

-WHO AM I-

**BY TINA STEVENS-CULBREATH**

My name is Christine Stevens; most people refer to me by my nickname Tina. I currently live in Winchester VA and have lived here for about 7 years. I was born in Alexandria VA, growing up as a kid was tough. Not only did I have struggles of being a bi-racial child, but we lived on Section 8 Housing assistance (not a very good neighborhood). I was raised by my single mother; doing her best to raise three young girls. My father passed away from a drug overdose when I was seven years old, and my mother turned to alcohol to self-medicate. By age 8, I found myself helping my mother care for my two younger siblings. As time passed by, I attended T.C. Williams High School, and things were even tougher for me. Each morning by 6 am, mom would be off to work at a local hospital. This meant that I would have to make sure that I got myself and two sisters ready for school, and out of the door for the school bus, by 8 am. It was a great deal of responsibility on my shoulders, at such a young age, but I had to do these things to keep my family together. I didn’t want Child Services to suspect anything, so I had no other option. I had to be sure that we were not late, or miss school over the years, and to keep my sister’s safe, and fill in when my mother was inhibited.

I met my now husband when I was about 15 years old. He attended West Potomac High school, in Alexandria, VA (Fairfax County). My life turned around for the best when my mother’s job relocated to Reston VA. Things were looking up! A new place to live, great neighborhood, slower pace of life, and by this time my mom had cleaned up her act and stopped drinking. Before relocating, I found out that I was pregnant. We explored our options and decided that even with our hardships up to this point; I would continue the pregnancy. I secured a job at Giant Food Store chain (which is where I am still employed after about 26 years). By day, I worked hard to graduate, at the Bryant Center which is an alternative school for teen moms; and worked part-time about 20 hours per week during the night. My husband and I would switch shifts, and my mom also helped with daycare at night. While on maternity leave, I continued vigorously to stay on tasks with my assignments. Ultimately, I returned to school and earned my diploma from South Lakes High School in Reston, VA.

My husband and I are both graduates, and by age 19, we were the proud parents, raising two boys, and one girl, (a child from Rodney’s previous relationship). I had always wanted more for my children, so we both vowed to stay together and raise our children; in a two-parent home. Graduating from high school was a challenge because I was a teen mom at that time. I didn’t want to be the stereotype of a teen mom, not graduated and relying on financial assistance to raise her children. No, I wanted better; I worked hard to graduate and continued onto to college, to further my education for a better future for our children.

While in college, my husband and I were notified of a family crisis and were told that we would have to step in and adopt my sister’s two children (a niece and two nephews). If we declined, the children would be split up and adopted by two separate families; that was already approved as an adoptive parent. At this time, her children were about 6 months, 4 years old, and five years old. Our three children that we were raised in our household at that time were just 5, 7, and 8 years old. Remember, I was already juggling parenting three children, attending school, and working at the Giant Food Store chain. The adoption agency advised me that I would have to quit going to school in order to have time to focus on raising the sibling group. They also advised me that I wouldn’t be considered as a qualifying adaptive candidate otherwise. Initially, we were approved as foster parents (for four years). We had a rigorous adoption process, lots of prying, parenting classes, therapy, etc. We jumped through many hoops, and finally four years later the adoption was finalized (it took longer than average adoption processes because they wanted to make sure that we would be able to handle it all). Combined with our birth kids; it totaled 6 children that we were raising at the age of about 25 years old for me, and 27 years old for my husband. Although, Reston had become so developed, and a very expensive county to raise our family in; legally, we had lived in Fairfax County until the adoption was finalized. When the adoption was finalized we purchased a single-family home with a huge backyard and lots more space for everyone. Economically it was great, but it was a culture shock for the kids. Looking back, we know that we made the best decision.

Today, five of our six children have graduated: some in college, most work. The youngest which was 4 months old at the time, is now 19, and graduated high school in 2021. It has always been important to me that the kids graduate, and along the way, I reminded them of my hard path of graduation. Always expressing to them, that they had NO excuses for failure other than that they didn’t try! We gave them the tools to succeed, and all of the support they needed! We constantly shared with them what my path to graduation looked like! I expected more from them, especially because I was able to reach my goal of graduation as an at-risk teen mom, growing up in a bad environment, in a single parent home, helping to raise two siblings, working at 15 years old, and going to school, and still graduate: all at the same time. I pride myself on the accomplishments that I have made in my life in order to make a better future for my children, and family.

This road has not always been easy, and I have sacrificed a lot, but it was all worth it. I beat the odds against me. One thing that can admit is that I always tried my best, made mistakes along the way; but I never gave up! My children are healthy productive citizens of society, and I can say that I had a direct influence in molding each one of them! Eventually, I was able to return back to college once the kids were older; but three years ago, I was diagnosed with Stage 3 Breast Cancer. Once again, I had to put my degree on hold. At least for now... No more school at this time. I have been presented with a bigger purpose in life. My attention has now been concentrated in another direction. That direction is to help mold and positively influence delicate impressionable youth and communities. My life is fulfilled with my role as the Founder of I’M JUST ME MOVEMENT, and inspiring not only the minds of young people but people as a whole. My passion is encouraging, and to reach others, through the mission of I’m Just Me Movement organization.