

THE  
STRUGGLE  
TO  
BE  
STRONG

UPDATED EDITION

True Stories by Teens About  
Overcoming Tough Times

Edited by Al Desetta, M.A.,  
for Youth Communication  
and Sybil Wolin, Ph.D.

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Al Desetta, M.A., for Youth Communication  
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## A MESSAGE TO YOU

### “THINGS WILL GET BETTER.”

I remember my guidance counselor telling me that while I was in his office. I had just gotten into a fight in the schoolyard with this kid who thought it was a good idea to smack me in the head and run away. (Ha! I showed him.) I was about to get suspended. I thought to myself, “Things will get better? Yeah, right.”

After school, that same kid was waiting for me with a bunch of his friends. They beat me bloody, and no one tried to stop them. “Things will never get better,” I thought to myself.

But you know what? Things always get better. Maybe not today, tomorrow, or even the next day, but they will, and that’s what resilience is all about—regaining self. If I told you half the things I was able to bounce back from, you’d be mortified. You might even reexamine your own problems and decide they’re not as bad as you thought. I hope the stories in *The Struggle to Be Strong* help you realize that there’s always a way out of “no way out.”

LENNY JONES\*

\*Lenny wrote the story “My Hair Is Blue—But I’m Not a Freak!” in this book. See page 126.

# INTRODUCTION

## A WAY OUT OF “NO WAY OUT”

by Veronica Chambers

**W**here does it come from—the ability to be strong? How do you struggle to survive when it feels like you’ve been born in the wrong skin, the wrong body, the wrong family, the wrong neighborhood, or on the wrong side of the tracks? How do you make your way when grown-ups who are supposed to take care of you fail miserably at their jobs? How do you try to move forward with your life when your parents, friends, or the kids at school don’t know where you’re coming from or what you have to deal with every day?

The teenage authors of *The Struggle to Be Strong* don’t have all the answers, but they do a hell of a job wrestling with the questions. The wisdom they’ve gained is what makes this book so powerful, and what can help you face tough issues as you move toward adulthood. These thirty stories offer many lessons learned, from Yunique Symone’s painful reckoning with her drug-addicted mother in “I Don’t Know What the Word *Mommy* Means” to Artiqua S. Steed’s exploration of interracial dating in “I’m Black, He’s Puerto Rican . . . So What?” to Tamara Ballard’s story of becoming tight with a girl she never thought she’d be proud to call sister in “She’s My Sister (Not Foster).”

These stories first appeared in two youth magazines in New York City called *New Youth Connections* and *Foster Care Youth United* (now known as *YCteen* and *Represent*, respectively) and were originally published together in the first edition of *The Struggle to Be Strong* in 2000. The young writers wrote their stories to help teens like you with similar problems and stresses. And their stories continue to provide advice, inspiration, and hope. No matter what your life is like, the stories in this updated edition of *The Struggle to Be Strong* can help you realize your own strengths so you can face the future with greater confidence.

As you read these stories, don’t think these kids are different from you—that because they’re published in a book, they’re



somehow more special or together than you are. They've dealt with many of the same difficulties and challenges you've dealt with, and there's no shame in having problems. When you find ways to struggle through your challenges, you're already more remarkable than you may realize. The very things that seem to be ruining your life right now—having trouble controlling your anger, having an alcoholic parent, being too shy to make friends, living in a foster home—may be the very things that will give you the strength to face and deal with future obstacles as they come your way.

A person who keeps going despite hardships and setbacks, who learns positive, powerful lessons from these experiences, is a person with resilience. Resilience means inner strength. Since this is a book about resilience, in a way it's a book for everyone, because we all have the ability to bounce back from setbacks, disappointments, and loss. But this book will be especially valuable to young people who have had more than their share of troubles.

I know, because when I was sixteen, it seemed like there was nowhere for me to go but straight down the gutter. I had moved out of my mother's house because I didn't get along with my stepfather. Then when I moved in with my father and step-mother, the abuse just hit a whole new level. I spent many nights at the homes of friends, working in restaurants as a bus girl so I could get something to eat, or just walking the streets, hoping nobody would see me or hurt me.

I used to look at reruns of old TV shows like *The Brady Bunch* and think, "I bet every one of those cabinets in that TV kitchen has food in it. I bet those kids are never hungry." I liked school, but it's hard to study when you're afraid to go home. By the time my junior year rolled around, I was just trying to make it through each day. I had always dreamed of going to college, and I carefully avoided both sex and drugs because I didn't want an unplanned pregnancy or an addiction to derail me as they had some of my friends. But the question I had to wrestle with was: If I couldn't finish high school, if there was no safe place for me to live while I finished high school, how was I ever going to make it to college?

If you have a dream for your life, and if you try hard enough and you knock on enough doors, eventually you'll find what you

need. With the help of my guidance counselor, Mrs. Chatmon, I applied to and was accepted at Simon's Rock, a college for kids who want to go to college early. I just knew that if I didn't find a way out of my situation, I wouldn't survive. My dream was to go to college, but the longer I stayed in my abusive household, the more I felt the dream slipping away from me.

So I went to college early, and it saved my life. Without really being fully aware of it, I was taking initiative, forming relationships, and trying to become independent. That's what the authors in this book, who are no different from you or me, have done in their lives. They haven't always succeeded and their problems haven't completely disappeared, but they have gained strength and grown through their efforts.

I once read something I've never forgotten. Angela Davis, scholar and activist, was talking about the Black Power movement of the 1960s. Here's the gist of what she said: "The thing we didn't understand back then is that freedom is an inside job."

I believe that with all my heart: "Freedom is an inside job." It may take you years to change your outside world and realize your dreams, but it's within your power to change your heart and mind. You might not think you have the power to change whatever in your life is causing you pain. But these teenage writers provide some valuable clues about how to begin tapping into that power.

Resilience isn't one specific magical quality that you're either born with or not. There are many kinds of resilience, and all of them can become part of you. This book is about seven kinds of resilience identified by Sybil Wolin, coeditor of *The Struggle to Be Strong*, and Steven Wolin. Together, the Wolins founded Project Resilience to conduct research and provide training in resilience. Learning about these resiliencies can help you think about ways you struggle to be strong. Each suggests actions you can take to survive, grow, and learn from the difficulties in your life. The seven resiliencies the Wolins identified are:

- Insight, or Asking Tough Questions
- Independence, or Being Your Own Person
- Relationships, or Connecting with People Who Matter
- Initiative, or Taking Charge

- Creativity, or Using Imagination
- Humor, or Finding What’s Funny
- Morality, or Doing the Right Thing

You may feel you already have many of these resiliencies. Or you may feel you have none of them—or only one or two, in the tiniest portions.

Don’t worry. It’s not how often you act in these ways that counts—rather, it’s your willingness to *build on what you’ve got*. You can learn to recognize what your strengths are and use them for all they’re worth.

This book isn’t called *Triumphant Stories of Teenagers with Unbelievable Will and Might*. It’s called *The Struggle to Be Strong*, and the key word here is *struggle*. Struggle means making the effort to be strong. You have the power to “walk out” your anger, as Tamara Ballard did. You have the power to step in and be an example to your brothers and sisters when your parents are behaving irresponsibly, as Charlene Johnson did. You have the power to befriend someone living with AIDS, as Max Morán did.

If every day you do one little thing to make your life better, then guess what? You win. Because if you make that effort every day, your life will change. As teen writer Lenny Jones puts it, “If I told you half the things I was able to bounce back from, you’d be mortified.” Still, Lenny insists, “But you know what? Things always get better.”

That’s what the stories in this book are about. By reading them, thinking about them, and trying to see how they relate to your life you can, as Lenny says, find “a way out of ‘no way out.’”

**VERONICA CHAMBERS** is the editor of *Past Tense*, an archival storytelling project at the *New York Times*. She’s the coauthor of four best-selling memoirs and the recipient of a James Beard award for her food writing. She’s also the editor of the recent anthology *Queen Bey: A Celebration of the Power and Creativity of Beyoncé Knowles-Carter*.

You can follow Veronica on Twitter @vvchambers. She was in the Youth Communication writing program when she was an early college student at Bard College at Simon’s Rock.

# “THINK ABOUT IT” — AND MAYBE WRITE ABOUT IT

**A**t the end of each story, you’ll find a couple of questions under the heading “Think About It.” These are to help you reflect on what you’ve read and find parallels between your experience and the writer’s. Take a few moments to read them over. There’s no need to write anything.

However, if you feel like it, jot down some of your thoughts. You don’t have to write a lot—a few sentences can help you clarify your reactions to what you read.

Maybe you’ve had the experience of keeping a diary or journal, or writing letters or emails. If so, you know that writing helps you learn things about yourself and gives you a good way to deal with difficult emotions. Writing about your feelings can help you gain more control over them.

Terry-Ann Da Costa has written a story called “How Writing Helps Me,” (page 112). Here’s how she describes the importance of writing:

“I remember one day I was really depressed. I wrote about how I felt and what made me feel that way, and then I read over what I’d written. That helped me feel a lot better, because when I read it I couldn’t believe I was capable of having those harmful, dangerous thoughts and feelings about myself.

“Writing helped me when I was going through difficult times with my family—when they didn’t or couldn’t understand me, or when they didn’t understand why I would cry for no reason. Writing helped me when I needed someone to talk to. Writing is like both my friend and my family, because it’s always there for me whenever I need it.”

Lenny Jones, author of “My Hair Is Blue—But I’m Not a Freak!” (page 126), has this to say about writing:

“I realized there was always something going on in my life that I could write about from my own point of view. I could tell the stories I wanted to tell, and no one could tell me if I was

right or wrong. I started to see writing as a really fun way of expressing myself and what I felt inside.”

You certainly don’t need to write answers to the questions under “Think About It.” Just thinking about the questions is enough. But if you feel the urge to do so, writing your responses may deepen your enjoyment and understanding of this book.

**NOTE:** Many stories in *The Struggle to Be Strong* include slang or possibly unfamiliar words. The glossary on page 171 provides definitions of some of these words.

Each story ends with information about where each author was shortly after the events of the story. In some cases, we’ve lost contact with the writers. When possible, however, we’ve briefly described on page 169 where authors are now and what they are doing.

humor INDEPENDENCE  
RELATIONSHIPS MORALITY  
INSIGHT INITIATIVE *creativity*  
humor INDEPENDENCE  
RELATIONSHIPS MORALITY

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THE  
**RESILIENCIES**

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INSIGHT INITIATIVE *creativity*  
humor INDEPENDENCE  
RELATIONSHIPS MORALITY  
INSIGHT INITIATIVE *creativity*  
humor INDEPENDENCE  
RELATIONSHIPS MORALITY  
INSIGHT INITIATIVE *creativity*  
humor INDEPENDENCE

# INSIGHT

## ASKING TOUGH QUESTIONS

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**INSIGHT** is asking tough questions and giving honest answers about yourself and the difficult situations you find yourself in.

The opposite of **INSIGHT** is avoiding a painful truth.

**INSIGHT** is hard because the urge to blame others for your troubles, instead of looking honestly at your own role, is powerful.

**INSIGHT** helps you see things as they really are, not as you wish they would be.

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Insight, our first resilience, is the habit of asking tough questions—about yourself and about the situations you find yourself in—and giving honest answers. With insight, you can face a painful truth instead of avoiding it. Insight is a resilience because it helps you open your eyes to situations as they really are, not as you wish they were.

The stories in this section are by teens who have struggled with difficult truths about themselves, their families, and their communities. You'll see them examine their own actions, face problems, and risk being hurt. As you may know from your own experience, it's often easier to ignore or deny what you don't like about yourself or your life than it is to face your problems squarely.

Having insight means you don't blame others for your problems. You take responsibility for yourself. It takes work—and courage—to face the truth this way. But insight helps the teens in this section become the people they really want to be. Insight can do the same for you.

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# I DON'T KNOW WHAT THE WORD *MOMMY* MEANS

by Younique Symone

If you looked at any of my baby pictures, you would see a little girl who seemed happy, loved, and cared for. You'd think this little girl would never go through any pain. You would probably also think that her mother was a proud and strong Hispanic woman who took care of her three daughters.

But the hardcore truth is, my mother didn't take care of us. She couldn't cope with herself, let alone three daughters. For a while, when people asked me why I lived with my aunt, I would say my mother died when I was three. But the truth is, she left me and my sisters and gave us to my aunt to raise.

When I was four, I used to watch TV and see mothers tuck their children in or read them a bedtime story. I asked my aunt and uncle why they never did these things. They told me only white people did them. Then one day I told my uncle that my friend's mother tucked her in and read her a story. He told me, "Your friend's mother is trying to be white."

For a long time my aunt and uncle would hide behind the excuse of "acting white" because they didn't want to show me

**"But the hardcore truth is, my mother didn't take care of us. She couldn't cope with herself, let alone three daughters."**

any affection. For a long time I wanted to be white, because for everything I saw and asked about, I always got the same answer—they were either white or trying to be white. I used to listen to rock and roll, and when I was younger I couldn't really dance that well. My family used to make fun of me and

call me "white girl." That was just another example of how my aunt and uncle never showed me love.

When I was four I started to rebel against my mother. I always was a child who would look at a problem—and not only look at it but also speak out on it, instead of trying to ignore it. My sisters used to say, "When I see Mommy, I'm gonna tell her

to get herself together.” But when Mommy came around to visit at my aunt’s, they would forget all about it.

My sisters would tell our mother how much they missed her or how they loved her. Instead, I’d say to her, “I wish you would get yourself together. I wish you would stop using drugs.” My mother just told me my mouth would get me in trouble. She told me that a lot of times, or she’d say that I kept bringing up stuff instead of just letting it be. I had to teach myself not to settle for less. My family hated the fact that I spoke out.

They hated the fact that I knew what was going on and that I always questioned things when no one else did. For example, I also asked my mother, “How come you had us when you weren’t going to take care of us?” My mother would just look at me, cry, and walk away, or she’d say as always, “Your mouth is going to get you in trouble.”

**“I had to teach myself not to settle for less. My family hated the fact that I spoke out.”**

I hated when my mother came around, period. It wasn’t bad enough that we didn’t live with her or that she knew we were getting abused but didn’t do anything to help us. She acted like her life was more important than ours. Gradually, I wished she wasn’t my mother, and she wished I wasn’t her child.

My mother had a rough childhood. Her own mother would rather gamble than put food on the table. And my grandmother’s mother gave my grandmother up. So really, no one in my family had a good mother or was a good mother. They all wanted to show their mothers how to be mothers by having children at a young age.

But having children that way doesn’t make you a mother. I believe my mother had me and my sisters young to show my grandparents what a “real family” could be. I also believe she wanted a family so badly that sometimes she would push us too hard and sometimes she didn’t push us enough.

For example, my mother always used to tell us that she was trying to get herself together. But she didn’t push herself enough to give up drugs, because her will wasn’t strong enough. When my mother finally did come around to see us, she wanted our relationship to be so perfect. She wanted me to tell her

everything. She wanted to make up in two hours for all the time she missed. She pushed me too hard. She wanted to bring us together so fast that instead she pushed us apart.

To this day we still don't get along. I feel if she wanted to live her life, she didn't have to bring me and my sisters into this world. I always used to dream about her coming to get us and taking us away. We would live in a house and she would have a job. I dreamed we would just be one big, happy family, but finally I can say I grew up.

I grew up when I realized this: My mother is not going to change because I want her to. She's only going to change when she wants to. I also know, deep down in my heart, that we are never going to be a real family. As long as she tries to tell me what to do, I'm going to rebel, and as long as I tell her what to do, she's going to rebel.

Our relationship is no relationship at all. We don't have any communication whatsoever. My mother is now married and says she is living her life for her husband. If my mother doesn't want anything to do with me or my sisters, that's her loss, not ours! Today I am in school (with no children, thank God), and I have a life. Before I have any children, I am going to take parenting skills classes. I won't hurt my children the way I was hurt.

"I want to break the cycle."

I don't want to have children at a young age to show my mother what a "real mother" is. I want to break the cycle. If I don't, I might end up doing the same thing my mother did. I might hurt not only myself or my family, but everyone else I come in contact with.

**YOUNIQUE SYMONE** was sixteen and living in foster care when she wrote this story. She eventually returned to her family.

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## THINK ABOUT IT

- Think of a time when you were at odds with a family member or friend because of a problem that no one wanted to talk about or confront. Did you speak out? What happened when you did? If you didn't speak out, how did it feel to keep silent?
  - What is a "cycle" in your own life you'd like to break? How could you go about breaking it?
-

# BEAUTY IS MORE THAN SKIN DEEP

by Danielle Wilson

**M**y friends always ask me, “Why are you always looking in the mirror?” or “Why are you so confident about yourself?” I know it might be hard to believe, but until the age of fourteen, I never really thought of myself as beautiful or gorgeous or ugly. I thought of myself as an average person.

When I was twelve, I didn’t really care how I looked. I was a short, skinny girl with a couple of ponytails (because my grandmother used to do my hair all the time) and thousands of bumps on my face.

In my sixth-grade class, this boy used to call me “Bumpy Road” or “Mountain.” Yeah, it used to get to me. In fact, it got to me so much that I knocked him right out of his chair. I know that was mean, but he was being mean to me!

**“I became stuck-up because I was getting compliments like crazy and I wasn’t used to this kind of attention.”**

And guess what? He saw me recently, and he now wants to know when I’m going to be his girl. Please! I wouldn’t give him the time of day because he hasn’t changed. But I certainly have.

During the summer when I turned fourteen, I began recognizing my beauty a little more. I started by taking care of my face. Not only by washing it fifty times a day, but also by cutting back on chocolate and going to the skin doctor for my acne.

Of course, boys started to notice me. I’ve always had a perfect shape and never had a problem with my weight. I also changed the way I dressed. I started to show off my figure by wearing skirts and jeans that really fit.

I started doing my own hair too. I can’t really remember how I did it, but my grandmother used to say, “Girl, you come up with the weirdest hairstyles. Just like your mother when she was little.”

That was the best summer of my life because I was getting mad compliments from the cutest boys. Whenever they

complimented me I used to say, “I know!” because I knew I looked good. Didn’t I?

I became stuck-up because I was getting compliments like crazy and I wasn’t used to this kind of attention. Before I turned fourteen, I don’t think anybody ever noticed me. Now that I had blossomed like a flower, I wanted the whole world to know. You can say I got a big head because every time I passed a car window, I stared at my reflection and sang to myself that I was the most beautiful thing in the world.

When I was younger, I never looked in mirrors because I didn’t like what I saw. Meaning, a face full of pimples. Now mirrors became my life. Before, I never liked having my picture taken. I used to try to hide in the back, but my friends

**“Now that I had blossomed like a flower, I wanted the whole world to know.”**

always wanted me in the front because I was the smallest. Now I began to love having people take pictures of me.

It got so bad that my attitude got worse, but only toward boys. I used to tell them, “I’m too pretty to be with you.”

I remember one day (about two years ago) I went with my friend to her boyfriend’s house. There was a boy there who wanted to meet me, and he was not what I expected. In fact, I thought he was ugly. He had little beady eyes and BIG lips. He sort of scared me!

The first time I looked at him, I yelled “No!” really loud. Then I turned to my friend and yelled, “He is *so* ugly. What’s wrong with you? Why did you try to play me and hook me up with this thing?” I thought I looked so good I couldn’t stand to be around anyone ugly.

After he heard that, he left. I guess he was mad. Then my friend’s boyfriend said I was wrong. I said, “I can’t help it if your friend is ugly. You know, you shouldn’t hang out with ugly people because they make you look bad.” After that, a friend picked me up and I left.

Another time, a boy tried to talk to me when my friends and I were coming from a party. And I ran from him because I didn’t like the shape of his head. His head was little on a big body. He looked like a cartoon, and he had scars and pimples all over his face!

My friends never forgot that. They tease me about it to this day.

I used to tell boys to their faces that they were ugly and that I looked too good to be with them. And they would just stand there and take what I said. None of them ever cursed me out or raised their hands to me. But then one day, when I was about fifteen, a boy named Rick turned my whole attitude around.

**“I started to realize I had let my looks take over my inner person.”**

Rick and I were sitting in the park, and we were arguing. He never was my man, but we were

friends leading to that. We had met at a party, but his friend liked me. I got mad at something I can't quite remember, and I said to Rick, "I'm too pretty to be with you or your friend."

Rick said, "You're right, but with that attitude you'll be by yourself. You could be as pretty as you wanna be to boys, but if you have a bad attitude, they won't want anything to do with you. They will do nothing but use you." And then he walked away.

Right then and there I wanted to run up to him and curse him out because I couldn't believe what he had said to me. I was furious! I was so furious that I wanted to call him later to curse him out. But when I got home, I was too mad to do it. And besides, I knew he was going to call me to apologize. But I was wrong. Rick never called.

I thought about what Rick said and about all the times I told boys I was too pretty for them. I started to realize I had let my looks take over my inner person. I didn't even remember how I used to be. My stuck-up attitude had become my whole personality. And I told myself I was going to change. Changing wasn't easy, because there were still times when I wanted to tell a boy I was too pretty for him, but I made myself hold back.

The reason why Rick had such a big impact on me was because he was the first and only boy who wouldn't let me talk to him like that. He stood up to me, and I'm glad he did before my attitude got worse.

For a while I lost my friendship with Rick. A little later on down the line we started being friends again, but we never discussed what had happened between us.

Even now I still look in the mirror for hours and I look into car windows, checking out my reflection. There's nothing wrong with that. You don't have to be stuck-up just because you admire yourself.

But after Rick said that to me, I started to be nice to boys. I accepted compliments in a nicer way by saying "Thank you" every time someone said I was pretty, instead of "I know."

I also started paying more attention to my interests, like writing and reading. I wrote short stories for contests in my school, and once I won second place. As I improved my writing, I finally won first place. I was so happy!

I never really thought I was such a creative writer until I wrote a story in my eighth-grade class and let my friend Jody read it. Jody loved it so much she showed it to my classmates and then to my teacher, who put it in the school newspaper.

I did more than help myself. I helped someone else—my friend Tasha.

Tasha wasn't stuck-up like me. She was miserable all the time because she thought she was ugly. Tasha used to ask me, "How do you get your hair like that?" So one day I told her I was going to do her hair.

After I did her hair, she was still a little doubtful about her looks because she didn't like the way she dressed. So I took Tasha shopping. (Not with *my* money, with *her* money. I didn't become *that* nice.) And we had a blast.

I didn't tell her what to pick out. It was her choice. But she asked me for advice and fashion tips. After we finished, Tasha said she felt great and that she'd never had so much fun in her life. She also said she owed it all to me. Then I told her, "It wasn't me who changed you, *you* changed you. Now, don't change your attitude because you changed your looks. Stay the nice person you are."

If it weren't for Rick, I wouldn't have done this for Tasha. I probably would have thought Tasha just wanted to be like me or something. What I learned was this: To be beautiful outside, you have to be beautiful inside too.

"What I learned was this: To be beautiful outside, you have to be beautiful inside too."