



O^{The}pen Heart

To give and receive lies at the heart of a human life by Rebecca Walden

We've all got them in our lives.

Those who use their talents to better the circumstances of perfect strangers, the ones for whom action becomes the antidote to cynicism.

The reason the term "salt of the earth" was invented.

Meet Brookwood endocrinologist and president of For Nicaraguan Health nonprofit Rodolfo "Rudy" Vargas.

When Dr. Vargas left his native Nicaragua in 1969 to attend medical school in the U.S., he carried the poverty-stricken images plaguing its citizenry with him.

Keeping an eye on the political situation back home, which was quickly accelerating from bad to worse, Vargas finished his training in internal medicine, specializing in the then little-known field of endocrinology. By 1981, he was in private practice, and regularly flew home to try and make a

meaningful impact.

"Every time I would travel there, in one bag I would take my clothing and the other bag was packed full of medicines for either local hospitals or dispensaries."

Vargas continued this service for the better part of a decade, by which time he became more involved as he learned of additional needs. "The old hospital where I had done my medical training was in need of washers and dryers. They were doing their washing on stones. Two philanthropists here gave me a total of \$70,000 and we purchased three washers and three dryers, 75 pounds capacity each, which went to the local hospital and the asylum."

By 1995, Vargas' involvement had morphed from medicine man to hands-on healer. "We brought a 15-year-old kid here that when he was a year old, a truck ran over him and broke his hip—he had lost his left lower extremity. This kid got a total

prosthesis from the abdomen to the left leg and lower extremity. For three months, he went to recovery at Lakeshore and for three months, he and his mother lived at my house."

Three years later, Vargas, with two friends in tow, traveled to Nicaragua for one week to provide medical relief to victims of Hurricane Mitch. "We also took \$35,000 to the Red Cross. In those days, the national person of the Red Cross country chapter was my mother-in-law. That was our first real mission group."

"That is one thing that I've always had there—a good nexus of friends and family. That is the way things work in Nicaragua. It is a bureaucratic environment. But if you have good contacts, you can make things happen. Nothing is practical like here where you fill out a form and you know that everything will be done. Thank God I've been able to have the ability to make things happen."

Later that same year, Vargas returned with a dozen physician friends representing a wide range of specialties. The consensus was that the group could strengthen its impact by filing for non-profit status and galvanizing its donation efforts. By February 2000, For Nicaraguan Health was born, and a team of more than 40 physicians and other volunteers embarked on the non-profit's first official medical mission trip.

"After two years of working in medical missions, the group felt we needed to have more of a presence there. In the historical area of Granada, we found an old, dilapidated building that we restored and equipped, and in February 2004, we opened the Clinica Alabama-Granada. We hired two doctors and four other personnel. Between the two doctors, the clinic now sees on average 60 to 80 patients a day. Every patient receives consultation and medicines free."

While the focus of the Alabama Granada Clinic is adult general medicine, Vargas notes that it has gained notoriety for the treatment of diabetes.

"They can get the latest types of medications and drugs, including insulin. We always have an endocrinologist, nephrologist and general medicine physicians there."

Vargas estimates that the clinic provides services valued in the neighborhood of \$1.5 million annually.

In addition to providing assistance to the clinic during their annual medical mission trips, Vargas and his team also divide their time between the local hospitals in Granada

and Manawa, the National Eye Institute, the National Cardiology Center and the military hospital.

Non-surgical patient visits excluded, Vargas conservatively estimates that during each trip, the group collectively performs: 20 pacemaker surgeries, 50 to 70 cataract surgeries, 10 corneal transplants, 80 oral surgeries, 20 endoscopies and 5 to 10 gynecological surgeries.

"We do this with a budget of less than \$200,000, which is less than 5% in overhead. We're managing very well every penny that we get, but we're also making every possible use of the resources of the good, great humanitarian heart of the American people," he adds, citing with gratitude Alcon, which provides all eye surgery supplies, Medtronic, which supplies pacemakers, and also the contributions made to For Nicaraguan Health by St. Jude Medical.

When it comes to fundraising and donations, Vargas is a self-described "professional beggar."

"I will have no shame to ask you or anybody to donate, because the more we can do for these people there, the better. I know we are doing a lot, but it's never enough. The needs are so great. So I have no shame and no qualms about asking people to donate."

"I think we've learned that there is a sector of the population that, unfortunately, will never have their head above water. They are so poor and neither the government nor the private sector will do enough to bring them to a decent level. It's an unfortunate

situation. I know they will be there and I know there will always be a need. We don't look at the political situations because we know those things will never change."

"But we're not going to wait until we have a perfect, ideal world in which to give help. They need it now, they'll need it tomorrow. That tells me that I need to continue doing it," Vargas says.

That tenacity and power of one mentality, which served as the impetus for the start of Vargas' medical mission work, is a trait shared by former FBI agent and budding car ministry founder Ashley Curry.

Although he's quick to dismiss any kudos with a self-effacing "I'm a shade tree mechanic at best," Curry's passion for helping others lift themselves up by the bootstraps easily gives him away.

"We're helping people who are trying to help themselves. I emphasize the fact that these are people who are trying to work. We're not just giving cars away. We're trying to help people that are barely getting by and trying to help themselves and support their families."

The idea first gained momentum when Curry was approached by a minister at his home church of Vestavia Hills United Methodist. The minister recalled Curry's interest in tinkering around with cars and asked him to assist a family within the congregation who was about one step away from becoming homeless.

"This family was trying to work but how do you get to work if you don't have

transportation? We're not a city blessed with mass transit so it wasn't like they could go out and catch the bus. What started off as me going over to their apartment and putting a water pump in their car led to that family getting back on their feet. The father of that family has volunteered a lot of his time at the church as a way to pay back. So in a small way, we were able to help that family."

In true pay it forward style, Curry's initial foray into his fledgling car ministry led the father of this first family he'd helped to discover a similar need with another family. By now, Curry was hooked, igniting his passion for what the idea could become.

"What I can envision with this is that we have an old, used vehicle that is mechanically ok, sitting up here at the church, ready to be used by someone whose car has died. Then ideally we could take the one that died, repair it and have it ready and waiting for the next person."

Active in his neighborhood association, an avid huntsman and a skilled handyman who single-handedly restored his family's summer retreat at Lake Martin, Curry has no shortage of distractions with which to fill his free time.

Despite this, he finds it hard to imagine not pursuing the car ministry idea. "We can always fall back on 'Well, I just don't have the time—I've got to do this, I've got to do that,' type excuses. But the one Bible verse I've always remembered is where Jesus said, 'What you do for the least of these you do for me.' And that's the basis for trying to help these people."

A regular at community outreach events sponsored by his church, Curry often crosses paths with the kind of tough get going folks who are working hard to better their present circumstances, further fueling his passion for the impact this car ministry can have on the lives of others.

"Recently, we were painting the house of one of our church employees. A young man who lives there helped us work all day. We didn't ask him to—he just did that because he lives in the house. That work ethic made an impression on me. I asked his guardian if he had any skill sets, and it turned out that he was a welder. In the course of my normal duties, I was at Wayne Industries. The general manager wanted to talk to him.



Dr. Rodolfo "Rudy" Vargas.

Scenes from the Nicaraguan clinic where Dr. Vargas volunteers time, services and medicine to patients in need.



He didn't have a car. I drove him down there and they hired him on the spot. Now he has a job, but no car. So we kick in this car ministry again."

Working through a mechanic friend of his, Curry found the young man a recently repaired 1994 Ford Explorer and bought the car, for which the recipient is paying him back monthly.

"If you could have seen the smile on this kid's face—for a 1994 Ford Explorer, his first

car. It didn't even have a bumper. He called me recently to see if I would help him find one, which we did at an auto salvage yard. He paid for the bumper himself and was absolutely tickled to death."

"So we accomplished a couple of things here. Here was a young man who needed employment and has now shown a lot of maturity in assuming this car debt and paying me back. He also has great pride of ownership. It gives him a lot of pride to be



Former FBI agent and budding car ministry founder Ashley Curry. Below, he is photographed with Jay Campbell, a participant in the ministry.

able to pay me back. This is not a situation of someone just giving him a car.”

As he considers the potential impact that this car ministry can make, Curry acknowledges that legal and liability ramifications will have to be addressed, but just as quickly concedes, “There are always reasons not to do something.”

“But in these type endeavors, you find a way to make it work. You take some risks. In a small way, we’re helping these people.”

As Curry and others like him have found, these “small ways” of helping others more often than not can launch a ripple effect,



leading to unexpected displays of generosity. One such instance occurs almost daily in the Town of Mt Laurel, where residents routinely frequent an unassuming little white Toyota truck parked outside the EBSCO Realty office and fill it to bursting with all manner of household treasures.

It’s an unspoken code of sorts within the neighborhood. Just as the truck’s owner, petite and spunky philanthropist Della

Pender would never ask for donations, longtime residents, who know of her good works, would never consider not giving.

Each afternoon, their contributions are taken to God’s Outreach Corner in Harpersville, a resource program providing a wide range of assistance to families in need that Pender has quietly operated since 2005.

The program informally got its start back in 2000, when Pender felt called to find and help families struggling at Christmas. Armed with \$1,000 in savings and a business-card sized ad in the Trader’s Helper asking for families who needed help with food, clothing or toys for their children over the holidays, she didn’t have to wait long for letters requesting assistance to start pouring in.

Pender personally visited with each of the 40 families who had written her, got to know their circumstances and their children, and then set about shopping to see how far that \$1,000 would take her.

“I’d be in WalMart, juggling two buggies, each filled with four or five basketballs, four or five footballs and a bunch of other stuff. Strangers would come up to me and ask what I was doing. When I told them, they opened up their wallets. Some asked if they could adopt a child and buy this or that for them. I had 120 children that first year, and we helped every last one of them. I didn’t have to touch a penny of my savings, even though I had dedicated it for that purpose.”

The joy of providing a meaningful Christmas for these families quickly faded, however, as the conditions Pender observed during in-home visits left her feeling the need to provide services with a longer-lasting impact.

Initially, Pender operated God’s Outreach Corner from a camper trailer, but as her inventory of clothing, housewares, toys and appliances grew, she longed for a more suitable environment where she could welcome families to supply them with whatever they needed to get back on their feet. That’s when she moved the program to its current location off of Highway 280 in Harpersville.

“I just felt in my heart that I needed a place where I could bring the families and actually clothe them properly so that the children would not be made fun of at school. It is all about those children.”

Word of mouth about Pender’s ministry spread quickly, and before long, she was outfitting families with much more than winter coats.

“In the years since I started God’s Outreach Corner, we’ve actually been able to get two mobile homes for families, each of whom has three little children. The first time, I was looking for one with a wood-burning fireplace so the family could stay warm when the power gets cut off—that is just the way it is. Word spread, and eventually I received a call about a mobile home that was available and when I walked in, there was the most beautiful stacked-stone, wood-burning fireplace.”

“I got the family, blindfolded the children and walked them inside. I cannot explain it when they saw it. Before they got the home, the dad had a metal barrel that he kept a fire going in all last winter. Those children would play around it to keep warm. When they went in this big place with central heat and air—it was amazing. The mother kept saying ‘I can’t believe it. I’m in a dream. I’m going to wake up.’ It’s really something when you can do that for people. They are floored that someone would even think to do that for them.”

The second mobile home helped rescue a family living in squalor in a camper trailer that Pender describes as “the most horrific place I have ever seen.” Through the combination of a successful benefit yard sale at Pender’s church, and a call from someone who learned of the organization amidst his divorce and was looking for an outlet where he could donate furniture, that family now has new furniture, a washer and dryer and a complete household setup. “I still visit them, and they are living happily here, doing very well.”

“That is my goal—just to help people in our own backyards. They’ve got Mom and Dad there, but he may be making minimum wage, and they are just trying to survive and it’s all they can do. I tell them all the time, ‘If we’re doing your clothes, you don’t have to spend money on clothes. We’ll do the school supplies, you use your money to pay bills and get the utilities going.’”

While Pender’s focus is certainly where it should be, on necessities rather than frivolity, Over the Mountain mom Ashley Byrd believes that celebrating milestone



Della Pender runs God’s Outreach Corner in Harpersville.

events is a vital rite of passage for every child, eschewing the notion that children in unfortunate circumstances must forego this “luxury.”

Feasting on a huge piece of cake and ice cream, eagerly tearing into brightly-wrapped packages of favorite toys and soaking up the attention of friends who have gathered just to celebrate your overall fabulousness—it’s the stuff of birthday magic.

Believing so firmly in the importance

of celebrating these events in a big way with children who would otherwise go without, Byrd has been bringing the birthday magic to children of the Shelby County Hannah Home since 2007.

New to the city and eager to establish roots in the community, Byrd was initially moved to action after attending a luncheon where keynote speaker Patsy Riley spoke about a project she’d initiated to provide parties for elementary school children whose

Over the Mountain mom Ashley Byrd believes all children should celebrate birthdays even when they find themselves in difficult circumstances. She works to make sure that this vital right of passage happens for some young people.



birthdays would otherwise go unrecognized.

Within 24 hours, Byrd hatched a similar plan for the Shelby County Hannah Home, had it green-lighted by the Women's Auxiliary president and set to work assembling her "Birthday Bin."

Now, several times a month, on each child's actual birthday when possible, Byrd rolls out the red carpet for her petite guests of honor, who range in age from one to 12. She consults with each child's mother beforehand to learn about the child's interests, and then scouts out the perfect theme, cake and assortment of gifts to help each honoree feel celebrated and special.

"I have tremendous respect for these women. They have survived circumstances I can't even fathom. They are [at Hannah Home] to give their children a better life."

Byrd cites the friendships forged with the women of the Hannah Home as one of the best, if not unexpected, outcomes of the program. "I was very nervous the first time, I wasn't sure what I'd be getting myself into. But the mothers really got involved in it. Now, rather than thinking of it as me giving the parties, I see my role more as assisting the

mothers in throwing their child a birthday party."

Byrd's enthusiasm is contagious, and has helped her recruit a dedicated circle of volunteers, including her mother, sister, mother-in-law, and growing cadre of friends.

"It's nice to have the women of the Hannah Home socializing with the women that are volunteering to host this party for the children. There are a lot of conversations about how other moms handle particular situations—mothering-type questions. People who own businesses also go down there and doors open up for many of these women who are trying to find employment. That has probably been my biggest surprise, because I always thought I was doing this for the children and now I see it's as much for the women as it is for the children."

As Shannah Garrison can attest, having women support each other in this manner can be very self-affirming, particularly for those working earnestly to build better lives for themselves.

The straight-talking, second-chance believing Garrison is a force of nature to her clients at The Lovelady Center, a transitional

program for women working to overcome poverty, addiction and abuse.

Her ability to relate to residents is forged from common ground; Garrison herself originally came to Lovelady on court order, the result of one too many drug possession charges.

The daughter of a Memphis-based Pentecostal preacher, Garrison enjoyed a privileged childhood and the trappings of an upper-middle class lifestyle, until she took what she describes as "a hard left" after finishing high school.

"If you'd ever have told me I'd let cocaine become my God, I'd have said you were nuts."

That downward spiral earned Garrison a three-year-sentence at a women's penitentiary in Mississippi.

Following her release in 2002, Garrison sought unsuccessfully to reconnect with

family.

With no support system, she turned to the streets, where she was quickly dubbed "Half Pint" because of the half pint of whiskey she carried around in her back pocket. When law enforcement busted Garrison's hustle—selling dope to truck drivers along Highway 78—she found herself unceremoniously forced onto the footsteps of The Lovelady Center.

Cautious and somewhat resentful of her new surroundings, Garrison balked at the Center's faith-based curriculum, which includes a steady stream of praise and worship music playing over the sound system. "I hadn't wanted to hear anything about God for years. I told them 'You need to turn that off or I'll tear up your radio.' It made me think about my life and my roots."

Despite a prickly start, Garrison settled into life at Lovelady for eight months, during which time she graduated from the rehabilitation program and even started working as a Lovelady staffer. Under the supportive eye of Center founder Brenda Lovelady Spahn, Garrison was a flourishing

success story in the making.

"One night, I just walked out. I was conflicted about it, but I walked out."

Over the next seven months, Garrison downshifted back into her street lifestyle.

"This one night, I was back at the truck stop parking lot off of 78, waiting to meet the drug dealer, when this woman came up to me and said, 'Do you know God loves you?' I said, 'Yea, I do know that.' I told her I grew up in the church but if I get down on my knees and ask for forgiveness now, then stand back up, then what? What will happen? 'This is my life. I'm surviving day-to-day.' I had eight smoking trucks waiting on me."

Before long, word reached Garrison that "a red-headed bounty hunter" was looking for her.

Garrison laughs out loud as she recalls the fierce loyalty of Spahn, who had worked tirelessly after Garrison split to find and protect her prodigal daughter.

"She came to North Birmingham, where she didn't need to be, and looked for me. She'd heard someone say they'd seen me at a guy's house—his name was Pink Panther. She knocked on the door and asked to see 'Mr. Panther, please.' He is huge—she just tried to walk right past him in the doorway to look for me, until he finally convinced her I wasn't there."

Pink Panther did get the message to Half Pint, and when she was eventually arrested on violation of probation, Garrison sat in the Jefferson County jail a full week contemplating her next move.

"I was a shell of a person. Even though I had betrayed her trust, I thought I owed Brenda an apology. I called her collect and the first words out of her mouth were 'Hey darlin', are you ready to come home?'"

"Here I was, wearing camouflage pants and a tank top—my tattoo still said 'Half Pint.' I remember sitting back here crying, thinking, 'Can I really have a life?' She put me through intensive residential treatment."

After Garrison completed her treatment, Spahn hired her on as a case representative. "She told me 'Sit at this desk now,' and I've never left it."

"I now teach a morals and values class on 'Who You Are When No One's Looking.' I tell the women, 'Don't think you can go back

Shannah Garrison gives back through her work at The Lovelady Center, a transitional program for women that she credits for getting her own life back on track.





Jennifer Jolly understands both sides of giving through her experience with United Way.

Since that reunion, Garrison has settled into an apartment in Crestwood with her dog, a long-haired Chihuahua named K.J., short for Kingdom Joaquin, “after my daddy,” she says. She’s also paid off all of her felony fines, which had reached the thousands, and has even reconnected with her 15-year-old daughter through Facebook.

“She finally accepted my friend request,” Garrison says, proudly adding that her daughter has recently returned from her sixth consecutive mission trip to Guatemala. Garrison is ever-respectful of the boundary there, noting “I don’t have the right to be over-involved with her. My dad is a

part of her life, and for that I am thankful.”

“This is where I’m supposed to be.”

That’s the curious thing about philanthropy. Just when we start feeling cozy and think we’re where we’re meant to be, our peaceful little worlds can get rocked on the turn of a dime. Just ask Jennifer Jolly.

Jolly is the kind of person who beats the Monday office doldrums by surprising coworkers with a box of Panera Bagels.

Refreshingly selfless in her notion of career success, she draws her 8 to 5 satisfaction less from her own accomplishments and more from coaching and developing her staff along their individual career paths.

A regular at the Worship Center Christian Church, room mother for the classroom of her eight-year-old-twins, and a United Way fair share participant for the

past decade, this modest, soft-spoken single mother of three never expected to be in the position of receiving the generosity she was so accustomed to giving herself.

But in October, a chain of events in her life created the perfect financial storm, and Jolly, who had always been the giver, began to empathize with those she had helped in ways she never could have imagined.

“I’ve never been in that position, where something as simple as getting lunch or coming up with gas money were concerns,” says Jolly. “I have always been the giver. For that to be reversed and for me to find myself on the opposite side—needing help at 40 years old—it was humbling.”

Jolly and her oldest daughter—20-year-old Chanel—combine paychecks to cover household expenses. But when Chanel lost her job as a cashier in August of this year, which coincided with substantial cutbacks in Jolly’s own job, the family’s already limited disposable income vanished.

Jolly maintained her pluck and nimbly readjusted expenses to make ends meet when a blown head gasket in her 2005 Chevrolet Equinox saddled her with an outrageous car repair bill.

With no financial slack left in the reins, Jolly’s dilemma quickly accelerated from uncomfortable to impossible, forcing her to face the rather humiliating task of prioritizing vital, non-luxury expenses like food, shelter, transportation and health insurance.

The low point came in early October, when Jolly, who had been paying her rent as timely as she could while balancing payments for other household bills, came home to an eviction notice.

“Everything that could go wrong went wrong. It was a combination of everything at once. I had been holding it in for so long and trying to be that strong person, trying to keep up this image that everything was ok. Inside, I felt like screaming.”

That’s when a friend suggested Jolly contact the United Way. In a matter of hours, the agency conducted their due diligence and notified Jolly that they would cover two months’ rent while the family worked to regain its financial bearings.

This good news came on the heels of even better news. After three months of conducting a focused job search, Chanel

received a job offer as a seasonal sales associate with Target. Acknowledging her gratitude, Jolly observes that “In the midst of all that has happened, I know everything is going to be okay.”

Although she’s intensely private, Jolly does not shy away from sharing her story with others.

“I want people, particularly single mothers, to realize that it’s okay. You don’t have to have it all figured out. Do the right thing. Know that if you do come into a situation out of your control, there are people out there who care for you and are willing to do whatever they can for you.”

“I’ve been sowing and sowing and now it’s time for the harvest.”

Josephine Talmore has certainly found this to be true. Determined to rewrite her own success story, Talmore is keeping her eye on the prize—for the day she can enroll in Le Cordon Bleu’s culinary arts program.

Like any other committed student, she attends class regularly and hits the books hard. The difference is that for Talmore, “class” consists of one-on-one tutoring sessions at The Literacy Council, and her go-to books include the “Challenger” reading series and the dictionary.

With a mixture of candor and ambition, Talmore unabashedly admits that despite receiving a diploma as part of the 1983 graduating class of Gadsden High School, she still has trouble with reading comprehension and math skills, neither of which will deter her from her long-term goal of becoming a chef.

“I was in special education classes, which didn’t teach very well. I just wanted to start over fresh and get some help with someone working with me one-on-one. Although I have a learning disability and there are some things I can’t grasp very well, I do a lot of reading exercises and listen to questions to keep my mind focused. I am doing what I have to do by starting at the bottom and working my way to the top.”

Through The Literacy Council, Talmore is beginning to realize her dream.

Currently enrolled in the GED program at Jeff State, she remains devoted to her coursework at The Literacy Council, and is beginning to see measurable improvements in her reading comprehension test scores.

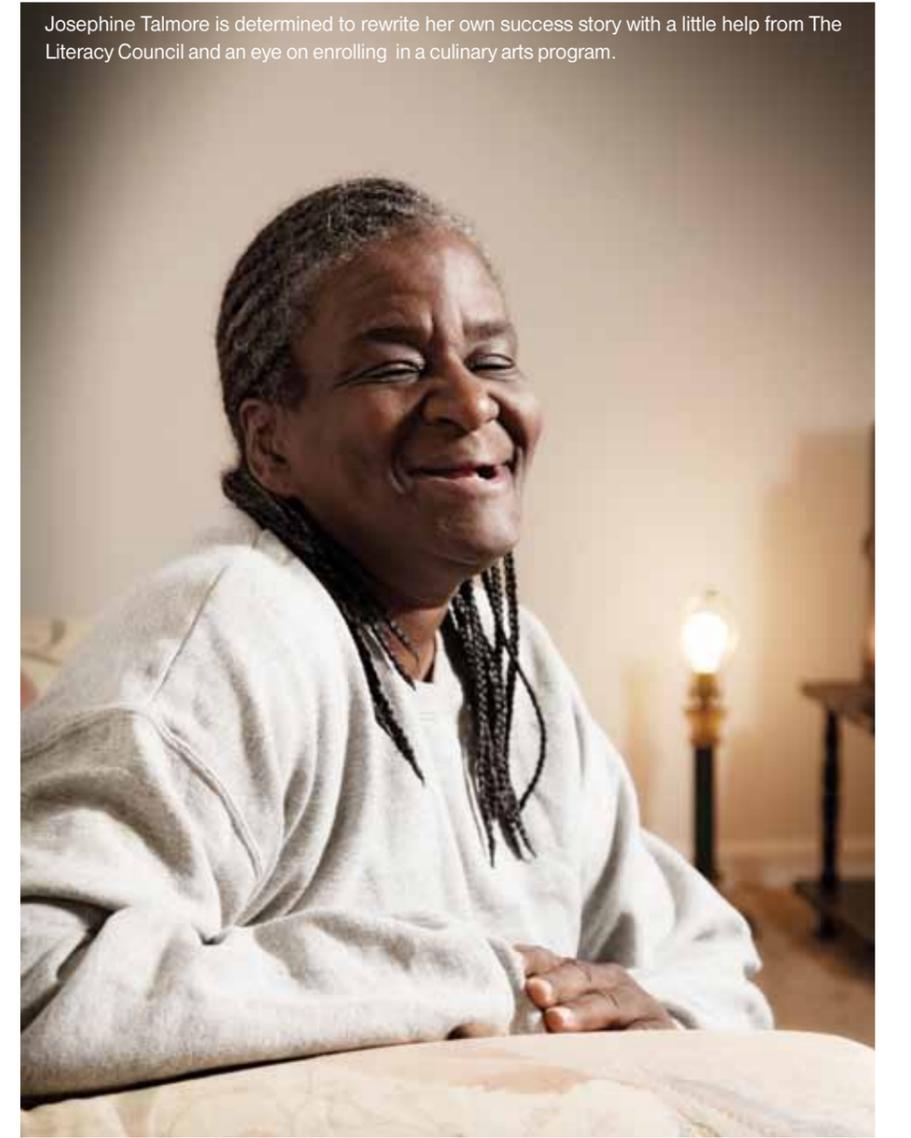
“My tutor [Tommie Blanton] is an

excellent teacher. She works with me and takes time with me. She gives me insights on how to do things. She helps me get my mindset right where when I feel like I’m not doing well or I am down, she picks me up and lets me know that I can do it. She gives me the encouragement to let me know that I can do it and can go on.”

“If I don’t stay in a book, then I will basically lose what I have learned. When I want to ask her a question about a word that’s in a book, I ask ‘What does that mean?’ Her philosophy is to [have me] look it up in the dictionary and learn what it means. She will ask me if I found the word and to tell her what it means. She wants me

to look in the dictionary and understand it because that is the only way I will learn for myself. If I go to college, I can’t have anyone tell me what certain stuff is—I’ll have to look it up and map it out on my own.”

Talmore is also proud to share her newfound reading confidence with other students of The Literacy Council. “Sometimes some of the other students ask me to help them. If, for instance, if I had the book they have now, I know how it goes. They do it themselves, but they’ll ask me one or two questions, and I’ll help explain stuff to them. I tell them ‘You have to answer that in your own way, but look back and read it again. You can do it.’” •



Josephine Talmore is determined to rewrite her own success story with a little help from The Literacy Council and an eye on enrolling in a culinary arts program.