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## From the L to Streetcars

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RACHEL MATA

## From the L to Streetcars

*Honorable Mention for the Ella V. Schwing Award*

“To love means loving the unlovable. To forgive means pardoning the unpardonable. Faith means believing the unbelievable. Hope means hoping when everything seems hopeless.”

-Gilbert K. Chesterson

People will experience heartbreak, grief, sorrow, and woes at different times of their lives—it’s inevitable. It all stems from unique situations and circumstances; how each individual responds or copes with it is different. Some learn that they can come out stronger from these situations. When facing these challenges, one must have hope and faith that they will be able to overcome them. Kiya Chatagnier did just that, not letting her unfortunate circumstances discourage her from moving forward in life.

Kiya has a passion for many things in life, including volleyball, her friends, shopping, and her religious faith. She is quick-witted and never shies away from speaking her mind. She also has a burden to help others, something that could be considered uncommon for a sixteen-year old junior. She is thin, has long, golden brown hair, and thick eyebrows. She also has deep brown eyes, and olive skin due to her partial Latin heritage. Like many teenagers her age, she likes to hang out with her friends, go to the mall, scroll through endless pages of social media, all while balancing homework and church life. To those who don’t know her, her life seems like that of a typical teenager. These observations are correct, but she’s also faced many difficulties in her life—difficulties that someone her age should not have had to go through.

Her home life now is vastly different than that of her childhood. Upon entering her current home, one can see that the house is stately, yet minimalistic at the same time. It is two stories, with noticeably high ceilings. The decor in the house is in shades of whites and grays and little hints of yellow, making it simple, yet grand. When asked if she would have seen herself living here five years ago, she answered, “not at all, but I know how blessed I am to be able to.”

Kiya moved to New Orleans last year in November. She was born and raised in a city that is ten minutes away from Chicago, the third-largest city in the United States, also home to the Cubs. She said that she tells people she’s from Chicago to those who aren’t familiar with Illinois—similar to people who say they’re from New Orleans, but are actually from Metairie. Even so, she didn’t move to New Orleans directly from Chicago—she moved from Mississippi first. The reason for this was that her home life in Chicago wasn’t suitable for a child. Her grandmother had arranged for her to live in the Tupelo Children’s Mansion for at least a year, hoping that her daughter—Kiya’s mother—would get her life together. It ended up being five years.

The Tupelo Children’s Mansion is located in Tupelo, Mississippi. It is described as being a home for the abused, mistreated, abandoned, orphaned, or for families that have found themselves in a crisis and need short-term assistance. The home is a shelter for close to 50 to 75 children per year and offers a warm and friendly environment, as well as a Christian foundation.

What makes the home unique is that it was founded on UPCI principles, setting it apart from most foster homes and orphanages. The UPCI is the United Pentecostal Church International, a movement that has a firm foundation in a connection with God through the Holy Spirit and baptism, also believing that God provides them with other gifts like tongue-speaking, prophecies, and healing. They also have a dedication to missions, helping those locally as well as internationally.

Prior to living in the Mansion, Kiya's home life in Chicago was anything but—it was just a building she happened to live in. She lived with her mom and her mother's boyfriend, Kermit, while her brother lived with her grandmother. The house that she lived in with her mother was owned by Kermit's mother. There were at least seventeen people paying to live there, resulting in the house being overcrowded with very little room. "I never had a bed there... I had to either sleep on the floor or at the end of people's feet," Kiya recalls. Most of the time, the house was filled with drugs and alcohol. She was all too familiar with the drunken fights that her mother and Kermit would have. Those verbal arguments would usually lead to physical abuse, but unfortunately, her mother could not defend herself. Soon it became a daily occurrence. She would justify the abuse, saying that she was faking her pain to make her boyfriend feel bad. Kiya's eyes glazed over as she said, "I remember hearing them fight. When I heard him beat my mom, I would immediately start shaking... I would put headphones on to drown it out, but I could still hear her screaming."

Even when it came to her education, her mother would put her own needs before Kiya's. Remembering this, Kiya said, "I would have to walk myself to school every morning because no one would ever feel like waking up to take me... I would try to stay awake during school, but sometimes I was so tired because they would fight all night... I would do so badly in math class because I had no one to explain it to me." Sometimes, her mother would do her homework for her so she could at least get a couple of hours of sleep. Fortunately, she had teachers who were concerned about her health and weariness, so some of them would let her take a nap. Others were there to offer her help with her subjects. She was grateful to those teachers who didn't make her life harder than it already was.

Kiya accredits her time at Tupelo Children's Mansion to her grandmother. Her grandmother was her rock during these tumultuous times. Her grandmother saw that Kiya's mother was bringing more harm than good to Kiya, so she wanted to help in any way that she could. She couldn't take her in, because she was not in the place to raise Kiya and her older brother, Alvaro. She decided to find the next best solution.

Kiya's grandmother was and still is a member of the UPCI, attending church regularly without fail. She found out that her church sponsored the Tupelo Children's Mansion and decided to send in an application for both Kiya and Alvaro. It took her a while to convince their mother that this was the best option for her kids, and that it would be safe for them. Kiya said that her mother even attempted to kidnap her so that she wouldn't have to go away. Eventually, she gave in and signed the documents.

According to the guidelines of the residential group home program, the average child stays there for a year, and others, like Kiya, stay there for a longer—by choice or necessity. In Kiya's case, she was originally told that she was going to be staying for a year, but had to stay there for an extended period of time. This is because her mother's parental rights to her were terminated, resulting in very limited contact. At the Mansion, when the year program is up, the child and biological parents may go to court, depending on the circumstances in which the child was brought to the home. Because of Kiya's experiences in Chicago, court was mandatory. Her

mother decided not to show up, resulting in automatic termination of custody. When recalling the situation, she said, “I was very hurt and shocked that she could so easily give us up... I’m still struggling to find peace with that.”

Adjusting to a new way of life was very difficult at first, especially since Kiya had not been exposed to a structured daily routine. She had to wake up at six every morning. She had to have her room and bathroom cleaned, and had to be dressed in her uniform before seven. If she was not in the living room by seven, she would have to have extra chores or get an iCard (iCards affected the grades of the students and were similar to getting a detention). There were other details that affected the grades of the students, such as being respectful, keeping the rooms clean, and being time-conscious. At seven, their rooms would be checked for cleanliness and afterwards, they would have devotion. At 7:55, they would walk to the Christian school that was on the Mansion’s campus. School started at eight in the morning and ended at three in the afternoon. After school, the students would go back to their rooms and work on homework. If they finished they could go outside, as long as they were with authorized personnel. Kiya remarked, “It was hard, it felt like I was locked up sometimes... we could talk to our families every three weeks but only if they scheduled it, and the calls were monitored.”

When asked about how she kept coped with her new environment, she said that her faith kept her grounded. When she lived in Chicago, she would attend church with her grandmother every Wednesday night and every Sunday morning and went to church camps during the summer. The people that lived with her would make fun of her when she came back home, but she never let it get to her. She liked going to church with her grandmother, but didn’t really practice it on her own. She usually only prayed when she was afraid. She didn’t truly delve into her faith until she got to the Mansion. Even so, there was a time when her faith was tested.

Before being officially adopted, another family was going through the process of trying to adopt her, but a complication occurred and they couldn’t go through with it. She wanted so badly to be adopted by the first couple she looked to as parental figures. She prayed for it and was ecstatic when the social workers told her that the couple was interested in adopting her. When they told her that they could not proceed with the adoption, she was crushed. “I felt like God just took it away from me... I was angry... heartbroken... I felt so sick.” She said that she went through a period of not participating during church services. She stopped praying because she felt that God had taken everything away from her and left her with no family, and with no joy. She just stared at the wall because she was so angry with God. This was also during the time that her brother was going to leave the Mansion because of graduation. “It was a very difficult time for me,” she said, “I felt like I was going to be at the Mansion my entire life and that I might not ever see my brother again.”

A couple of months after this occurred, she was at a service, and was not participating during the entirety of it—until the very end. A woman spoke to Kiya, saying that whatever pain she had, she could look to God and he would lift those burdens up. “I cannot explain the feeling,” she exclaimed, “it was like a funnel, He was just pouring into me, I just felt all the pain lifting off of me.” She hadn’t told anyone what she was feeling, so she was taken aback, and decided to let God continue to work in her life. She decided to be more positive and pray that change would come to her life. After a few months, the family that she is with now took interest in her and officially adopted her.

According to Adoption & Beyond, there are more than 118,000 children in the foster care system awaiting adoption and approximately a million children who have already been adopted. In many cases, it is rare for a teenager to be adopted, even within the system of Tupelo

Children's Mansion. Kiya Chatagnier ended up beating the odds. Through these experiences, she thanks God for pulling her out of her situation, but knows that there was a reason that God put her there in the first place. "I didn't know it then," she commented, "but I know now. It was definitely God's will, because if I had been adopted by the other family, I wouldn't be living ten minutes away from my brother."

When asked about her relationship with her parents and siblings, both biological and adoptive, she had varying answers. She said that when she first met her adoptive parents, she was a bit shy around them, but quickly realized they were awesome. They already had two sons and daughter, all below the age of nine, and had a good relationship with the couple that sponsored her brother. "It wasn't too difficult to adjust because I was already very comfortable with them... I call them 'mom' and 'dad' because that's what they are to me. We have our moments when we fight, because I'm still a teenager, and I love them a lot." She also continues to have a close relationship with her biological brother, Alvaro, and is thankful that he is always near. She also loves her new little siblings, and would do anything for them. When it comes to her biological mother, she is still struggling to forgive and make peace with her. "I still love her," she maintains, "but she needs to learn to take care of herself before I allow her to reenter my life."

Kiya is a part of a larger group, one that is seldom heard. She represents those who are in foster care for whatever reason, especially those who feel that they are hopeless and desperate to escape. She strives to show those around her that she is more than a statistic. She wants to make a better life for herself, better than the one she grew up with. Because of this, she wants to go into social work and help those who are or were in similar situations to her. She wants to show them that they are not alone and that their voices will be heard. She wants to show them that they don't have to resort to throwing in the towel, and that there is so much more to life than just giving up.

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