

## **“THERE’S A HEALING WHEN I’M TALKING”**

*Georgia’s Story*

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As I adjusted the video camera, from the vantage point of the equipment room, I had a chance to see Georgia on the TV screen before we’d had the chance to speak. I saw a somewhat large-framed African American woman, kind-faced, and wearing a T-shirt touting “God Has a Plan.” I could further see that the canvas neck strap holding her photo badge and a few other items said, “I love Jesus.” She was looking at the black and white Ansel Adams photographs on the wall behind her, and I heard her say, in a voice not much above a whisper, “*I don’t think. . .*” and no more. To myself I thought, well, I do think... I think this is a woman with a story to tell.

God’s name comes up often in the telling of that story and it’s obvious that her deep and abiding faith has played a huge part in getting Georgia to where she is today. How else could she survive so much? Her earliest memories are of her father who died when she was only three. She recalls a “*warm feeling*” that accompanied his presence and describes him physically as no more than a “*big, tall shadow.*” His death left her mother with the responsibility of raising Georgia and her siblings by herself in their family home. It was this same home that “some guy” broke into less than two years later with devastating results. The man raped her mother, who subsequently managed to shoot her assailant. He ended up losing his arm. And although not discussed with the children, Georgia remembered the events well enough to recount many of the details to her surprised mother, close to 25 years after the fact. That’s a lot of story to carry around for two and a half decades.

Early on, Georgia developed a pattern of keeping her thoughts to herself. This decision was due, in part, to the fact that when she spoke she stuttered. She was teased relentlessly by her grandfather who took every opportunity to “*get in my face about it.*” “*The result being, I decided I didn’t want to be seen.*” She efficiently accomplished this task by not being heard. One of twin daughters, Georgia tells of being in a room with others, “*but because of my own silence, they wouldn’t know I was there.*” They would go so far as to turn around, see her, and to her twin remark, “When did *she* get here?” Being “invisible” was her strategy for dealing with the painful events of her life.

Georgia makes it clear, however, that her “invisibility” to others should not be confused with an inability to grasp the events going on around her. “*God has blessed me with wisdom. I’ve had it all my life, but for a while it really got lost.*” She is able now to identify her mother’s behavior with herself and her siblings as “passive.” Georgia recounted that it was through her own role as a parent that she began to understand the importance of an active stance. “*Whenever I came across a situation where my kids were being accused of something, I always asked them directly, ‘what happened?’ I let them know there was someone there to hear them.*” I wondered if Georgia’s wisdom would have “gotten lost” if, in her childhood, someone had found a similar means to make sure she knew she was being heard and seen.

She's a hard woman to miss nowadays, and it would be a shame for anyone to do so. Close to the half-century mark (she made me promise not to reveal her actual age, and I wouldn't want to betray her), Georgia is a survivor in more ways than one. A mother of seven kids of her own, she lost one son in 1987, has been a single parent for much of her adult life, and has waged personal battles with TB, depression, and lung cancer. With all this, there's a laughter that spills out from her accompanied by a lowering of her head that is the one remaining indicator of the pain that cannot be forgotten. It's almost as if by doing so she can hold onto a portion of that laughter for herself.

From someone who hardly spoke at all, Georgia has come full circle and is now frequently asked to share her wisdom with others. She has, on earlier occasions, been interviewed and videotaped, been identified as a parent partner, and was asked to speak in front of the Superintendents of AmeriCorps from Washington, D.C. about her own involvement with that group (she is currently in her second year as an AmeriCorps volunteer). She attributes her growth to many factors, her strong faith and the love of her children being just two. When Georgia explains how she recently developed an appreciation for the richness of her experiences of the last five years, there is electricity in the air. *"Everything's lining up,"* she says excitedly.

It was the behavior of her youngest son that first brought Georgia to the Alliance for Excellence and its Mothers and Sons program. Even though in professional therapy "off and on for some 22 years," it was here that Georgia shares she first *"felt validated as a parent ... when I was able to say things, without being judged, that I was never able to say before."* Here she met women like herself, single mothers all, who she feels, as she does. *"I will carry it (validation) in my heart wherever I go."* Her only complaint, when asked by a program staff member about her experiences, was that it was very tiring to get a meal when she got home because her involvement at that time coincided with the weekly treatments for her cancer. A meal was later incorporated into the program's evening's agenda. In other words, *"He listened, and I was heard."*

Her involvement with Mothers and Sons led Georgia and her sons directly to Families and Schools Together (FAST). Another program that incorporates food, Georgia further values it for teaching her *"how to have a meal with my family."* She and her sons not only got the opportunity to share food but also ideas, and Georgia recounts how much they learned from each other through "Scribbles," an activity focused around creating a picture from what at first appears to be nothing more than scribbles on a piece of paper. Also included in the time families spend together is the agreement that, for 15 minutes, the kids get to be "the parents." Georgia learned some valuable lessons about her own parenting style when she realized that her son *"was always respectful of me during that time."* (The FAST program also included a parent empowerment group that Georgia can't say enough good things about.)

Out of FAST came an offer to work with FAST as a parent partner. This was followed up shortly thereafter with an offer to join Americorps. Again, it was an Alliance staff member who approached her, this time pointing out that the program might help relieve some of Georgia's earlier reported fears of getting back into the work force. She got past those fears all right and has since expanded her spheres of influence to include a role in the Healthy Start program and a promise to herself to *"always be taking a class somewhere."*

Georgia recently completed a class in early childhood development at a local community college and continues to take parenting classes that will enable her to become a better community advocate. She's come along way from the stuttering little girl who didn't want to be seen, and now the wisdom is clearly spoken.

*"If you help your community to grow, you're helping yourself. If you intervene before the crossroads, that will help you later in life because you've made a difference in that person's life. Because of people like the Alliance staff seeing something in me, I can now help others dealing with pain. A person gets stuck, I add a little humor to it, which brings lightness to the situation, then they're able to get back to some normalcy. Even though I can get weepy at times, it doesn't effect me the same way. Before I would get stuck, now I can move on. 'Hope' is a part of my vocabulary now. I've been validated, and there's a healing when I'm talking."*

**Georgia**

