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Introduction

by Sagashus T. Levingston

Infamous Mothers is a response to a need. As a graduate student, I took a class on global feminism. It was the first class I had ever taken that was fully dedicated to feminism of any kind. I fell in love with it. Giving me the language and context to understand some of my experiences as a woman, it empowered me. Yet, almost as soon as it made me feel visible, feminism erased me. While the literature and theory gave voice to the struggles of so many women around the world, women from all kinds of backgrounds, I noticed that women like me were absent from this global stage. I am a single mother with six children by four different dads. I am poor... black, and I am an entrepreneur who is also completing a PhD. Where was the voice of women like me in the literature? Equally important, on the pages of articles and books throughout the discipline, where were we imagined as people who made a positive impact in the public sphere? We were either the charity cases people were trying to save or the social pathogens that institutions were trying to correct (and in some case eradicate). Always at one extreme or the other, rarely were we depicted with complexity. Part of the reason for this is that we seldom get to tell our own stories. *Infamous Mothers* is my attempt to address this gap.

In it are the stories of 20 women. All of them are, in one way or another, mothering from the fringes of our society. They were teen mothers, sex workers, drug abusers, or they are single mothers and baby mamas. Some have been abused by men, others abused by their

own fears. All of them are black. At the same time, they are women who have lived through circumstances they were never meant to survive. More than this, they are making a difference in our world, today, as doulas, business owners, family advocates, artists, and counselors.

This work is important. It gives complexity and depth to some of the stock stories you hear about black mothers in the media and popular culture. It also provides you with two pieces of the story the news and television dramas rarely give: the narratives of these women's triumphs and the ways in which they matter to our society. The best part is that these women are telling their own stories in their own words using their own voice. Their tales are as eloquent as they are raw. Not only will they challenge everything you thought you knew about an "infamous mother," their testimonies may make you question yourself—and that's not always a bad thing.

To learn more about our work, please visit our website at www.infamousmothers.com. There you will find more information about the makings of this work—including questions and answers about the target audience, methods, challenges, and so on. You will find additional study guides and resources. You can get details about our programming, speaking engagements, and Infamous Mothers memberships. You can also submit questions to us via Live Chat or by sending us a message by clicking Contact. I look forward to connecting with you. ❁



Tanisha

I was a teenage mother. I got pregnant while I was still in high school, but I successfully finished. I also have connections to the adult entertainment industry. I worked for four years as a stripper shortly after I gave birth to my son. It was the first job that I got, but in truth, it was a job I sought out for many reasons, primarily because it fit perfectly into every insecurity and all the negative messages I had received over the course of my life about my beauty, my body, and my sexuality. And the money was good, sometimes even great, and I needed money.

Part of me was rebelling through being a teen mother, through sex, and yet, another part of me was doing exactly what I was programmed to do. I remember it being a huge deal in my family because good girls, smart girls, girls who lead school assemblies and make the honor roll DON'T get pregnant in high school, though the men and boys in my family kinda did whatever they wanted. Case in point, shortly after I found out I was pregnant, a male cousin got two women pregnant at the same time. Even my own father, who had two long-term domestic partnerships, five children and waited 22 long years to marry my stepmother, was shaking his head. The males in my family had a freedom not afforded to the women and girls. I felt like I had let my father down, like I had let my whole family down.

I was raised with a really sweet mother and a traditional black, macho father. My womanhood bounced off

their energy like a pinball my entire life. I didn't have a lot of affirmation outside of what my dad did or did not approve. There are other contributing factors that I can share, but it's my story, and I really don't want to make it about my mom or my dad. There are parts of their lives I wouldn't be comfortable with sharing. But what I will say is that there was definitely trauma.

I grew up poor, like a lot of black folks. My parents split when I was nine. By then, I had experienced molestation, verbal and emotional abuse, and toxic dynamics via caregivers, friends of the family, and community members. By the time I had my son and was dancing in the clubs, there were a series of events that led up to it.

My freshman year, my mother and my father ended up in custody court, and my dad won custody of us from my mother. That probably was the biggest reason why I ended up a teen mom. There was just very little protection for my womanhood and really very little guidance, but a lot of male expectations of womanhood and beauty in general.

And being a dark-skinned woman, I remember a lot of years in my life, my teenager years in particular, when the only thing that people seemed to be affirming was that I was really smart and that I was sexy. Nobody ever called me pretty. I was one of those girls that the boys ignored in school. I was gangly, long-limbed, awkward, and had thick glasses. I was dark. But the boys would call

on the phone later. I was about 14 or 15 when that started.

And then you mix trauma with that. You mix not seeing my mother on a day-to-day basis for two-and-a-half years and it being an extreme situation. There were a couple summers where I wasn't protected at all, and those are the summers when my body started to develop, when the niggas started ride through the neighborhood real slow talking about, "Do you need a ride home?" knowing damn well you're 15.

There was a summer where I was just hurting, and there was always some guy there to take advantage of

slave plantation metaphor, we would call it "the moment that you break." You hear it in the conversation of pimps today, the idea of breaking a bitch or breaking a woman.

I ended up leaving my dad's house because of his temperament and his views on women. I ended up getting in my car one day, at about 16, and driving to my mama's house in Saginaw. When I got there, she wasn't really in a place to receive me. I hopped from couch to couch, and a girlfriend's mom let me stay for a bit. But I didn't have anywhere to go. I ended up meeting a man who was about ten years older than me, and he took

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those moments, to exploit and capitalize on my weakness and vulnerability, sort of compounding the issues I already had. I began to doubt my own worth. The only thing anybody ever affirmed was that I was sexy. Nobody ever said "pretty." They never said "beautiful." They just said "sexy." I could see my innocence erode over time. That continual vulnerability and predatory thing, I know intimately. I KNOW how many times that walk home from school happens before you end up in the back seat of a guy's car or before you end up at a hotel underage. My experience as a young woman of color I liken to the experiences of a young man of color who is walking to and from school every day past gang members and drug dealing. There is a corrosive enticement to compromise, and over time, you find yourself weakening. Using a

me in, underage, to "help" me, but what he really was doing was fucking my young ass and kicking my young ass, that's what he was doing.

I didn't then and don't know now what the edges of my womanhood are. I still surprise myself and don't know what I'm capable of completely. As a woman, I'm still expanding and growing. As a teenager, I wasn't able to articulate that about myself. I felt like a grown-up playing house with this man, had no idea what it was to be a grown-up at all. And as soon as I took that pregnancy test, I just knew that I couldn't stay there, that he was too toxic and too violent and either he was going to kill me or I was going to kill him. I knew this man could pop me upside my head one day, and instead of me balling up, I could break one of those lamps over his head and go to

jail. So we had to separate. Or he'd break a lamp over my head, and I wouldn't wake up. So we had to separate, and I went from him sexualizing me to the world doing it in clubs.

After I left my son's father, I ended up moving back to my hometown, and a cousin let me stay with her for a little bit, but I knew that wasn't going to work. By the time I had my son, I remember how hard it was just trying to live, survive, and be a good woman. That's a theme in my mothering, the cost of trying to be a good woman while surviving.

I was pregnant and walking over an overpass every

single day two miles to and from work because the bus didn't go to the Meijer's that I worked at. And it did have a negative effect on my pregnancy. I ended up going into preterm labor because of the workload. Oh my goodness, I'm going to cry. The workload was hard and heavy and a burden, and I was alone as a teen dealing with it.

Because of all of the walking and just not having anybody to protect me or care about me, my placenta abrupted. My water broke at 27 weeks. I almost died. My baby almost died. And three weeks later, they were trying to keep me from going into labor too soon. My baby came out. He was due late January, and I had my baby



November 8. He spent the whole winter in the hospital. He was two pounds 4.5 ounces when I had him, and 14 inches long.

I remember there was a girl from my high school who I had heard was a stripper in Flint, Michigan. And I remember thinking, “If she can be a stripper and make money and get on, hey, maybe I can.” And I went and did an amateur night, and it’s so strange to me now how strippers and stripping is sort of idolized.

People ask me what it was like. Was it sexy, or thrilling, or fun, or adventurous? My answer is always the same: it was like being naked in a room full of strangers. Butt-bare naked, new-baby body, new-mommy pooch, in a room full of strangers. I think I even wore the little pumps that I wore to my junior prom. I didn’t even have stripper shoes. I had some bras that I got from Kmart. I didn’t have any of the right stuff, but once it started, the money came quickly.

The hustle came naturally to me because I was a smart girl, and prior to getting pregnant, I was doing well in school. I am the first child in my family and have always been a traditional, archetypal achiever. I had won awards for numerous things including public speaking. And I went to national public speaking competitions, played sports, started clubs, and gave the black history speeches. I was that girl in school.

My ability to talk to people and my intelligence helped me thrive as a dancer. I took my intelligence with me into that darkness, and I adapted it in the hustle. But it was a continually sexualizing environment. It was like being Tweety Bird in a room full of Sylvester the Cats. It was brutal in a lot of regards.

I didn’t go through stuff that a lot of other girls went through because I got into a relationship with an ex of mine as soon as I got my own place. The young man had

a similar life story as my own. We had a great friendship, and we just seemed to gravitate to one another and ended up in a five-year relationship.

The whole time I was a stripper, I was in a relationship. I always had a home to go to. I had a man who would drop me off at work and pick me up, and not in a pimp-mobile. He worked two jobs, menial jobs at times, jobs that other men I’ve dated would never take. He worked at Subway, and he worked at a lab keeping up rats, like discarding rats or something. I had a little family, so that was my experience while I was in the sex industry. I had this whole other life where the part of me that had been the most abused was celebrated, in a perverse sense. And I think that’s really the heart of the infamy, and the success. Oh, my goodness, I’m going to cry again!

That part of me is what God is actually redeeming in my art—that I am sexy but not sexualized by others. And I can offer and speak my truth and be beautiful and be captivating but also have sexuality in my artwork—the pain, the real pain and the real trauma of real complexities connected to my type of black womanhood.

I don’t think that you get to a place where you make yourself a subversive black girl without going through some stuff that requires you to be an antihero in your narrative and go against the grain. It is essential to your survival as a woman of color. The things that I went through now require me to be a rigorous advocate for myself, that I stand up. It’s like you can only be molested so much, and abused, and raped, and put down, and constantly inappropriately touched, even in a verbal sense, before you finally say, “Okay, stop. That’s enough.”

I believe there’s a little bit of my soul, my journey, and struggle in a whole lot of women. It’s makes me able to identify, empathize, not judge, show up for, or give the kind of words that I needed when I was walking that



Sheila

I am a recovering addict, and I have 29 years clean. In recovery, I make 12-step meetings. A part of the meetings is giving back that which was so freely given to me. Sharing my experiences, strengths, and hopes with other people shows them that they, too, can stop using drugs and find a new way of life. I must be accountable.

There are times when I am called upon, within Narcotics Anonymous meetings, to share with whoever's in the meeting my experiences, strengths, and hopes. I've never ever, ever, ever, ever liked to share, and I cringe at the thought of doing so. I do it because I must. I must give back, but I don't relish it. This is part of being accountable. I stand on the shoulders of those who came before me. I must be accountable.

I was a problem child. I was the oldest of three and the only girl. I got pregnant at 15. My mother, wanting more for me than she had for herself, got me an abortion that I ended up paying for because I had a part-time job. I lived in a strict household. I wasn't allowed to do anything, or so I thought at the time. She was always on my case because I was a girl. My two younger brothers were allowed more freedom than me because they were boys. That was very unfair. So I felt like I was searching for something. I didn't know what I was searching for, but I was searching.

When I got pregnant again, I was a freshman in college. I dropped out and got married. I was 19, and went from my mother's house to a marriage. I did not want a

girl. I wanted a boy, because I knew the hard time I had given my mother in raising me, and I didn't want the same for myself.

I wanted a boy, and I got a boy. I loved my son, but I was not at all ready for motherhood. Not at all. I had not a clue.

My husband and I separated often because he would jump on me, and I couldn't beat him, so I would leave only to go back repeatedly. We separated for two years, and in that time span he moved to Michigan and I stayed in Illinois. I began a series of one-night stands. I would go into bars and sit at the bar, order a drink—I didn't drink, didn't know anything about drinking—and I'd let a man buy me a drink and then take me to a hotel. Later in life, I realized I was looking for love in all the wrong places. I needed to be wanted. I needed to be needed. Two years, that's a long time. That's a lot of one-night stands.

I reunited with my husband, and I moved to Pontiac, Michigan. That lasted maybe nine months. We started fighting again, and I left for good. I moved to Detroit. Once I separated from my husband—oh, immediately, the first week—I slept with his first cousin. I don't know why; I was not really attracted to him. It just happened. I think I needed to be wanted, part of the elusive, ever-present search. That destroyed any relationship that my husband would have had with his son.

I was not at all prepared to be a mother. I would buy clothes. I'd take him and everybody in the neigh-

borhood—all his cousins—and we’d go to museums and to zoos, and we’d do a bunch of wonderful things, but I didn’t have time to be a mother. I didn’t want to take time to be a mother.

My son cried out for help, and I chose to ignore it or just didn’t know that it was a cry for help. People told me it was a cry for help, so I can’t say I didn’t know. In school, he would be really disruptive. They had parent-teacher conferences. I’d go. And they suggested that I get him some help. I got him help. I took him to see a psychiatrist, and they suggested that I might also need help, that I was the problem.

At some point, I began using drugs. I started out smoking reefer. I didn’t hide it, and that was an issue

to court for something—I don’t remember what—and the judge said to me: “It definitely looks like you cannot control your son. If you can’t control him, we can.” He said, “I’m going to give you a continuance so you can think about whether you can handle him.” He said, “If you can’t, you come back and tell me, and we’ll keep him for 30 days, which will teach him a lesson.” All I could think was that he would be gone for 30 days, and I would be able to get high uninterrupted. His court date was two weeks before his 14th birthday. He didn’t know, but I knew, that when we went back to court I was going to tell the judge I couldn’t handle him so I could have a 30-day vacation. When I did that, they kept him. The look on his face broke my heart. But I didn’t stop it. I didn’t

I needed to learn how to be a mother to a son that was grown. And how do you do that? That was extremely hard for me. But I did it with the help of countless other women. I redefined who I was.

for my son. In school they were teaching “just say no to drugs” and here is his mama doing drugs, and he’s worried that I would die or go to jail. But I didn’t see that. I didn’t want to see that.

His problems in school got to be worse and worse, and the police got involved. They put him in this special education program and suggested that he take Ritalin. When I gave it to him, he was a different person, like a zombie. And I couldn’t do that. I wouldn’t do it. I stopped giving it to him. Later, I would often wonder if I had kept giving it to him, would it have helped him? I don’t know. But I didn’t.

My drug use progressed to the point where mothering interfered with my getting high. My son had to go

change my mind. I didn’t ask the court to give me another chance. I allowed them to take him. His behavior once he was incarcerated in St. Charles escalated, so that 30 days turned into 18 months, which began a life of institutionalization. He’s been in and out of jail ever since. He is now 46 and is currently in jail.

Infamous? Yeah, I’m an infamous mother. I love my son to death. It’s because of who I am that he is who he is. He didn’t have a chance because I didn’t give him a chance.

I’ve begun to make amends to those people, places, and things that I harmed throughout my life. It took me a long time to be able to stop feeling overwhelmed with the shame and the guilt. Once I got clean and stopped us-