

Showing courage in the face of adversity

It has taken me to reach the age of 36 to understand the word adversity. When we think of the word "Adversity" we tend to acknowledge words that are negative.

- Misfortune
- Bad luck
- Disaster
- Heartbreak
- Torture
- Pain
- Shock
- Upset
- Tragedy
- Bad times
- Hell
- Stroke of bad luck

The meaning of adversity is a difficult or unpleasant situation, whether that be Physical, Mental, Emotional, Social, Spiritual or Financial.

But what if we were to challenge this and make a point that adversity is a positive thing to happen in anyone's life?

I will share with you my story that will explain why I chose to show courage in the face of adversity and how it saved my life.

One image that remains within my mind to this day was one of me staring into the tv as a child, looking back into me was another child. She was black, I was white, she lived in Africa and I lived in the UK, she had sadness in her eyes, I had sadness in my eyes, she had a smile on her face, I had a smile on my face. I had a passion to help others mainly a passion for those in India and Africa. It would take me many years to find out why?

Part 1

CHILDHOOD

Born in Liverpool on Thursday 8th March 1984, my dad was black, and mum was white. (This is important and will tie in later) Unfortunately I was not to meet my dad until 34 years later. Mum met my stepdad and life was chaotic. As a child I experienced emotional and physical abuse from the two people who should have been protecting me, nurturing me, guiding me, educating me, and keeping me safe. Now you are most probably thinking why me? **I USED TO WET THE BED**

Years went on and by the time I reached 16/17 my body and mind had finally given up. One night, I took a gin bottle and tablets I found in the kitchen draw with the intent to overdose and end my life. Life was too much for me, I was broken. I remember the next day I awoke, feeling sick as a pig. I woke feeling sadness, sadness I allowed this to happen and I had no one to talk to about it. I felt anger, anger that I have been mistreated for much of my life. I promised myself that not one person would ever make me feel that low again. I got up, dressed, and took the double decker bus to my factory work and I never told a soul until many years later. I never would have thought that this was just the beginning of my problems and that I would need all my inner strength to have courage in the face of adversity.

Relationships were hard for me, after breaking up with a boyfriend after 4 years at the age of 21, I met my prince charming. Out one night, dancing, drinking I met him.... Fast forward 6 weeks and I found I was pregnant with my son. Life was amazing, we were married within the year and I found my happily ever after. I remember one day when my son was 8 months we went to get his first passport pictures, as we were pulling out of street we had a disagreement and all I remember was his fist connecting to the side of my head. In a space of seconds, I felt so many emotions, but one thing that stood out was in that split second, I realised my childhood was starting all over again and there was no escape. I screamed at him to stop the car, managed to run back home, flopped on my bed, and sobbed. After shouting I was going to call the police, I never did. 5 years, lots of black eyes, bruised body, and another child later I finally left. People often ask why it took me so long to leave? It took me so long because I was broken, I did not know what to do? I was blamed by him for his behaviour, the day I caught him cheating was the day I knew it was not my fault. **IT WAS HIS CHOICE TO LAY HIS HANDS-ON ME, IT WAS HIS CHOICE TO SPIT AND KICK AT ME, IT WAS HIS CHOICE TO CALL ME NAMES, IT WAS HIS CHOICE TO CHEAT ON ME.**

IT WAS NEVER MY FAULT, AND IT WAS MY CHOICE TO LEAVE!

Part 2 - Rebuilding my life

In 2010, I made the choice to leave, with two children who were 4&2 at the time, after a year I then had to leave the army quarters, with the threat of a bailiff entering. I moved to a house situated in and known as one of the country's biggest council estates. To say I was devastated was an understatement. To go from having employment, routine, financial security to then having to rely on benefits crushed my soul. For over a year I struggled financially looking after two children, having no car, and carrying bags of shopping with kids, in comparison to what I had been used to was soul destroying. Walking around the estate where everybody seemed to be miserable, their eyes appeared dead. My perception was that they felt like they were a lost cause because society has given up on them, the government had given up on them, the lack of jobs in the area –employment was at an all-time low, it was depressing. I was depressed.....

My youngest started full-time school in September and on that day, I also had my debit card declined to pay for milk and bread. That was the final straw for me the humiliation of standing in a shop in a deprived area. However, that happening was the catalyst for my next move. I empathise now with the people who are claiming benefits and bringing up children. Not only do you deal with financial hardship but dealing with the public's perception of you being on benefits- I was not even proud of being a single parent at this point. I felt I had let myself and my children down. That night I was at my lowest, if the government was not going to help, I had to do it myself.

I called a friend who owned a mortgage broker. It is a small private sector business. I asked my friend to take me on as a volunteer. I would pay my own travel (income support) in return for experience working for his company. He told me I could start in one weeks' time so it would give him enough time to get equipment ordered in i.e. desk, chair, and computer. My feeling at that point was sheer joy, excitement, I felt like I would be putting my benefit money to good use. First day – I was up at 6 am I carefully picked a dress to wear with heels. I must admit I looked and felt good. I felt an enormous sense of pride in that split second. I dropped the children off at school and caught the bus to the train station. The moment I sat on the train I remember it being a beautiful morning. I spotted the metro newspaper and read it. For the first time the next 16 minutes on that train journey I felt euphoric (that was until I realised, I forgotten to shave my legs so much for trying to make a good impression – ladies take note!) I was a proper commuter. I mean you see on films commuters travelling to and from work and I was doing it myself. WOW!!!! My whole outlook in life changed in that one split moment. My head was up, and I felt important I felt part of the community, the working world. I no longer felt like I was incompetent just because I was on benefits. People do not talk enough about how they feel it is all about judgement. It is a very dark and lonely place when your circumstances change, and you are part of the 'benefits cycle '. Luckily, I was blessed with a strong positive, driven mind. It was certainly sink or swim time.

After 3 months of work experience at the mortgage brokers I had a hard decision to make in December 2012 that changed my life forever. I was about to be offered paid work at the mortgage brokers and my son Taylor was due to have corrective surgery on his feet at Southampton General Hospital after experiencing severe problems through his early years. The recovery time was 3 months so as a mum my choice was to stay at home and care for his needs. I was gutted if I'm honest as I had worked so hard at the mortgage brokers for 3 months to try and make a more comfortable financial life for me and the two kids but I could not take a position up with them as my son needed me. I think I was suffering a bit of depression at this point without realising it.

Following on from his foot surgery I then received some further devastating news. The doctors had detected my son had a heart murmur and with further investigation he was diagnosed with 2 mild

leaks on one of the valves (heart). He was later diagnosed, as having Marfan Syndrome (Connective tissue disorder) which is an inherited genetic condition. The condition affects the heart, eyes lungs and tissue in the body -The saddest thing to be told was he could never play for a football team or play other contact sports. As you can imagine whilst recovering from his foot operation, I was encouraging him to stay positive and that the operation meant he could play football one day so to be told that news was devastating for us as a family. I remember the train ride home; I cried all the way. I had no one to support me, I felt lost and alone (again)

So where did the condition come from? We got the genetic test back from me and his father and yep it came from me...I have Marfan syndrome also. I spent all this time never knowing the truth so for a while it all came crashing down on me...

Why me god ... I would often scream into my pillow at night with tears and a huge ache in my heart. I was emotionally and physically tired from life.

Wow, so 2 diagnoses in a few months. Did I lay in bed feeling sorry for myself? Yes, however I managed to get back up and find the strength to keep pushing through life challenges.

After 5 years of unemployment I went on to managed 120 people across Hampshire, Dorset, and IOW for a well-known charity in a full-time paid role. I attended a garden party at Buckingham Palace, I successfully have set up events to give a platform for the community to share their stories for International Women's Day over the last 3 years. I am in the final stages of registering my charity that will offer real life, insightful programmes to help others progress in life.

2018, I managed to find the brother of my biological dad on Facebook, like a bull in a china shop, I sent him a message saying I was his niece. I cannot begin to describe that feeling speaking to an uncle I have never met. He passed on my number to my dad and within days we communicated via text. I remember the first time I spoke with him and heard his voice I was sat in the car parked up at the supermarket (I think sub consciously I knew I needed a drink after) We slowly took the time to know each other and arranged a meeting. I could not believe he was closer to me than I thought. He no longer lived in Liverpool and had moved to Clapham in London. I remember the train ride, I was on my own, nervous, scared, and was one of the few times I needed my mum to hold my hand and say everything will be ok. As usual I faced every adverse situation on my own. It turns out my dad looked just like me; I was also pleased to hear I am part Guyanese. Guyana is known as the land of Six people -Africans, Indian, Amerindian, Chinese, Europeans and Portuguese.

That year, I also met a wonderful guy call Adrian. Both men coincidentally lived in the same area. A few weeks later I received the devastating call from Adrian that he had terminal cancer. By this point in my life.... I shouted up to god and said "Anything else you want to throw at me "I made the decision to continue in Adrian's life as a friend. We spoke every day and we became best friends.

2019, we were told my son will need his aortic valve replaced relatively soon (We do not the planned date for surgery), however I can assure you I will be prepared.

2 days later 8th March (my birthday) I went ahead and hosted my International Women's Day event. April came along, I visited Adrian who by this point, was now in a hospice. He died on the Easter Bank Holiday Monday. I was broken and decided to take myself off to the doctors and ask for help. I remember him saying to me "Charlene, don't you think even superwoman needs help from time to time?) I took part in a 16-week counselling program.

Fast forward to 2020, I have finally reached my 10-year plan. I am at University studying a BA Honours Degree in Business Management and Leadership, and I have started a brand-new charity that is in the final stages of being registered. I am indeed living my best life with gratitude to adversity for allowing me to learn, grow but above all..... Succeed

Showing Courage in the face of adversity saved my life.

Showing courage in the face of adversity has allowed me to live the life that was destined to be.

I now associate positive words with adversity rather than negative.

- Growth
- Strength
- Appreciation
- Share own experiences to help others
- Choices
- Control
- Appreciation
- Love
- Respect
- Empower
- Inspire
- Stroke of good luck
- Good times
- Be honest
- Be conscious
- Be grateful

Thank You