CHARMAINE RUSSELL

My charge, age 5, took off at quite a pace, running toward the far end of the large property. I panicked. Was I about to lose the little girl I had picked up for an ATD, Fourth World Movement gathering? No; it was OK; she changed course and returned with the same gusto.

This was my first meeting with Charmaine, who is now 29, a single mother of two. The time between then and now has seen hard knocks and sudden setbacks and courageous new beginnings.

Charmaine is endowed with a smile that comes easily. In elementary school she was teacher’s helper, to the neglect of progress in reading. A 3rd grader who did not read. So she and I chose books from the local children’s library, and we met every two weeks. She took the books home in the meantime. One afternoon she announced that we would no longer work with library books. I bought a book on the Saints quarterback (Aaron Brooks), and we made our way through it.

Charmaine was 14 when Katrina hit. As she tells it, “When we (she and her siblings) got to the Superdome, thousands and thousands of people were lined up, trying to get on the buses. People were passing out – people who were pregnant, the elderly, babies, and all – waiting there for 13, 14, 15 hours”. Charmaine and her siblings ended up in Fort Worth, Texas. They were there for a year, always wanting to come back to New Orleans.

At one point I knew they were back, but I didn’t know their whereabouts. Years passed. I kept track of Charmaine’s birthdays. With her 21st birthday coming up, I felt an inner push. Where was she?! I would find her if I could. I got some clues. I found her and her older sister in a shotgun house in the ninth ward. Charmaine’s schooling had stopped with Katrina. Here she was, an adult without an elementary school certificate. She DID have a charming little boy, and a girl followed sometime after.

I was able to keep in touch until they were evicted. I remember the time I went to the house, and strangers were there, looking at me with blank stares when I asked about “the Russells”. Once more, I assumed Charmaine was in New Orleans, but where?

Finally, I got a call from a member of the Fourth World Movement team. Charmaine had called . . . and asked that I be given her number. Charmaine and her children were living with Charmaine’s older brother. I got out a map and learned to make my way to their place on the outskirts of New Orleans. I visited her there a couple of times. When I next saw Charmaine it was at the Superdome! She had been hired by Security to guard the door to one of the Benson suites during Saints’ games. But then Charmaine grew quite ill, and she ended up in ICU. She has a heart condition, one not easily managed. Released from the hospital but not feeling well, Charmaine found her health even more compromised by their living situation, where tempers frequently rose. She looked on line and found a homeless shelter – Hagar’s House. She and her two lived there for 9 months. Unity – a New Orleans organization dedicated to housing mothers and children, got them into a shotgun in Gert Town. Her sister (now with 3 children) moved in too. Charmaine was now at First Grace Methodist Church, a staff member at the day care center. Her own children, Brindell and Gigi, went to school and pre-school, allowing Charmaine the chance to work. After a number of months Charmaine telephoned. They were being evicted, but Charmaine had found a place in the outer reaches of Chef Menteur. Her brother already lives in one of the units. I visited her just as the coronavirus was erupting. The units do have electricity and stoves and refrigerators. With her heart condition making it dangerous to be exposed to the virus, which is still uncontained, Charmaine and Brindell and Gigi stay at home. They get food stamps and some unemployment money. The children have had no schooling since mid March.

When I had gotten this far in her story, I read it to Charmaine, asking whether I had it right. I also asked what her feelings were. She said hearing me read it brought her back to what it was like to be homeless … that it was scary and that she had felt depressed and angry. Then she told me, “One time in bed in the shelter I heard a voice. The voice said that things were going to be OK, that they were going to fall into place, that I would get a job, that we would get out of the shelter, that we would have a home. The voice told me, ‘Hang in there.’ ” I asked Charmaine, “Do you think God was caring for you?” In a firm voice she said, “I believe so.”

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