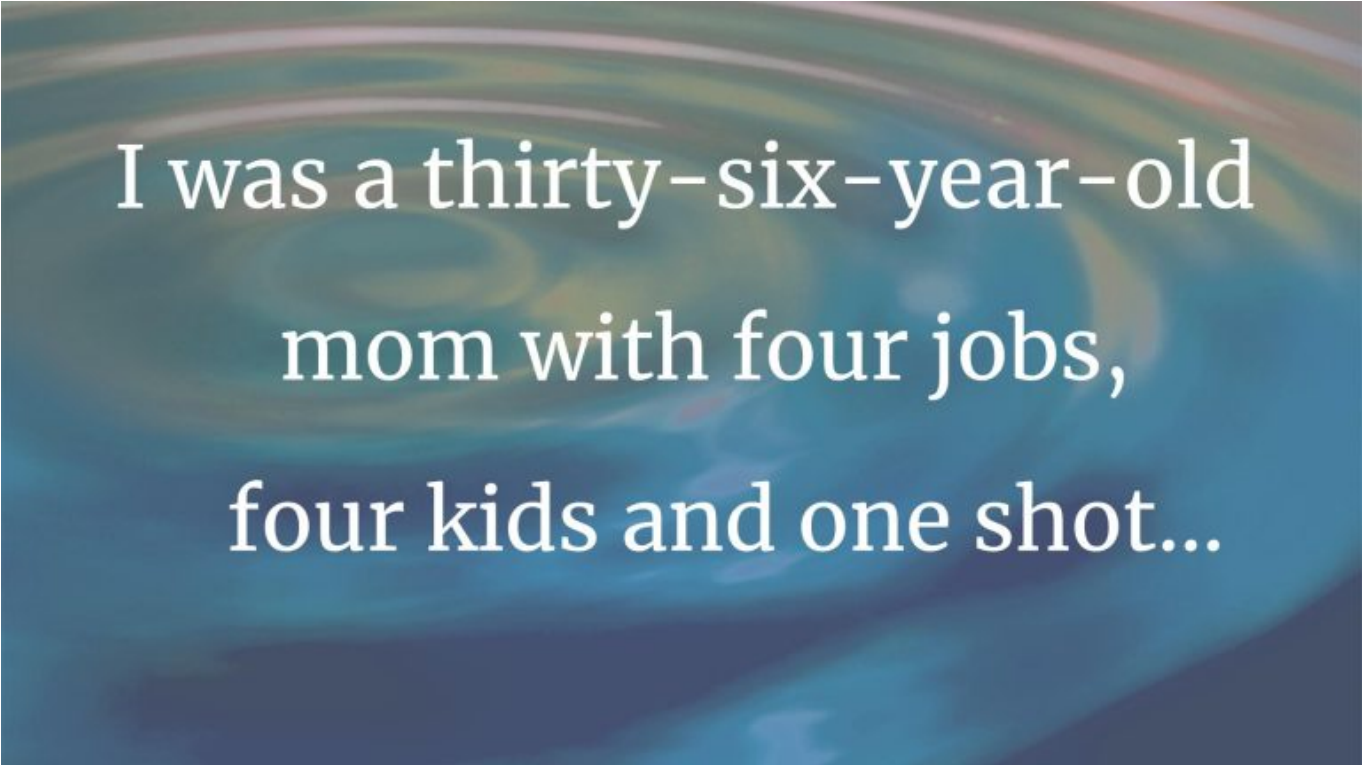


Nontraditional

Category: Stories

written by Lawana Bradley-Brown | April 2, 2024



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Editor's Note: This piece was awarded an honorable mention in the Pulse writing contest, "On Being Different."

I have always been different. As a nurse I was a late bloomer, though I'd always felt passionately drawn to the profession.

I was born to nurse. This was evident even when I was a young child; I bathed my grandmother's amputated leg while the other kids played in the yard. Although I had planned to go to nursing school after graduation, I took a seventeen-year detour and ultimately entered as a nontraditional student.

Nontraditional is a kind way of saying that I was a thirty-six-year-old divorcée and mom of four, working up to four jobs at one point during my schooling. I was living in a Section 8 apartment and using food stamps, and I got a Pell grant to get my first nursing degree. Many nights, my kids put away my books and laptop and tucked *me* in after I'd fallen asleep studying.

In my nursing classes at the local technical college, I was different. When a group of students insisted on talking in class while a lecture was going on, I quietly asked the instructor if I could address the class.

I told them that, as a thirty-six-year-old mom with four jobs, four kids and one shot at getting this degree done, I would appreciate their not talking during lecture.

"I'm not here to make friends," I finished, "but to make a new life for me

and my girls.”

It was a different kind of speech, but it worked. I still have the thank-you note another student wrote me after that speech. And when school was done, I enjoyed the very different experience of having my four children see me walk across the stage to receive my associate’s and then my bachelor’s degrees in nursing. That part of being different was lovely.

Working as a nurse was everything I’d hoped it would be and more. I was still different, however, and the first time I really felt it was when I stepped onto the labor-and-delivery unit in a small local hospital. At the time, there was only one other Black RN there—we were a true minority. But I was blessed, because she was the work mother I needed to mentor me and help me to grow into a caring and compassionate RN.

One night a patient was admitted in preterm labor. When I went in to start her admission process, she informed me that she did not want a Black nurse.

I knew that this would happen at some point. I was raised in the South, and this type of behavior was second nature for some.

I went back to talk to the other nurses on the unit, one Black and one Asian. We agreed to let the patient choose which of us would be her nurse, and she chose the Asian nurse.

Honestly, we all felt bad about the situation. It was the first time that being different made my skin feel heavy.

Thankfully, being a woman and working in a setting where women can truly identify with each other’s experiences, I found a true home. Over time, as I shared my story with women from all different backgrounds, I realized that once you know someone’s story you might find that they’re not really that different from you after all.

I returned to nursing school to get my master’s degree and become a women’s-health nurse practitioner. With this new degree, I could have looked for jobs that paid better, but I wanted something different: I wanted and needed good training, and a chance to give back to the local community.

I found this in the family-planning clinics of the state health departments. Since we had a provider shortage, there were times when I had to drive to a rural health department to see patients, taking my supplies with me. I am sure that if I’d gotten pulled over by law enforcement and they’d searched my car, the experience would have stood out to them as different: I had tons of condoms, a wooden penis and other instruments in the trunk.

I loved those days because I learned from some of the pioneers of reproductive health; I still hear their voices in my mind as I work today. But when I was first a provider, I also encountered new differences.

Some patients felt that I was not as qualified as a male provider; others preferred a physician to a nurse practitioner. Some even mistook me for an office worker or other administrative staff. The looks they gave me when I

said, "I'm the provider" could be a bit strange. After all, it's not every day you see a Black provider with blonde hair staring at you over the tops of her eyeglasses.

What I began to understand, though, was that being different didn't have to mean that I was subpar. It didn't have to make me feel uncomfortable. Being different was unique and special—something that I needed to own unapologetically.

As I worked with patients, I began to pull stories from my background to help me teach them. I discovered that the differences I'd wrestled with in the past had created spaces for me to develop my character and to draw on my source of strength, my faith in Jehovah God. Being different doesn't have to be a struggle; it can be a strength if you can accept that while others may look at you differently, it's how *you* look at you that really matters.

I love nursing. I love my patients. I love my colleagues. We are all different, but that is what makes nursing such a grand experience. I am blessed to be beautifully different, and I wouldn't change a thing about that.