to get approved. The process seemed short as I was only there for roughly 2 hours. Once I met with a worker, she explained to me that I would have been approved except for the small fact that I am a college student. I was in tears. I asked her why that would disqualify me and she told me that they count how much you get in student loans as the overall income you make and it was destined to be counted against me. I couldn't believe that trying to better myself would leave me hungry with a baby. I left with two choices. Either I could drop out of school to qualify for food stamps or continue and finish college and try to find ways to eat. I was still in a new city that was recovering from Hurricane Katrina 5 years prior to my arrival. I debated my options and by the end of the week I decided to drop out of college to make sure that I could eat healthy for my growing pregnant belly.

Forcing Medical Care

Ouch! My stomach felt like a knot was sticking out from both sides of my stomach. I felt so uncomfortable and uneasy. I called my doctor and she told me that I can visit her for an exam in the Labor and Delivery Ward. Although I was concerned about my evaluation, I went inside the lobby and waited for nearly 30 minutes before I was seen. Once I was taken into a room to be monitored, the nurse reassured me that since I was only 5 months pregnant she was sure that I was just having gas. After being monitored for 1 hour, the doctor came in and told me that I was having preterm contractions and that she was sending me home to rest until I saw my primary OB.

I saw my doctor later that week and she told me that she wanted me to go on permanent bed rest. I asked her if there was anything that I could get to help stop my preterm contractions.

I also informed her that I had looked online and was curious about Progesterone shots. These are a kind of progesterone called 17 alpha-hydroxyprogesterone caproate (also called 17P). The shots may help prevent premature birth and can be very useful in certain cases where women had a spontaneous premature birth before during a single birth pregnancy. Immediately, my doctor began to laugh in my face. I assumed she couldn't believe a young African-American first time mother was questioning her quality of care. She quickly turned to her computer, while still laughing, and told me that she would be writing a prescription for a new drug that was recently FDA approved to see if it will help with my morning sickness. Before I knew it, I was scheduled for diabetes testing as well as more lab work and my question was basically ignored.

I felt lost, confused and hopeless. I still had not mentioned my pregnancy to my family in California. My closest friend had moved back home to have a healthy pregnancy and here I was still in Louisiana, now a college drop out on food stamps with the frightening possibility that I was carrying a micro-premature child.

I decided to tell my mother when I was almost 6 months pregnant. She needed to know, and this was something that I could no longer keep a secret. When I shared the news, she was hurt instead of happy because she felt that my life goals were gone and my dreams of becoming an OB/GYN were now out of range. About a week passed by and once the news set in I noticed my mother began to have seizures. Years of testing finally allowed the doctors to confirm that her seizures began due to severe stress she experienced during the same time as the mention of my pregnancy. My mother later passed away from a stress-related seizure in 2019 and things felt as if they were unraveling beyond my control.

Finding Support and Resources

There was a teenager that I grew close to in the community. She was 5 months pregnant like me and was very resourceful in sharing specific programs within the community that were open and able to help pregnant moms like us. Kindly, she invited me to her pregnancy program in downtown New Orleans that met every Wednesday at 10 am and said it would be a great place to connect with other pregnant women. I called the very next Tuesday and signed up to attend the next meeting.

On Wednesday I was ready with a pre-packed lunch bag containing my water bottle, a banana, and crackers before I drove to the location downtown. I pulled up to a 2-story building with such little parking that I was left to park my car 2 blocks away. It was July and very humid in the city that day. I bore the elements and began to walk back to the building, praying that I would make it without passing out or becoming sick. As soon as I walked into the building the room was very welcoming. The receptionist handed me a folder or paperwork to complete, and told me that I could pick anywhere to sit in the conference room. I was very early and was the first one to arrive. A few moments later other pregnant women began to fill the empty seats. Some mothers had small children who went to a daycare that was provided on site while they came back to attend the weekly meeting.

I studied the other mothers and observed how they acted while sitting in the room. I wanted to make sure that I did not stand out or make it obvious that this was my first meeting outside of a school or extracurricular activity. A woman walked in and passed each of us a folder with community resources inside. That was the day I signed up for programs such as WIC which stands for Women Infants and Children, assisted housing options, and more. I couldn't believe that the resources I desperately needed for myself and my baby were being provided to me all at once. After all the mothers completed their paperwork for which resources they needed, a woman reminded a certain group of mothers about the 10 points they would receive for attending the meeting. One mother shouted out that she had 150 points and finally had enough to get a crib through the program! My eyes became huge as I was excited to hear that we can get free things for our baby just by participating in this pregnancy class. We all received a paper that listed how many points you needed to get certain items through the pregnancy program. Before I left that day, I earned a free baby shirt with the 10 points that I received for participating in the class and I felt like I had just won a million bucks!

After we learned about resources, used or saved our points and asked questions that we had regarding our pregnancies, we received a lunch box from the subway restaurant. I was so happy and so hungry. I remember eating it and feeling re-energized because that morning I only had a small bowl of cereal. I was so grateful for that program and things were starting to look better...that is, until my test results came back with shocking news.

Once I reached 6 months pregnant, I signed up for home visitation from the pregnancy program as I was having horrible preterm contractions and was unable to drive to the weekly Wednesday meeting. A social worker began to visit me at home, and we would cover different pregnancy and parenting topics for an hour each week. My doctor called me while I was having one of my meetings. She told me that my lab results came back with alarming details and there could be a high possibility that my baby may be born with deformities. I thanked her for contacting me with the unsavory news and asked my social worker for advice. The social worker was a home visitor that was an elderly African- American woman. She looked me in my eyes and told me "Honey, you need to have an abortion. There is no way that you can become a doctor with a special needs child. He will have a cleft lip and too many chromosomes. You don't need that." I told her that I would consider what she was telling me. Needless to say her words were shockingly discouraging and that was officially the last meeting I ever had with that program.

The Drive for HealthCare

In New Orleans, Louisiana, I managed to get through obstacles most of the time during my pregnancy. I became independent and learned how to utilize the local resources that were provided. Even though I was able to understand early on that the federally funded resources were flawed, there were still opportunities to help people stay supported when they needed it the most, even if it is only for a little bit of time.

There I was, sitting on my porch outside with the front door open, enjoying what felt like perfect weather until I heard a loud crashing sound that came from inside. When I opened the door and looked, I could not believe that the entire living room ceiling had fallen to the floor! Immediately, the traumatization of it all set in and I started screaming. I then grabbed my phone to call my mom. My mom told me to pack my bags and drive to Houston, Texas to at least be safe to my closest family members. I quickly packed what I could and left the house that evening because I did not know if the rest of the house was going to fall soon after.

I arrived in Houston, Texas early that next morning. My cousin Gerald and his wife made arrangements to drive me back home. It was a relief for me because the entire time all I really wanted was to be back home. I was 32 weeks pregnant and I knew that time was winding down before my birth. My great aunt made us some fried chicken to take with us as a snack and by nightfall we were on the road. It took us 2 days to make it to Sacramento, California. I did little driving and a lot of sleeping as I was still having preterm contractions which continued ever since I was 5 months pregnant. I just knew that when I got home, I would be able to have the best healthcare for my son. When we made it to Sacramento, I took a hot shower and slept for 10 hours.

Once I woke up, I was in so much pain I had to go to the hospital. At the Emergency Room, they were able to assign a doctor who would care for me until I delivered on my expected due date of January 8, 2011. The doctor even agreed to give me the progesterone shot that I wanted so badly. I was so relieved and thankful. I couldn't believe how easy it was to get what I wanted and what I felt my baby needed to thrive. I was also angry that the previous doctor did not seem to take my suggestion or my baby's health as a serious matter. But I finally found the relief I needed. There was no hesitation from the doctor and I received the shot within seconds. The doctor actually said I was a great candidate for it and I felt a tremendous difference. The nurse gave me some nausea medication through an IV, scheduled my next appointment and instantly I was sent home on bedrest.

November 2010

I was lucky to have 2 great weeks of pregnancy before I was sent back to the hospital due to fluid loss. It started when I woke up and walked to my grandmother's refrigerator to make myself some breakfast. As I opened the refrigerator door I began to feel liquid slowly leaking down my leg. I became worried and called the hospital because I was experiencing leakage but I had no urge to urinate. I also was just seen the night before at the hospital due to preterm contractions.

After arriving at Labor and Delivery, I checked in at the front desk and had to wait 75 minutes before a nurse took me into a room to check and see if I was actually in labor. It turned out I was! The nurse showed me a small, blue strip and told me that she was going to use it to see if the fluid I was losing was amniotic fluid. She told me that if it turned green then I was “in fact in labor”. As soon as she tested the strip, it immediately turned green. Her face looked shocked because I was nowhere near my due date. I instantly felt upset with myself that I had waited so long to be checked and remembered telling the nurse sarcastically that I was “happy I didn’t have the baby in the waiting room”.

Monday afternoon I was hospitalized and placed on a magnesium IV drip that my doctor prescribed to help stop my contractions. Thankfully it worked for a while right up until Thanksgiving Day. As a die-hard Oakland Raiders fan who was born into a traditional football family life, I had been waiting to see the game of the year on Thanksgiving Day since it was first announced in the summer. After watching the Raiders lose on Thanksgiving Day, I victoriously gave birth to my first child who I named Aiden. He was born at 2:26 am on Black Friday weighing in at 4 pounds and 2 ounces. I was now 34 weeks and zero days pregnant on my way to entering a new world called the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU).

Once I arrived, the doctor informed me that Aiden was still very small and would need a special nursery to care for his delicate size. She was very informative and made sure that I was comfortable before she left the room. Nurses were instructed to provide me with food since I was unable to eat during labor so I received a sandwich and some chilled fruit juices. After I got some nourishment and rest, the nurse came into my room with a wheelchair and asked if I was ready to finally meet my son. She took me into the NICU where she showed me how to properly wash my hands when I come and visit him. There were signs everywhere around the sink showing how to properly wash your hands. Once I was safely sterilized, she wheeled me into the NICU where a nurse who was waiting for me asked if I was “Baby Randolph’s Mom”. I told her yes and she showed us where he was in an incubator with an Ultra Violet (UV) blanket over him because he was jaundiced. The moment I saw him, I completely fell in love with his chubby cheeks. He was so tiny and so fragile. I just couldn’t believe he was mine! Although I was unable to hold him after he was born, this was my first moment seeing the child I had fought so hard to bring into this world. He was perfect.

The nurse called the doctor over the phone to share his diagnosis and the doctor told me that Aiden was a strong preemie that was only under the light for another 24 hours due to his jaundice and that he shouldn’t have any other complications. I secretly began to thank God in my head because I remembered when others said he could be born with many deformities. I knew at that moment God was watching me and using me for something bigger. The doctor could not tell me a time frame of when Aiden would be coming home but he promised to give me daily updates. I was so grateful for his attentiveness and after the call I stayed with my son for another hour before heading back to my room to try my first attempt at pumping my milk since breastfeeding was not an option because he would need time to develop his suckling motion.

Chapter Two: Stuck Between the Two

My second pregnancy was one that I planned with my boyfriend of 3 years. We decided to try for a baby, and we wanted to make sure that we were prepared in case I experienced any difficulties. This time around we made sure I had my medical insurance in place and we even shared a cute little apartment in Houston, Texas. We made sure that Aiden never felt left out of the loop and always included him in discussions of having a baby brother or sister. When I found out I was pregnant in October 2013, we were very excited. I thought I was prepared but this pregnancy had other plans.

Medicaid vs. Medical

I found out I was pregnant with my second child at 6 weeks and 3 days. The day it happened I suddenly became uncontrollably nauseous and I knew I had only felt like this once before in my life. I contacted my local OB/GYN and waited for a doctor's appointment. Days passed and I grew increasingly nervous until I went in to see my doctor. I really wanted to ensure the chances of a healthy pregnancy without spotting or bleeding if I were pregnant again. The anxiety set in that I could be expecting another baby. It was challenging not knowing what was going to happen with Aiden's health during my own journey through my second pregnancy and it made me fearful of what may lie ahead.

When my doctor's appointment came the following week, I went in with a positive attitude. She confirmed that I was officially pregnant and that she wanted to go over my family history as well as my prior pregnancy. I told her about my severe HG and preterm labor complications with my first pregnancy. She was kindly informative, and I could tell that she was very interested in my case. She told me to wait in the room as she went to her office. To my surprise she came back with medicine in a purple packet and told me that it was not FDA approved but it was a trial medicine she wanted me to take to help with the severe HG. This was the first time I had heard of a clinical trial being done with medicine for pregnant women. The researcher in me began to run a million questions through my mind: Would my baby be ok? Do they know the side effects? Has anyone had issues and if so, how does she know if it is still on a trial run?

I decided to take the medication for 2 weeks and see if it helped my symptoms. I don't know if it made me worse or not but the entire time up until I was 8 weeks pregnant, I was bedridden and limited to only being able to digest water and green apples. It was painfully horrific and the nausea made me unable to attend to my son. I felt like a bad mother and of course I wondered if what we were doing was the right decision. My boyfriend was very supportive. He would go to work each day and come home to take care of us.

I noticed I was much more nauseous during this second pregnancy than I was with Aiden. It was like a repeat of my first pregnancy except worse. There was constant nausea and vomiting from 5:00 AM until I would finally fall asleep from being drained from being sick all day around 8:00 PM every night. Life was very stressful and I found myself being more dependent on my boyfriend. I am used to being independent so having to rely on someone to come home in the afternoon to get a drink of water was beyond stressful to endure. Add a toddler in the mix to watch all day with very limited support and you've got the perfect recipe for a disaster! Although I had family in the area, I did not have a close enough relationship to ask for help with my care and I did not feel I could trust anyone new to take Aiden for a few days. It seemed as if I began to sleep through my days while hoping and wishing for my pregnancy to fly by.

My mother and relatives in California were completely supportive of my needs and they wanted me to come home, but I did not want to leave my boyfriend and risk the chance of delivering our baby without him. As I questioned my decision to stay, I started to feel guilty about the difficult days I would have where my son would lay in the bed with me all day eating delivered pizza and Capri Suns juices that I kept by my bed. I couldn't move without upsetting my stomach or I would end up sicker than I was 20 minutes before. I was beginning to count down the weeks to when I could possibly ask the doctors to deliver my baby. I had created a plan to reach 36 weeks and after that week if my condition worsened I was prepared to beg my doctor for an early delivery to relieve my misery.

Before I knew it, I was 5 months pregnant and still on bed rest due to my severe HG. Nothing I tried would ease the pain and I was still only able to eat green apples and drink water. My boyfriend was at work one day and I began to feel a horrible cramp in my stomach. I called the ambulance and was rushed to the hospital. I was beginning to have preterm contractions. Here I was again praying that I would not have a micro-preemie. The ER team was able to stop the contractions and told me to see my doctor as soon as possible. I made an appointment the next day. I told her that I was interested in getting the 17P shot that I received with my son to stop the contractions. Since I was living in Texas, I was on the Medicaid program. She agreed that I needed it and told me that she had to send a request for approval for the medicine. We went over the form together and she told me that I should be approved, and she would let me know once it was received.

After surviving another painful week, she called to let me know that Medi-Caid had denied my request for the P17 shot. She told me that it is costly, and they didn't think that I needed it. As a black woman I felt defeated. How can the life of my baby be in the hands of an insurance company? How could this even be an option? I talked to my boyfriend when he came home, and I told him that in order for our baby to have a chance at living I would need to fly back home to California to get the best care. He was hurt and upset but he knew that I would not have the best healthcare in Texas and we just wanted our daughter to be born with as little health problems as possible. I looked online for plane tickets that evening and within 3 days my son and I were on a plane.

Once I made it to California, I went to the human service office and was approved for Medi-Cal the same day. I made an appointment with an OB/Gyn and within 8 days I was seen and received the P17 shot with no hesitation. I received the P17 shot weekly until I moved back to Houston at 31 weeks to have my boyfriend at the birth of our daughter.

Difference in Insurance

What I learned about Medi-Caid is that they do not give everyone the same equal options in healthcare. I had to wait a month to be approved for Medi-Caid. It was like searching for a needle in a haystack to get the medical help that you need and once you finally locate it, the doctor still has to take time to review and approve the reasons why they feel you even deserve the help. This should not be a task that doctors have to worry about when trying to maintain and save lives.

My child could have suffered premature birth with major complications or loss of life but clearly, that was not a Medi-Caid concern. Depression, anger and an overall decline in my mental health became a side effect of their denial for which they also seemed to lack concern.

What I learned about Medi-Cal is that they care about their citizens. I was able to apply for health insurance and was approved within hours. I was able to see a doctor and receive the medication that I was previously denied on Medi-caid with. California cared about my baby. California Medi-Cal made the difference in how my pregnancy ended and provided me with a more pleasant pregnancy and NICU stay.

May 2014 Flying for Baby

My Obstetrician in California had warned me not to fly in the late weeks of my pregnancy but I stayed to get the help that I needed for as long as I could since I knew that I had only 3 weeks left to make it to Houston before our daughter would arrive. Prayerfully, I took a chance and flew to Houston to make sure that my boyfriend was present at my birth. I knew it was vitally important that he be a part of this special moment in our lives. Thankfully, while on the plane I didn't experience any contractions. I was so happy to get through a 3-hour flight without any complications and I knew I had made the right choice to return.

I made it through 3 more weeks before my contractions were so tight that I literally could not breathe. I called the ambulance and they rushed me to the Labor and Delivery Ward. I arrived at the hospital on May 28th and after 24 miraculous hours of hard labor, our daughter London was born at 34 weeks and 0 days weighing 3 pounds and 10 ounces. She was now ready for her time in the NICU and this time I was prepared to be there for her in all the ways I already knew I could be but I was still very nervous and partially devastated. I know I wanted to have her early to escape the misery of my pregnancy, but the thought of going through the NICU

experience again was a lot to handle mentally. The doctors and nurses were more concerned about the baby than they appeared to be for myself or my boyfriend. At times, when we would visit the NICU together, the staff would acknowledge me and ignore my boyfriend.

One day we went in to see London together as parents and the nurse only offered me a seat by saying “Here is a rocking chair for you Ms. Randolph, let me know if you need anything”. This phrase was a constant statement I heard whether I walked in with or without my boyfriend. Only this time it had happened far too many times and my tolerance for their mistreatment of him and our new family had gone far enough. I asked the nurse to please get my boyfriend a chair so that he can finally hold his daughter. It has been a week and he has not been able to hold his daughter on his chest. She went and got him a chair but never acknowledged him or even looked him in his eyes to apologize for the lack of quality care that all hospitals are trained to exert with their patients. She quietly returned to the room and placed a rocking chair next to mine. Then swiftly, she grabbed my daughter London out of her incubator with her feeding tube, heart rate monitor, and oxygen cords attached to her and delivered her into my arms. I felt strong, empowered, and loved. I had stood up for my boyfriend and made sure that he felt comfortable to see his daughter. I had communicated with the nurse about what I had wanted and she listened. I had finally found my voice.

Chapter Three: The Final Trip

With enough practice comes perfection which is true with pregnancy as well as anything in life. Doctors say that each pregnancy is different. I can honestly say that my last pregnancy was an unexpected trip that left me with some lasting results I never knew would be a part of my life forever.

Staying Ahead

After London’s birth, my boyfriend and I had no immediate plans of having another child. I had just started a small support group called “Glo Preemies” after my 2nd experience in the NICU with our daughter London and we were six months deep in our non-profit venture. Both my boyfriend and I were in our mid-20’s juggling a new business with the art of parenting. Life was busy! So busy that our lives changed after one night that led to unexpected gifts on a lovely Valentine’s Day weekend.

Days began to pass and I realized that I missed my cycle, I didn’t want to wait a minute longer to find out why, so I picked up a pregnancy test while I was at the local gas station and decided to find the truth right then and there. It turned out I was already 5 weeks and 4 days

pregnant! When the results came back positive, I instantly began to cry. I couldn't believe this was happening right when I was just getting started with my non-profit. I knew that this was going to put me behind in my progress and I just was not prepared for it. I walked out of the bathroom with my head held high and the young lady at the register asked me if I was pregnant. She knew my husband and I because we were frequent customers. I told her "Yes" and she gave me a "Congratulations!". I told her thank you but I couldn't help wondering how I was going to handle 2 babies under the age of 2 and manage a new business at the same time.

I went home and told my boyfriend that I was pregnant. He looked at me and said "Okay" and shortly within minutes I realized I was angry because I knew that my life was going to change drastically while his would still remain "okay". Memories of staying in the NICU for 18 hours a day until each of the babies were safely cared for and discharged back home began playing through my mind. After spending months of being hospitalized and vomiting non-stop, a third pregnancy for me was like hitting a brick wall going 140 mph. I didn't know if I was ready. I went into a mode of panic. I began packing my belongings along with the children's items and told my boyfriend that I only had a few days before I would be sick, so I needed to get back to California as soon as possible. A part of him knew it was the best option for me to get the healthcare I needed and had to fight the other part of him which hoped for the best and wanted me to stay. Before nightfall the kids and I were on the road headed to Sacramento, California and my boyfriend was staying behind in Houston, Texas to continue working to save money for our family.

I arrived in Los Angeles, California in a mere 32 hours, which was not bad for a pregnant momma. But once I made it into the city, I became viciously sick. I was so sick that I could not pass one exit sign without pulling over to throw up. There was heavy traffic and I knew that it was not safe for the babies. Luckily, I had cousins who lived in Anaheim I was able to contact who said they were able to rescue me and the kids. I pulled off the freeway to a fast food restaurant and we waited until they arrived. My cousin had her friend's daughter drive my car and I was taken directly to the ER where I ended up being hospitalized for 3 days. After I was released, I was given nausea medication and told to see my doctor back home in Sacramento, California. Sacramento is 6 hours away from Los Angeles and I knew the medicine would not work well enough for me to drive that far alone. I called my aunt who lived in Sacramento and she got on the first moving train to meet me in Los Angeles. I was so sick that I could barely stay awake without throwing up. My aunt drove us back to Sacramento which took almost 8 hours because she had to keep pulling over on the side of the road for me to vomit. I know that my babies were horrified seeing their mother so sick. Aiden was 4 years old at the time and London was almost 1 year old. Imagine that sight for them. Once we made it to Sacramento I immediately signed up for Medi-Cal and began to see my doctor.

Learning from the Past

By the time I was 8 weeks pregnant, I had signed up for all the programs and resources that I needed for a healthy pregnancy to ensure my children would stay healthy. I was seeing a doctor who was skeptical about my severe symptoms of HG and therefore was very rude and dismissive during my appointments. Eventually, I began to miss appointments because I was either too busy being hospitalized or too weak to even sit up. When I finally went to see my doctor (who was an Indian woman in her late 50's) I asked her if I could get an IV treatment because I was feeling weak and hadn't really eaten anything in the past 3 days. She told me that I just needed to figure out what the baby likes, take some Unisom which was an over the counter sleeping medication and Vitamin B6 to help with the nausea. She told me that I needed to start thinking positively and I wouldn't be so sick. I shook my head in disbelief even though I knew I was already trying my hardest to enjoy this pregnancy. I took her advice for 2 days and became so drugged up from the Unisom sleeping medication that I decided that wasn't the best option for me.

When I was well enough to physically attend an appointment I was already 11 weeks pregnant. The receptionist told me that my doctor had dropped me as a client because I was too sick and I missed too many appointments and she could have seen other patients during my missed appointments. As she told me that, the doctor walked in to talk to another receptionist about a patient. I looked at the doctor and she looked back without a word then continued to walk back to the patient room she appeared from. Over all the emotions within me the best word to describe my state of being was "traumatized". I thought to myself how could a doctor be so rude to a pregnant woman? How can a doctor just decide to "drop" her patient because she was "too sick"? Is this not why you became a doctor to help those who are ill? I left without causing a scene and returned home to cry for what seemed like the rest of the day.

I called Medi-Cal the next day and explained what had just happened. Within 3 weeks I was scheduled for an ultrasound to see the gender of our baby and they told me I would need to ask the Ultrasound office to refer me to a doctor. I went to my appointment feeling happy that I could have found an answer to seeing a new doctor who was better for my needs. When I walked into the Ultrasound building, the ladies at the reception desk were very helpful and genuinely nice. They offered me water and snacks and told me not to worry if I become nauseous because a lot of pregnant moms do in their office. I felt so welcomed and right at home.

After waiting for 15 minutes I was called to a room in the back. I was getting nervous to find out what we were having and also tell them that I no longer had a doctor. A feeling of shame grew stronger because I knew that I was not their typical pregnant patient and I was afraid I would be treated differently. The doctor came in and introduced himself. I told him my name and what the phone representative instructed me to share with him. He asked me about my prior pregnancies, and he reassured me that I was in good hands. He explained that he

works on-site which meant he works personally with every patient that comes in for an ultrasound. Since I was in danger of a high-risk pregnancy, this meant he would be seeing me until the end of my pregnancy and I would receive a bi-weekly scan to make sure that our baby was growing healthy. I was so relieved to have a doctor that wanted to take control of my pregnancy. The ultrasound started and the technician began to describe what she was seeing. To my surprise, she said the baby was doing great and that I was having another girl! I was so happy that I was able to accomplish so much in one day and I finally enjoyed an experience where I left feeling more proud of myself.

Chapter Four: Staying Positive

Staying positive

I was going through this cycle for the 3rd time. Regular hospitalizations to restore my fluids were nothing new to me this time around. I began to prepare myself at night because I knew I was going to wake up the next morning sick and was slowly becoming a severe HG champ! I noticed my pregnancy became less stressful once I started to accept the sickness as a part of the process of bringing life into this world. I stayed strong but it was hard because I missed my boyfriend like crazy. We would talk multiple times a day in our best efforts to work out a long-distance relationship. It had been 4 months without us seeing each other before I began to have stomach pain. I was taking the 17P shot weekly to help prevent contractions but this time it was not working.

Bed Rest

I was placed on bedrest at 5 months pregnant. My doctor saw my struggle and opened up a conversation with me about the possibility of getting my tubes tied after my baby's birth. He knew that I was living in pain and agony during my pregnancy and he wanted to show me a way to end it. I deliberated for days with myself about if I even wanted to consider it. After carefully thinking it through, I decided that I wanted to get a tubal ligation after my baby's birth so that I could focus on my career and get back to my mission of building my non-profit "Glo Preemies".

At my next scheduled ultrasound appointment at 6 months, I told my doctor that I was ready to sign the paperwork for the tubal ligation. He had me fill out a form and told me to carry it in my purse so that once I deliver my baby I can give it to the doctor so they can do it at the same time. I knew this was the right decision. I needed to give back to other women who were in the same situations that I had been in before and I didn't see any other way. I

needed to give back and I couldn't continue this cycle of being sick and putting my life on hold. I told my boyfriend that I had made the decision to get the tubal ligation and he was 100% supportive. He never tried to steer me out of that decision. He empowered me to think about what I wanted to do after and continued to do his best to support my journey from far away.

At 7 months pregnant, I began to have intense contractions. I was rushed to the Labor and Delivery Ward to see if I was having my 3rd child early. I was hospitalized for 3 days and my boyfriend knew that we were getting close to our baby arriving. He packed his bags and before I was discharged, he had bought a plane ticket to California to make sure that he did not miss his 2nd daughters' birth. When I saw him, I was in love all over again. This was his first time in California, and this would be the first birth that would be supported by my mother and my child's father. This was a dream come true.

I was placed on bed rest until I was 36 weeks pregnant. At that time the doctor told me that I was free to deliver the baby at any time. It was a slow and steady process that felt like it would be an eternity before our baby made an appearance into this world.

The Meltdown

At 36 weeks and 2 days pregnant I became emotional. I was so emotional I could have cried enough to fill a whole bucket. I grabbed a chair and sat in my grandmother's backyard and cried miserably for hours. My boyfriend came outside after a while and asked "What was wrong with me?" I screamed out "Why am I still pregnant?!? I don't want to be pregnant anymore!" I was physically drained from being sick for almost 16 months and the last 24 months were taking a toll on my mental and physical health. My boyfriend grabbed a chair and sat outside with me. He listened. He listened to my complaints, he listened to my tears. He made my worst meltdown a time of learning about each other as individuals instead of talking about what was out of our control. I saw the nature of his purpose and felt realigned with my fighting spirit to get through the emotional as well as physical pain of my pregnancy.

Preterm or Full-term

I went into labor at 36 weeks and 6 day pregnant. My water bag began to leak, and I told my boyfriend that it was time to head to the hospital. My mother met us at the hospital, and we began to walk to the Labor and Delivery floor. I was admitted and they began to place the monitors on me. For the first time I was in Labor and they were not trying to stop the contractions. I was relieved. I barely received any P17 shots this pregnancy after 32 weeks and was strictly administered it whenever I was hospitalized for fluid treatments. I had severe HG but with the positive attitude that I kept, I was able to see it as more of a process and not a haunting horror. I was more prepared this time around and now we were aiming for the finish line.

I made sure that my bag was packed with my tubal ligation paperwork. I really wanted to make sure I got this procedure done so that I could continue to focus on my plans to expand my non-profit business and support group. By the time of this birth I had completely put a halt to the support group for 8 months. I spent 16 hours in labor and was so hungry and ready to give birth. I went from 6 cm to 9 cm in 25 minutes and I was finally ready to push. I had my boyfriend and my mother by my side helping guide me. It was a perfect birth for such a traumatic pregnancy. There were 2 doctors and 4 nurses in the room. Everyone was grabbing medical equipment and rushing to be in place for the delivery. With only ten pushes I gave birth to my 3rd child Jamie. She was tiny and weighed 4.6 pounds. The doctor thought it was a great idea for her to go to the NICU because she was under 5 pounds, and we agreed it was for the best that she remain the next two weeks in the NICU.

This time my boyfriend and I were prepared for our stay at the NICU. I had my breast pump from WIC already and was signed up for my community resources within a week of having our daughter. I was less stressed about what was to come and was able to communicate more with the NICU Staff. This time around I did not need to look at the pictures reminding me of how to wash my hands. I went in asking questions about if she was doing tubal feedings or able to try breastfeeding. I was able to wash her by myself after 3 days! The NICU doctor knew I had a goal of becoming a doctor and had conversations with me in a doctor's dialogue. He would go over different treatment options, side effects, and the positive percentage rates. The nurses were comfortable with me so they let us have more time alone with our baby and were courteous to only check in with me every 35 minutes during my 8 hour visits. I felt at home and in control of my daughter's NICU journey. I had become her best advocate and the staff felt the same way.

Chapter Five: Black, Pregnant, and Shamed

Everyday in America, there is an African-American young woman who is just finding out she is pregnant. She is feeling guilt, stress, and possibly ashamed. She is probably sitting in a cradle position somewhere crying wondering who she can tell, what she is going to do, and how she will make it through. I was that woman 3 times before and there are millions of women who have said on social media that they have gone through the same emotions. It can all be connected to one word SHAMED.

Understand that we are not ashamed of being pregnant. We are ashamed of the way we are treated less equally by the way that we have chosen to bring a child into this world. Most of us do not understand how stressful our everyday life situations are until that moment we find out we are pregnant. For families that live in low income communities, finances can already be very scarce. Adding an extra baby to a stressful situation can do more harm to a growing fetus than good.

What We See

We see a world that looks down with harsh judgment towards women who bear the title of single mothers. That is a narrative that has to change. While having my support group for the last 6 years, I heard a lot of African-American mothers who said that they were asked at their admission to Labor and Delivery if they had arrived alone. I also noticed a similarity in the treatment of Hispanic women as well since it appeared that only certain ethnicities were asked if they had a husband coming to support them. With time and introspection of this common trend, I found that the verbiage for minorities that were admitted to the hospital was changed based upon the ethnicity of the family. It became evident that many Hispanics and African-Americans who were laboring mothers were more likely to not be married when arriving at the hospital. In these realizations, I learned that we need to see equality among all races, especially when it concerns the quality level of our communal healthcare. We should be provided the same medical options, no matter the ethnicity or level of income.

We need to see more funding in our local Black-owned and local ethnic resources and hospital care. We need to see more African-American physicians, midwives, social workers, therapists, and NICU nurses. What we see is a world which doesn't understand our culture but turns to the mainstream opinion of a scholar or outdated book to learn about who we are and how to treat us. We see the world trying to provide the best care in an image created by a biased truth. We as African-Americans are demanding the quality level of care we don't see in our hospitals now for our children's potential to thrive in the future years to come.

After Finding Out Your Pregnant

After finding out you are pregnant, you should take a moment to sit by yourself and grab a pen and paper. Write down the top 10 things you would like to make sure you buy the baby before it comes early. It is good to start planning ahead so that everything you will need to acquire as a new mother can be located and purchased within the first 6 months. You will need to begin buying this important list of necessities by the 4th month of your pregnancy.

If you have taken a pregnancy test and do not have a doctor that you feel comfortable seeing regarding your own results, the best thing to do is look for a pregnancy clinic in your area. There are pregnancy clinics in every state that can help with confirming your pregnancy, going over your options, and helping you with applying for programs that you may need. This should be done in confidentiality and the advice should be unbiased. You own the power of all of your decisions!

If you are unable to find access to healthy foods or need assistance with purchasing food, locate your local city human and health services and apply for food stamps or a Cal-Fresh debit card which loads the stamp amount onto a convenient method of use. Food stamps can provide benefits that allow you to get a certain amount of food every month from participating grocery stores. If you are unable to qualify for food stamps, take a look into your local food banks and churches. During the holidays churches will give away food to families who are in need. Never be too afraid to ask for help. The person who may be giving you the bag of food may have been in your shoes before. Lastly, If you find yourself in need of help with housing, transportation, or locating resources contact your local 211 and they should be able to provide you the information if they have it available.

No More Shame

Do not be ashamed about being pregnant. In African-American families, we take pride in our daughters. We want the best for them and hold them to a higher standard than we do our sons. This is common in other races as well. African-Americans in most households have two and sometimes at most three generations who were never even born in to slavery.

Since that time of independent freedom from slavery, we have continued to experience disadvantages that force us to still fight for equal rights to this very day. It is of high importance for our families to see us do better than they did. In many ways they are depending on us women and single mothers to take our families to the next income level and be better for the next generation ahead.

Understandably, at times it can be heartbreaking for our families to find out that we have become pregnant before completing our goals and dreams. It is not that we are ashamed of being pregnant but we are ashamed of letting our family down. We are ashamed of bringing another life into a world that we ourselves are not certain of. We do not need to feel ashamed of our feelings. Our emotions come from a string of hurt that our generations and generations had to endure. Our ancestors were enslaved as baby breeders and that is the last thing our families want us to be considered as. We need to have open conversations with our families when they begin to make us feel ashamed and communicate with them Yes, I am pregnant but I am also aware of resources and programs that will help me as I transition into motherhood". Do not be afraid to ask your family to embrace your pregnancy with you and to ask for their assistance. There will be times when they may become upset that you are dealing with hardships that come with an unplanned pregnancy but remember the initial reactions are temporary and the love your family will have for your child will remain forever. Understand that motherhood is a beautiful journey. In a few short months you will become a mother and the advocate of a beautiful new child. Your life may change but you must know it will be for the better. If you are in college or in a great place in your career, you can always go back. You will not be the first to have a baby and because of the many great advocates like myself before you, there are more programs and laws in place to help pregnant women get access to federal and state resources. They even allow the proper scheduling of the leave time you will need for a healthy pregnancy and delivery.

Handling Rude Doctors

There are several great ways to handle a rude doctor. Do not have fear to talk to your doctor about concerns that you have. Communications will be key in the progress of great health for your baby and yourself. The doctor may not share information with you about a condition that you are pre-exposed to due to your genetic makeup or ignore an important question you may have if they are not skilled to answer you properly without further research. If this happens, be sure to have a professional conversation with them so that you express whatever particular diseases or conditions you have concerns with and stress that you would like a further explanation provided to you. This will usually alert the doctor that you are a concerned parent and start the process of receiving the proper information you will need and deserve to know. If there are still problems with communications or the quality level of care that you or your child is receiving after you have already tried reaching the doctor, there are different departments that you can report unethical practices to.

If you are unhappy with the medical care that you received or witnessed within a health facility, you can write a letter to the institution or government agency. You can usually write them directly on their website. Make sure to be concise with your complaint and remember what your objective is with writing the letter. You should keep it to one page, be sure to list specifics such as names, occupations and the location of the incident and use bullet points if possible. If you are having difficulties expressing yourself, reach out to a friend or family member and ask them to assist you or contact your local information desk at the hospital to locate where to file a formal complaint against your nurse or physician.

What We Need

African-American families are deciding now that we are ending the generational trauma that our ancestors have endured for over 400 years. We have decided to no longer be victimized and stigmatized by our past but to own our future and give our children their best possible foot forward in life. We need equality within our health and educational systems, directions to black-owned resources and small family business support. We need support from our allies, our jobs and our healthcare systems. We need support from the world. We are all in this together to bring our next generation into a healthy reality. We will start with how we bring our children into this world.

Midwives and Doulas have grown widely in popularity again due to the fact that they provide a style of “Family Centered Care” in any setting. They are a prime example of how a patient and healthcare professional should interact. They understand their patient and the process of labor and delivery while steadily providing unbiased support before, during, and after the birth. They build trust with their patients before delivery so that the process is easier for the mother to endure and this is the example that we should learn to follow. Imagine if you are having a high-risk pregnancy and you had a chance to meet the doctor who would eventually be

assigned to take care of your child if it was placed in the NICU prior to delivery. Would you feel less stressed when the situation arises and your baby is suddenly in their care? It is impossible to know exactly which pregnancies will lead to an early birth. Healthcare professionals can do this by creating an informative video of the specific NICU Team that will be mandatory to show to all pregnant patients from 3 months - 5 months of pregnancy. The NICU is real and it is a place that can be scary so the goal is to normalize it and lend a hand to help empower families that go through there without leaving them in a dark, scary place.

Part II: Advocating

There is power in advocating for yourself and others. It is not something that you are born with, but it is something that is taught. We advocate every day in our lives, but we will never know the extent of how far our voices can go until we become an advocate for another human being.

When you vote, you are exercising your right by law to vote. If there were no polling stations in your city would you join a group of individuals and collectively ask for a polling station? If so, you would be advocating for your right to vote.

Why Advocate

Advocation, according to Webster's English Dictionary, is defined as a person who speaks or writes in support or defense of a person, cause, etc. It can feel uncomfortable at first to speak up for what you believe is right. It is important that you learn to speak up for your baby and yourself when things do not feel right so that your family receives the best care you need and deserve. There are others who have gone through similar situations and you are not alone. My mother used to tell me that nothing worth having will come easy. I take that into account when advocating. Advocating for yourself and your baby will change the future for other moms and help break the cycle of neglect. It is time to take charge of your situation and partner with your doctor. It is also a great skill to learn and to use in everyday life.

If you are nervous about advocating here are some ways that will help you understand the power in your voice and get you practice with advocating for yourself:

1. Go to a restaurant and request a dish that you normally would not order because it has an ingredient that you do not like. Ask the waiter to take out the ingredient that you do not like and make sure they understand your wishes. Congratulations you have just advocated for yourself!

2. Find an article or story that you disagree with. Write an email to the author explaining to them professionally why you disagree with their thoughts on the article from your point of view. Keep the email for your own inspiration without even sending it.

This works best when discussing a life situation or different view on a relatable experience. Congratulations again! You have just advocated for those who have been in similar situations as you.

Your Preemie Voice

You are the most important person in your NICU child's life. Remember to always trust your instincts because you are the mother and you do know what's best. Your child grew inside of you and you have the closest connection to their emotions. The hospital staff has been taught by medical statistics but always remember that you know the child intimately.

Epilogue/Conclusion

Everyday another African-American woman discovers that she is pregnant and feels scared and alone. I hope by reading my story those specific women as well as other new mothers can relate to new ideas of how to overcome the obstacles within their path and become queens of a new life.

If you find yourself in the NICU, know that there is always help and support from others who have walked your shoes. Your story is unique. Your story is what makes you amazing. I have included some helpful resource material for your journey ahead within the following pages.

BLACK OWNED RESOURCES

Working Toward A Better Tomorrow

The Alliance for Black NICU Families™ has a strong core of organizations below which are listed as founding US and non-US members. Many are African-American parents of NICU premature infants who have personally experienced racial inequity and can help you.

GLO Preemies:

<https://www.glopreemies.com>

Connect to NICU:

<http://connect2nicu.com>

Eli Collins Foundation for Premature Babies:

<http://www.elibabies.org>

Families Blossoming:

<https://familiesblossoming.com>

Once Upon a Premie:

www.OnceUponAPremie.com

Pebbles of Hope:

<http://www.pebblesofhope.org>

Saul's Light:

<https://www.saulslight.org>

Mended Little Hearts:

<https://mendedhearts.org>

BLACK FAMILY FRIENDLY RESOURCES

Alliance for Black NICU Families:

<https://blacknicufamilies.org>

Preemie Crystal Ball:

<https://crystalballhealth.com>

PreemieWorld:

<https://preemieworld.com>

Prolacta Bioscience:

<https://www.prolacta.com>

Sage Therapeutics:

<https://www.sagerx.com>

Partnerships

- Jennifer Carroll Foy:Female African-American Delegate for Gov. of Virginia
- National Coalition for Infant Health
- Saul's Light
- My NICU Family
- Free2Read
- Golden Journey Empowerment
- Skyler's Gift
- Families for Depression Awareness
- Sobi Therapeutics
- 2020MOM.ORG
- I am Amyrcle

About the Author

Mrs. California United America also known as Mrs. Ashley Randolph-Cooley is a 2018 Presidential Excellence Award Winner for Empowering Women of Color. She won the title of Mrs. America's Virtuous Woman in 2021. She was born in Berlin, Germany to her parents Erik and Wendy Randolph. Her father Erik was a military veteran who was based in Germany during the great fall of Berlin. Ashley was raised in Sacramento, California.

She is an African-American mother of three children who were all born prematurely. She speaks nationwide about her personal experiences and has advocated against racial disparity in the NICU credential programs for healthcare professionals as an advisory board member and became the first African-American parent chair to a subcommittee at CPQCC based at Stanford University. She was a Special Educational Aid and Instructor who dedicated several years to advancing and improving the methods of local educational services that specialize in supporting students who have been disadvantaged due to problems in the system or environment of the child.

She brings her stories to inform and empower African-American pregnant women and families in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) with a series of her life experiences within the book *Black, Pregnant, and Shamed*. Her stories will give you valuable tools, resources, and inspiration to support you through your high-risk pregnancy and strengthen you over your lifetime.

10 Years of GLO Preemies Special Edition

A letter from Ashley

Dear Readers,

As I pen down these words, my heart is brimming with gratitude and awe as we come together to celebrate the remarkable journey encapsulated within these pages. Over a decade ago, in the hushed corridors of a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU), my story began – a narrative that transcends the boundaries of personal triumph to embrace the broader tapestry of Black maternal health and the NICU experience.

This book stands not just as a testament to my individual resilience but as a collective ode to the countless stories etched in the hearts of Black mothers navigating the intricate path of childbirth and neonatal care. It is a tribute to the strength, love, and unyielding spirit that binds us as a community.

In the initial chapters, you will walk beside me through the horror events of my pregnancies and the delicate corridors of the NICU, each step echoing the palpable emotions that reverberate within the walls. It's a journey marked by uncertainty, fear, and hope – a testament to the power of love that propels us forward even in the face of adversity.

As the pages turn, you will witness the evolution – not just of my personal narrative, but of a movement that has grown from the seeds of hardship. From those early days in the NICU, a commitment blossomed within me – a commitment to elevate the discourse on Black maternal health, to amplify the voices that had long been muted, and to carve a path that leads to equitable healthcare for all.

Today, as I stand before you, honored to be recognized as a global leader in the realm of Black maternal health and the NICU, I acknowledge that my journey is not mine alone. It is a shared expedition, and I extend my deepest gratitude to each one of you who has played a role

– whether through support, advocacy, or simply by being a compassionate reader.

This book is an offering, a bridge connecting the past with the future. It is an invitation to reflect on the progress we've made, the challenges that still lie ahead, and the infinite possibilities that unfold when a community unites with a shared purpose.

May this narrative inspire, empower, and resonate with the hearts of those who embark on its pages. Let it serve as a beacon of hope for every Black mother, every NICU family, and every advocate tirelessly working towards a future where healthcare is a birthright for all.

In celebration of a decade of growth, resilience, and transformation, thank you for trusting me.

Ashley Randolph

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As seen on Essence, Yahoo, Washington Informer, The Roland Martin Show, Verywell Family, Vox, Fox19, Journal of Medicine, PR Newswire, USA Today, and more.