



Mothers' Strengths

By Erin Vanden Brook, JPA Therapist

As a child therapist, I witness parts of my clients' lives that are difficult and painful. That can leave me with my own heartaches and feelings of exhaustion. But at the same time, I've had many opportunities to see how these challenges can be catalysts for resilience and strength for my clients and their families.

I am particularly moved by the constant power I encounter with mothers and grandmothers – women who without hesitation or question make sacrifices and reshape their lives to ensure their children and families have the best they can provide. Like anyone, they may endure times that require more effort and support, but they fight through because it's not just themselves they're carrying, but also their entire household.

Faith:

Two years ago, Faith, a single mother with a 10-year old daughter, came to Chicago to escape extreme domestic violence. She had come close to being killed on more than one occasion and knew that her only option to keep herself and her child safe was to get as far away from her abuser as possible.

But Chicago was not an easy fix – living on the streets and in shelters, Faith rarely had a moment where she wasn't fighting to find a roof over their heads and some food to eat, let alone any time to breathe and process the astronomical life change

she had just put her small family through. Still, she persisted, and eventually secured housing, found counseling, and began to establish a new life where she and her daughter could heal. There would be days where she said she thought she would break, but she knew she had to keep going, not for herself, but for her daughter.

Kim:

Kim thought her parenting years were behind her. She had raised four children and was happily settling into her role as doting grandma who got to have fun with the grandkids during the day, while still having nights to herself. That was until her youngest daughter moved out of Chicago, leaving a son behind.

Kim knew if she didn't step in, her grandson might end up in foster care; she just couldn't let that happen. So she changed her work schedule to accommodate drop off and pick up at school; cleared out a spare room to make a bedroom her grandson would love; took him to doctor appointments and summer camp; and made sure he still visited his dad when she could.

Kim also asked for help when it became evident this change in her grandson's life was bigger than the two of them could handle on their own. Even on the most challenging days when she would call with a lengthy list of events that left her feeling lost and overwhelmed, she'd tell me it'd be okay, that she'd always do what was needed for her babies.

Paula:

A mother of two boys, Paula was considered a “hothead” at their school. She’d often raise her voice with school staff, using language that was not the most child-friendly.

Teachers didn’t always know how to approach her with feedback about her boys’ behavior and academic challenges, worried she might cause a scene – and it’s true, she often did. But when I offered a support group for single mothers at the school, she was quick to sign up and always attended. She’d reflect empathically about the effect her actions and reactions had on people, openly acknowledging that it might be helpful to try communicating differently.

She was actively looking for ways to make that change. Paula shared that the father of her two boys was in prison; she feared that if she failed as a parent and her sons had any problems, no

matter how small, they would end up in prison or worse, killed.

She disclosed times when she’d had to drive around at night with her young sons sleeping in the back of the car because they had turned off the heat in her apartment, and times when she had to work two jobs just to afford enough food for her kids, but not enough to feed herself. Paula constantly fought for her kids, and, as she put it, “if I don’t, who will?”

As a woman who doesn’t have kids of my own, I find myself constantly in awe of the selflessness, courage and strength it takes to be a mother. From day one, moms are pushed to the very limits and tested on what they can physically and emotionally handle. As I continue to work closely with female caregivers - mothers, grandmothers, aunts, cousins, neighbors, and friends – I’ll cherish the opportunities I have to witness the endless power that exists within these real-life superheroes. **JPA**