

STEPHANIE JONES

RUNNING



TO

CATCHUP

WINNING IN SPITE OF MYSELF

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PRAISE FOR *RUNNING TO CATCH UP*

“Transparent. Authentic. Courageous. Relatable. *Running to Catch Up* is a beautifully written MUST-read to help acknowledge, face, and conquer your fears in order to forge ahead to successfully realize your dreams and God-given calling!”

—**Todra L. Anderson**, MD, MBA, FACOG Chief Medical Officer,
Memorial Hospital Miramar, and Football Mom Forever

“Unrelenting pursuit of perfection to live up to a self-imposed set of standards built on a foundation of fear is a complex, yet all-too-familiar scenario in the lives of successful people. Yet few have recognized and challenged this self-deceptive mindset. With brave honesty and crystalline storytelling, Stephanie Jones offers us the opportunity to join her on a journey of self-discovery as she peels away the beautifully sculpted layers of a successful life of motherhood and career to reveal an authentic core steeped in uncertainty. The courageous vulnerability displayed through life’s familiar chapters extends to the reader an opportunity to use lifelong self-reflection as a platform to face our most deeply seated fears. Anyone looking to unlock new paths into the dreams that life’s harsh realities have since shrouded would enjoy this trailblazing work. Brava to Jones for sharing this inspirational exploration and the encouraging outcome!”

—**Stephanie Gilbert**, Telecommunications C-Suite Executive

“*Running to Catch Up: Winning in Spite of Myself* is a powerful and compelling book that resonates with those—especially women—in pursuit of personal and professional growth, reminding us that it’s never too late to conquer fears and go after our dreams with unwavering determination. The author’s courage and vulnerability leaves readers inspired to set their own path to embrace their most authentic and fulfilling life.”

—**Kim Miller**, Vice President, Community Affairs of the Miami Dolphins,
Hard Rock Stadium, and Formula 1 Crypto.com Miami Grand Prix

“Stephanie has embraced her calling! She has cleverly woven the common root of all psychodynamic elements into an intriguing page-turner. I was so immersed in her memoir, *Running to Catch Up: Winning in Spite of Myself*, that I felt as if I were in Coconut Grove with her and her favorite cousins, playing tetherball. This is a must-read! Heal yourself as you navigate the delicate balance between faith and fear with Stephanie!”

—**Jessica Garrett Modkins**, Film Director, HBCU Honors;
and President, Hip Rock Star Advertising

“This is a fantastic read. Stephanie eloquently outlines what many of us feel but don’t say out loud. Fear is front and center in our minds. As women, we have been conditioned to take what is given to us and then made to feel guilty for wanting more; for asking for what is ours; and for wanting to be treated as equals. In this book, Stephanie challenges us to step forward and to be bold and fearless. Her story is a true inspiration for reminding ourselves that ‘Fear is a Mind Killer.’ A must-read.”

—**Susana Pichardo**, Senior Vice President of Finance
and Chief Accounting Officer, Convey Health Solutions

“I’ve been some insecure all my life, but blended that with energetic purposefulness and enough chutzpah to go ahead and try—and that’s given me the best possible chance to make a difference for others (and myself). A great example of exactly that is Stephanie Jones—successful by any standard as a person and a professional. Sharing her life’s lessons will help so many to make a difference for so many more. She has my respect and admiration—and applause!”

—**David Lawrence, Jr.**, retired *Miami Herald* publisher
and chair of The Children’s Movement of Florida

“It takes a huge sum of vulnerability—plus discipline and sacrifice—to sit down and share a memoir as rich as this one. The investment of time and commitment is evident throughout this book, making it worth the read. Steph’s story is incredibly powerful, making this memoir unique, thoughtful, and a special gift to women who believe in courage over fear and living with intention. As a mother and career businesswoman, I will be sharing this book with friends, colleagues, mentors, and mentees. It’s an inspirational must-read!”

—**Monica R. Richardson**, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist,
Executive Leader, and Speaker

“Stephanie Jones’ first outing as an author is a triumph! *Running to Catch Up: Winning in Spite of Myself* is an inspiring book about self-empowerment and encouragement from a woman who has achieved success despite challenging or extraordinary circumstances. Steph’s book paints a vivid portrait of her intellect, courage, and unwavering determination to make a difference in her life and the lives of others. I have been so proud to watch Steph’s journey of success throughout the years!”

—**Suzanne Prowse**, Health Care Executive

“Stephanie Jones’ raw, vulnerable, and courageous memoir is a testament to the power of resilience and the choice to live a life of joy and purpose. Her story will leave you empowered to confront your own fears and step boldly into the light of your authenticity.”

—**Domonique Worship**, Executive Coach and Leadership Advisor,
CEO and Founder of Domonique Worship Coaching & Consulting

INTRODUCTION

*You don't have to be great to get started,
but you have to get started to be great.*

—Les Brown, *The Power of Purpose*

In 2021, when my young adult children relocated across the country with very little warning, I found myself at a crossroads. My sudden empty nest was like loud crashing sounds that sent me into a depression. But I managed to turn those unsettling feelings into action in the form of self-reflection. I was forced to look at myself in the mirror and figure out who I was beyond motherhood and career, which were areas of my life where I had always felt successful. As a 52-year-old daughter, sister, wife, mother, friend, and executive, I decided to face my fears and unleash a vulnerability that I hadn't fully tapped into since the sixth grade.

This wasn't necessarily a conscious decision—I didn't wake up one day and just decide, *Oh! I'm going to face my fears today.* In fact, I don't know that I'd ever acknowledged my fears to myself. I always had a tough exterior in all aspects of my life. I was the opinionated little sister, the mouthy and sometimes disrespectful daughter, the strong wife and mom, the no-nonsense friend and executive. Vulnerability and weakness had no place in my life.

I spent 25 years of my life with the majority of my identity wrapped up in being a mom to two active and competitive boys. Mikel's mom. Miles's mom. A sports mom. The team mom. Miss Stephanie to their friends. But now that part of my life was over. I should have been prepared, but I wasn't. Facing my empty nest led to a journey I never expected: a journey of self-discovery; a journey of acknowledging, owning, and challenging my fears; a journey of legacy-building.

Often, women are afraid to openly discuss what scares us because we don't want to appear weak, timid, or less than perfect to our friends, family, and col-

leagues. As I struggled with my new identity crisis, I found that talking about my fears and vulnerabilities with others helped me cope. When I first discussed living a life of fear with some of my closest friends and colleagues, they didn't believe me. Somehow, I was able to mask my fears by appearing strong, outspoken, and unafraid to tackle any challenge that came my way. Those things are true. I am strong, I am outspoken, and I embrace complex challenges head-on. I am always looking toward the future and planning for potential problems. I live to solve problems: in both my business life and personal life, I'm the go-to person for creative solutions.

So yes, I'm proud to acknowledge my own courage, but I still have fears—real fears . . . some that I've carried for decades and never resolved. I believe these fears have hindered my personal and professional growth. In some cases, my fears have kept me from celebrating my God-given passions and talents and kept me from shining as my authentic, unique self. I often ask myself, *What could I have accomplished had I not been afraid?* When I think about all the things I've avoided out of fear, it's mind-boggling to me that I've been able to reach my current level of career success.

In 2023, while writing this book, I was promoted from a business unit president managing a \$70-million operating unit to chief operating officer for the entire enterprise. A chief operating officer of a \$400-million company doesn't sound like someone who should have fears, right? (As a matter of fact, because I faced a fear, it resulted in the promotion, which is a story I'll share in Chapter 5.)

COO or not, I'm sure my fears are not very different from most people's. But for me, I decided it was time to face each fear individually with the solutions-based approach that has made me so successful as a mother and as an executive. Motherhood (including being an aunt and a godmother) and career are the two areas of my life where I've had the most success, and the areas of my life that make me feel the most genuine sense of pride. Chapters 5 and 6 examine why I was able to approach my career and motherhood with courage and not allow my fears to paralyze me. But despite my success as an executive and a mother, sometimes my fears did cause me to stumble along the way.

Today I am facing my fears with a bold and unapologetic approach so that I don't miss a single opportunity from now on. I'm introducing the 11-year old Stephanie—the real me—to Stephanie, the adult, for the first time. Stephanie, the athlete, the singer, the writer, the thrill-seeker, and the fashion enthusiast, is re-emerging, and it has been an eye-opening journey of self-love and clarity.

Clarity of self.

Clarity of purpose.

Clarity of goals, no matter how big.

And and a vision for my life and legacy.

It's never too late to overcome your most crippling fears, to become the person you've always aspired to be, and to live the life you've always dreamed of. *Running to Catch Up: Winning in Spite of Myself* is a dedication to my 11-year-old self. It's a story of how, at 52 years of age, I made the decision to live my best life, with no fear of failure. Two years after making the decision to face my fears, I have accomplished more in terms of personal and professional growth than I have in my entire adult life.

By being vulnerable and sharing some of my deepest fears, I hope to inspire people (particularly women) of all backgrounds and stages in life to not let "fear" prevent them from accomplishing their dreams. The future is bright, and I hope this book gives you the courage to pursue your most authentic self.

CHAPTER 1

FEAR UNLOCKED

Thinking will not overcome fear but action will.

—W. Clement Stone

As a child, I used to dream big dreams. I would daydream for hours about being a professional singer, a world-renowned journalist, an author, a fashion model. I remember sitting on our front porch just staring at the red bottlebrush tree that my father planted in our front yard. Staring, thinking, dreaming. One minute I would be envisioning myself in another country in the middle of a war zone as a journalist with my photographer by my side. The next minute I would be strutting down the runway with hundreds of people on either side idolizing me. Despite my vivid imagination, I never took a single action to pursue any of these dreams. Something changed when adolescence began. My dreams were replaced with self-doubt and fear.

In fact, I haven't thought about my pre-teen aspirations in so long that I could barely remember any of them until I sat down to write this book. I had to dig deep into my past to remember who I was at the age of 11. The most significant realization I've had during this discovery journey is the power of that self-doubt. But remembering the self-love and self-admiration I felt at the age of 11 has been a therapeutic and healing experience for the adult me.

Before trying to recognize and name the fears I ultimately adopted, I needed to remember what I truly loved about myself as a child.

I loved being a runner. Leading the pack in long-distance races during elementary school PE class was one of my favorite things about myself. I had a real gift. I felt a sense of pride every day after those runs. I considered my friend Vonshea to

be my competition. She fueled me to be the best runner in our class. Some days she would win. Some days I would win. We thrived on that competitive rivalry partnered with our friendship.

I loved being a bad-ass neighborhood tetherball champion. Not too many women (or men) out there would probably list their tetherball skills as one of their favorite things about themselves, but this activity was another outlet for my athleticism and competitive spirit. I could beat anyone who approached the pole, no matter their age or where they came from. Young or old, my block or the next block over—it didn't matter. I would always win.

I became interested in the game of tetherball during the summers when I spent every day at my grandmother's house in Coconut Grove, an urban, inner-city neighborhood of Miami, where most of my uncles, aunts, and cousins lived. That area seemed considerably nicer than the part of Miami I lived in, Allapattah (a subdivision within the Liberty City neighborhood). Although Coconut Grove was less than 30 minutes from Allapattah, it seemed like worlds away. The people were different in Coconut Grove—more neighborly, more friendly, with a little more southern hospitality.

The second-best thing to living in Coconut Grove was getting to spend those summer months at my grandmother's. My mother worked nearby, so every day we would commute from our home in Allapattah to Coconut Grove, where she would drop me off to spend the day at my grandmother's house while she went to work.

Tetherball wasn't very common among the neighborhood kids in Allapattah where I lived, but in Coconut Grove, it seemed like all of the kids had mastered it. So as you can imagine, when I first started playing with my two older cousins, Kim and Schikenna, I was quite intimidated. They were so much better than me and extremely competitive.

They had a tetherball pole at the edge of their backyard. Kim and Schikenna approached the tetherball pole with no fear. Whoever was the server would walk up to the pole with a bold sense of confidence . . . grab the string with the hard yellow ball at the end of it . . . hold the ball high in the air . . . clench their

fist and then pound the ball down toward the ground. Bam! The ball would fly around the pole toward the opponent standing on the opposite side. When it was my turn to go up against them, at first I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to return a hit. And at first, I rarely did. I couldn't hold a stick to them, but I didn't give up, even though there were days I wanted to. I admired Kim and Schikenna for more than their tetherball skills, but the game represented much of what I looked up to.

I wanted to outdo my cousins so badly that I asked my parents to buy me a tetherball set of my own. They finally accommodated my request and bought me one as a Christmas gift. I still remember my dad digging the hole in the backyard and placing the metal pole in the ground to hang the tetherball on. My backyard on Northwest 41st Street then became the house where all the kids came to play tetherball. I'm certain I was the only kid on the block with a tetherball for a number of years. By the time I introduced the game to the Allapattah community kids, I had already gotten my training from my cousins in Coconut Grove, so I was the best player. No one could beat me. I was appreciative of those long summers of losses to my cousins because they prepared me for my future as the Allapattah tetherball champ.

I loved being a bad-ass cheerleader. Cheerleading was a big deal in my community, and to be a great cheerleader, you had to be a great jumper. I could outjump most of the girls in the neighborhood, with the exception of my best friend, Carol. Her jump was beautiful—high and wide. A work of art. Her legs flared out in the air with a swoosh-like sound. As a matter of fact, when she would jump, the onlookers would say, “swoosh, swoosh, swoosh,” after each jump. I admired her ability to wow a crowd with her skills. I was the second-best jumper behind Carol. Because she was my best friend, I was proud to be second only to her.

I loved my social circle. I made friends easily—at school, church, and through my parents' friends who also had kids my age. I especially appreciated my circle of school friends. We started kindergarten together at age 5, so we had quite a bond. I vividly remember our lunchtimes at school. We had a special, “exclusive” table

of about six of us, and we'd have so much fun. I was also aware that we were considered relatively popular and smart. That was definitely a source of confidence at that age.

I loved being a part of groups and organizations. I was a part of the Red Circle and the youth choir at Antioch Missionary Baptist Church from as young as I can remember. And in fifth and sixth grade, I was a member of DESPA, a performing arts after-school program run by Mrs. Felder, also my fifth-grade teacher. She had a reputation for being mean and scary, but she brought out the best in us. We worked hard to perfect her choreographed dance and song routines. She was a perfectionist, and I believe she instilled a work ethic in us that drove our competitive spirit and our ambition. I still recall her walking around during those rehearsals wearing her black dance leotard and holding a long stick in her hand. Don't dare get a dance move wrong, or you would catch the wrath of her stick banging on the floor, the stage, or the table—whatever was closest to her at the time. Luckily, she never hit any of us kids with the stick, but I think we all feared that she might one day, so we worked even harder to perfect each move, each song, each skit. The weeks and weeks of practices five days a week were worth it. The yelling and tough love we received from Mrs. Felder meant our performances in front of the school and our parents were amazing. We were proud of ourselves.

I loved being a girl. Clothes, shoes, all types of hairstyles (straightened, candy curls, braids, curly perm). Playing with dolls and tea sets. Being a cheerleader. Going to Girl Scout meetings with my sisters. Watching my sisters and their friends dress up fancy for homecoming or prom. Watching my mom and the women at church dress up in their beautiful long gowns and colorful wigs for the annual church tea. Competing with my friends and my cousins for the best wardrobes. I loved anything that made me feel pretty, dainty, and feminine, and I appreciated anything having to do with beauty.



With all these things that excited and inspired me, I felt extremely confident in myself through sixth grade. I was vibrant, energetic, athletic, and full of life. I had

a lot of friends and enjoyed my home, school, and church life. So what happened? Why did I become afraid to live—to truly live?

Somehow, instead of continuing to wonder fearlessly about my calling in life, and therefore to pursue whatever that may be, I let go of my dreams. I was 52 years old when I realized that I was still searching for my true “calling” in life. Don’t get me wrong: I’m eternally grateful for the career path in healthcare that I stumbled upon. I love my work. And I’m not certain if I’d become a journalist, author, or fashion model—as the sixth-grade me imagined—that I would have considered those any more of a calling than what I actually do professionally. When I think of a calling, I think of passion, legacy, and something that generates eternal happiness. I think of being your true self and shining your light with pride.

At some point, probably during adolescence, I became afraid to pursue that level of pure happiness and fulfillment, afraid to pursue all those things I loved as a child. Adolescence for so many of us can entail countless incidents and encounters that begin to instill fear, insecurity, and feelings of unworthiness in us. As we mature, we may even be hindered by a most basic fear of death. When I think back on where and how all of my fears came from, I remember developing feelings of being uncomfortable in my own skin . . . skinny, ugly, and feeling like my dark complexion made me less-than.

I was the youngest sibling in the family and was regularly picked on by my older brothers and sisters, making me feel like I had to constantly defend myself. I had bad teeth when I was 6 years old. So my siblings created a “catchy” song on my behalf called “Rotty Dip,” and every time they got upset with me, they’d sing the jingle over and over: “Rotty dip, rotty dip, you make the world go round with rotty dip.” Even in the best of families, these are the kinds of dynamics that play into our fears and insecurities.

But families aren’t the only places where those insecurities take hold. Kids at school can be the worst, with all of the comparing, contrasting, and competition (sometimes healthy, sometimes not) that follows. Most of the children in my neighborhood went to daycare or preschool and were already reading by the time they reached kindergarten. I stayed home with my mom until I was 5, when it was time to attend kindergarten, so I was a late reader. I represented my school in a national spelling bee in the fifth grade and was humiliated to lose. I had a crush

on a boy in middle school who didn't know I existed, let alone felt the same way. That same year I had to perform a recitation of the poem "Black Is Beautiful" in front of the entire school—I was so nervous that my knees were knocking and my voice was trembling. Did I mention it was in front of the *entire* school?

Again, none of these are particularly traumatizing or unique experiences. We all (well, most of us) suffer some number of slights, disappointments, embarrassments, and judgments throughout our early lives. As these accumulate, it's only natural to develop fears of experiencing them again, and a fear of being our true selves. By the time I went to college, got married, and had kids, my fears were so deeply ingrained in me that I didn't even recognize them as fears any longer.

One day, several years ago, my oldest son Mikel said to me, "Why are you so afraid to live?" I don't remember exactly what we were talking about that sparked his question, but it was likely something to do with an adventure he wanted to pursue, perhaps skiing or snowboarding. My response would have been a resounding "no," to which he offered up his question . . . or challenge. Mikel has always been extremely attentive and intuitive—a very good judge of character and a straight shooter just like his mom. He has never minced words. And although I shrugged off his question at the time, his insightful words stuck in the back of my mind.

Years later, as an empty nester with nothing but time to think, it was finally time to face Mikel's question. After reflecting on my identity and my passions as a child, and then all those moments that slowly chiseled away at my courage, the next step was to actually name specific fears that led my son to imply that I was afraid to really live life. I broke the list down into two categories.

Childhood fears that carried over into my adult life:

- ◆ Fear of adventure that could lead to accidents or death, like swimming, skiing, or zip-lining
- ◆ Fear of failure that leads to an inability to try things that make me uncomfortable
- ◆ Fear of public speaking and singing

- ◆ Fear of not fitting in; fear of large social groups
- ◆ Fear of being unattractive

Fears that manifested as an adult:

- ◆ Fear of not aging well
- ◆ Fear of losing everything—health, money, family, friends
- ◆ Fear of not leaving a legacy

All of my fears are now unlocked, published in this book for the world to see, staring me square in the face. Writing them out like this is scary, but I've come to a point in my life where I have to choose between remaining paralyzed or tackling each fear head-on. Even though I still struggle with these fears every day, I've chosen to face them, and, from here on out, live a life of joy and purpose and create a legacy I'm proud of.

CHAPTER 2

RUNNING TO CATCH UP

In order to examine how these fears came about, I have to examine my life from the beginning. If any of us really wants to dive into our subconscious—where so many of our fears reside—we likely need to return to our earliest memories of experiences that led to emotions that turned into fear.

I was born in 1969, the last of five children. There was a four-year age difference between me and the fourth child, my brother Derrick. My oldest sibling, Angela (a.k.a. Ann), was nine years older than me.

We lived in the inner city of Miami, Florida, in a part of Liberty City called Allapattah. While Liberty City may have been considered a rough community, and we were all relatively poor, I have fond memories of my childhood.

In Allapattah, many of the parents were professionals—nurses, teachers, ministers, and business owners. The homes were single-family homes; generally both parents lived in the home and were married, and most families had one or two cars. Many of the kids in Allapattah thrived in school and were fortunate enough to pursue college degrees. This wasn't typical in Liberty City, but in Allapattah, this was the norm.

My parents were from Ocila, Georgia. My father, Saul, spent some time in the Army before leaving the military to take a job at the Veterans Administration Hospital. My mom, Willie Mae, and dad were high school sweethearts and married shortly after high school. They relocated from Petersburg, Virginia, to Miami in the early 1960s and started their lives.

From as far back as I can remember, my mother wanted to be a nurse. She was a nurses' assistant and eventually took some time off from work to raise me. She spent five years at home as a seamstress until it was time for me to go to kindergarten. During those early years at home with my mom, I enjoyed playing with tea sets and playing house with my dolls. My other siblings were in school, so I spent a lot of time alone. Playing in the backyard with our big, playful German shepherd, Devil, passed the time.

My mom did her best to educate me at home in between sewing jobs, but my first year of school was very challenging. I was clearly behind the other kids in reading, and I can recall being laughed at during reading time. The most basic of books, like *Sam I Am*, were a challenge for me.

Although I have a competitive and outspoken personality like my father, I've always admired my mom. She is quiet, yet she exhibits a strength that shines through in her shy and silent demeanor. Everybody who knows her absolutely loves and admires her. And she loves all of her children equally. I can't remember a time when I ever felt she had a favorite child. She made us all feel uniquely special. She's a beautiful and graceful woman with the loveliest smile. My mom gave me a strong example for how to be a mother, which is why I think motherhood came so naturally to me.

I always wished I looked like my mom. She is the epitome of natural beauty. She has a lighter complexion and beautiful gray eyes. I, being of a darker complexion, would always ask myself why I wasn't light-skinned like my mom. It has been indoctrinated in the Black community that having lighter skin is superior and more attractive. I felt the effects of colorism from an early age, particularly once I started school. Teachers seemed to treat light-skinned students a little better. Light-skinned girls were usually the cheerleaders and were most sought-after by the boys. My other siblings are all on the medium to darker skin tone as well, so colorism was never felt at home, thankfully.

My mother went back to college late in life. As I said, she always wanted to be a nurse. So after I started school, she went back to work as a nurses' assistant at Doctors' Hospital and enrolled in college to pursue an associate's degree in nursing. She worked full-time and took classes at night. She would frequently host study groups at our home for her classmates. Many of her classmates were from the Philippines. At the time, I had never heard of the Philippines, and I found the women from the Philippines to be intriguing with a different kind of beauty I had never seen, which further expanded my view of beauty.

I vividly remember my mother's college graduation ceremony from Miami Dade Community College. She was so pretty in her white dress and white nurses' hat with the green stripes. I wore a light pink dress, and at the end of the ceremony, we took a family photo. We were all dressed in our Sunday best and were beaming with pride.

Following graduation, my mother immediately began studying for the state exam to become a licensed practical nurse (LPN). I remember the thick books and the long nights of studying. She passed the state exam, successfully conquering this milestone, and was officially a fully fledged, practicing LPN.

But being an LPN wasn't her end goal. Back then, becoming a registered nurse (RN) was the pinnacle of success for anyone pursuing a career in nursing. Even with several attempts, my mother unfortunately never passed the state exam to become an RN. I think the pressures of raising five children, being a wife, and being a devoted church member didn't allow her to really focus on studying for the exam like she needed to. Sadly, not passing the RN exam was one of her biggest disappointments in life.

I also recall my mother being hospitalized quite a bit during those years she was in nursing school. She had ulcers and a few other ailments that would lead to overnight hospital stays. All I knew about ulcers back then was that people would say they were caused by worry and stress. I couldn't help but think that my siblings and I somehow contributed to her stress. It was, of course, nobody's fault, but I imagine that feeling of being a source of stress to someone I love so much influenced my psychology to some extent.

Those hospital stays always scared me, but my mom always looked beautiful, even in a hospital bed. My mom loved beautiful silk gowns and robes, so she always made a point to be the most fashionable patient in the hospital. During each hospital stay, my father would take us down to the gift shop, and we would always surprise my mom with a new gown or a new robe to make her feel better.

While the initial transition from home life to school was difficult, I have an abundance of positive (and some negative) memories of elementary school. What stands out most in my memory of first grade is Mrs. Walks. Next to my mom, she was the prettiest woman I had ever seen. She had really long, straight black hair that nearly reached her buttocks. Mrs. Walks was not light-skinned. She was a beautiful pecan-brown-toned woman with flawless skin. The kids used to say Mrs. Walks must have been part Indian. That's what young Black kids used to say or think when someone had unusually long, beautiful hair. While I was surrounded by many other pretty girls and women who were darker-skinned, Mrs. Walks was unique. She had a different kind of beauty that expanded my perception of what it could mean to be beautiful.

While I continued to struggle a bit academically in first grade, by the time I reached second grade I recall being pulled out of my regular class to go to a special class for smart kids. I thought I was being pulled out of class as a punishment until my teacher explained that I was working faster than the other kids, and they wanted me to spend a part of my day with students that were more on my level. Up until that moment, I didn't know I had improved so much in school to be considered one of the "smart kids." But from that point on, I was always thought to be one of them.

By the fifth grade, I was put in a class with all sixth-graders because my test scores indicated I could compete at a higher level. Only three fifth-graders in the entire school qualified for that class. I had to leave all of my closest friends to be a part of what I considered an experiment. At that age, I didn't really understand that my intelligence was being recognized; instead, I felt like this was sort of a social punishment. The one-year age gap between me and the overwhelming number of sixth-graders seemed larger than life. I felt outnumbered and alone, and I longed for my old friends. Seeing my fifth-grade friends sit together without me during lunch was hard. It felt like I was missing out on the fun of being a fifth-grader.

That year, I was honored with the American Legion Award, and boy, did that make me proud! The top two students in the school received this honor. I was being honored alongside a boy named Andy. Everyone knew Andy was the smartest kid in school. And to be side-by-side with him receiving the award on Awards Day was an incredible feeling. I still remember the multi-colored purple, maroon, and gold dress I wore that day at the restaurant where the ceremony was held.

I only found out later that I was not selected to be a part of the school's gifted program—my IQ test scores qualified me, but after visiting my home environment, somehow the psychologist disqualified me. I could never figure out what the psychologist performing the home visit saw that she felt disqualified me. Maybe it was because I had a normal home environment with lots of friends playing in the street when she arrived. Maybe it was because my siblings were running in and out of the house slamming the front door during her visit. Maybe it was because I couldn't do some weird hand exercise she asked me to do. Whatever it was, it was heart-wrenching to get the news that two of my best friends

since kindergarten, as well as Andy, had been selected for the gifted program, but I wasn't . . . especially since I was given no explanation. Of course, that left me wondering what was wrong with me.

Not being selected that year was one of the first personal disappointments in my life that I can vividly recall. The pride I had from going from being the worst reader in kindergarten to being considered for the gifted program by sixth grade was an amazing feeling and a huge boost to my self-esteem. But in a split second, I felt inadequate, my confidence stripped away. Every time the gifted bus came to the school to pick up my friends, that sense of inadequacy came back. I continued to excel academically, regardless. As a matter of fact, I think the disappointment fueled my competitiveness even more.

Through these ups and downs in school, my home life remained a source of stability and happiness. My childhood and my family really were amazing, even by today's standards. Being one of five children, we had a lot of fun playing card games, playing the home version of Family Feud or the Newlywed Game, watching television, and just enjoying life. My parents would host parties for our large extended family, and my cousins and I would run around playing hide-and-go-seek and other games. Life was good.

We knew we were somewhat poor, but my parents had good jobs with benefits, so we didn't *feel* it very much. On the rare occasion when we were reminded we were of limited means, our extended family was always there to help when we needed them, and my parents did the same for other family members. I recall one time when our power had been turned off. I didn't understand why then, but later I realized my parents hadn't paid the electric bill. That same night, my parents loaded my siblings and me in the car and drove us to my grandmother's house. She lived with my uncle and his family. We left their house that night with a bag full of groceries from my uncle's refrigerator. That was the first time I realized that my parents were struggling financially. It couldn't have been easy for them, raising five kids so close in age.

My father had four siblings that all lived in Coconut Grove, and they each had large families. With my grandmother as the beloved matriarch, our extended family was always close. Except for my cousin Chucky, I was the youngest of all the cousins and siblings. My female cousin closest in age to me is Schikenna. She

was my best friend and favorite cousin. (Yes, I had a favorite.) I loved spending time with her, especially during the summer months at my grandmother's house. Schikenna and I were inseparable. She was pretty and light-skinned, and I silently admired her looks and how much everyone liked her, especially the boys. (That was not really an area where I "excelled.")

The competitive nature of my family made it tough to be seen, and I was always trying to prove myself. One area where I really shined in the family was with my singing. My dad, being the competitive (and supportive) man he is, identified my talent for singing early on. He would have me sing to my grandmother and his brothers every chance he got, probably from as young as 7 years old. He loved bragging about me and making me sing. His encouragement really inspired me.

But his support still wasn't enough for me. I wanted to stand out against my siblings and cousins in more ways than one. I had much to admire in each of my siblings. My sister Michelle (a.k.a. Chelle), who was eight years older than me, was the brain in the family. She was pretty, smart, and good at everything. She was my first sibling to go to college. She received a full four-year academic scholarship to Georgia Tech. She became my barometer for success. Everything she did, I wanted to do, including joining the Flag Corps in middle school and majoring in accounting in college.

Looking back on it, I never even wanted to be an accountant. I hated every minute of my college coursework because I pursued her dream, not mine. Although I saw it through and graduated with a master's degree in accounting, I knew it wasn't something that would make me happy. Thankfully, I realized it early and never wasted time applying for jobs as an accountant.

My oldest sister, Ann, was really good at cooking and was always very nurturing. Ann gave me the most special gift a young girl could ask for. She made me an aunt at the age of 12. My first niece, Antoinette, changed everything. She was like my little sister and my daughter all wrapped up into one. Whenever you saw me, you saw Antoinette, until I left home for college at the age of 16. Because of Ann, being an aunt became a part of my identity. Something that gave me an unwavering sense of pride throughout my life.

My brother Jeffrey (a.k.a. Jeff) was an artist and musician, and was the best-dressed person in the family. Jeff and I were always close. I admired his beautiful

afro, his sense of style, and his ability to save money. For some reason, I always put him on a pedestal. When I went to college at Tennessee State University, Jeff would always send me care packages. The FILA tennis shoes he chose for me were hands-down the best care package I ever received as a college student.

My brother Derrick was an all-around talented guy. He could sing, dance, and make everyone laugh; he was popular in school; he was handsome; and he just had the whole package. In high school, Derrick was in the school band and was the captain of the Miami Jackson High School Drill Team, which was a huge deal in our community. The drill team members were like rock stars. Derrick and I were four years apart, so as I got older, I tried hanging out in some of the same nightclubs and after-hours spots that Derrick would frequent, like Strawberries. I looked up to him and his friends, but I was always viewed as the annoying little sister.

How could I compete with this lineup?

As you can imagine, as a young kid, I was always running to catch up with them. I was always tagging along trying to see what they were doing. And on top of that, my first cousins were all doing things I wanted to do, but I was too young to do them. This sense of always being behind and trying to play catch-up to the older kids apparently affected me more than I realized. For years, I questioned why I was so competitive . . . for no reason in some cases. I would compete just to compete with people who didn't even know I was competing with them for anything.

In the office setting, I always had to have one person that I considered my competition. It fueled me to reach my goals faster if I had someone I was silently competing with. It didn't matter who the person was. It could be a friend, or even someone I didn't know. But I've always sought out people whom I admire and who have a quality about them that makes them worthy of competition.

In middle school, I took extra classes during the summer to pass the time. As a result, by the end of the first semester of ninth grade, I had accumulated enough credits to move into tenth grade a semester early, meaning I would leave all of my friends behind. While most of my middle-school teachers advised me against this early move into high school, the competitive side of me couldn't turn down this opportunity. Little did I know at the time that this off-cycle transition

into high school would further push my fears into overdrive. I went into high school at the age of 14, with no friends from my original friend circle. I had a few older friends from the neighborhood and some of my brother Derrick's friends who were already upperclassmen at the high school, but it wasn't the same. I felt alone in school for the first time since entering kindergarten.

The transition into high school would prove more difficult than I had imagined. I had to develop an entirely new friend group. Walking into Miami Jackson Senior High for the first time was intimidating. There was a long walk into the main building, where the upperclassmen would sit along the wall. Some of the kids I knew, but most I didn't. Every day for the first few weeks, walking the long outdoor corridor made me sweat profusely. Then, eventually, Kimberly and Rennina entered my life. Two fellow sophomores who were not from the neighborhood. I had a few classes with them. They would prove to be two of my best friends throughout high school and into college. The two of them somehow made what started out as an extremely fearful experience into some of the best years of my life. Ultimately, I formed friendships with girls and boys at school and at surrounding high schools. We had a lot of fun going to football and basketball games, hanging out at Pizza Hut, Westland and 163rd Street malls, and at friends' homes. Those times when I didn't have the support and comfort of friends really made it clear how important friendships are to my success and well-being.

I continued to do relatively well in school, even graduating in the top 10 percent of my class. But the competition in high school was fierce. The girls were prettier, more physically appealing, outspoken, and well-dressed. Most girls were much more comfortable socially than I was. I was a 14-year-old, pimple-faced, skinny kid with braces. Although I was not shy in my regular friend or neighborhood groups, I was definitely shy and intimidated around certain crowds I was less familiar with, especially in front of boys. I had no shot at attracting boys' attention, and comparing myself to other girls made me feel insignificant and hurt my self-esteem.

I graduated from high school at 16 and had numerous college acceptances. Other than Florida State University, I only applied to out-of-state schools. I chose to attend Tennessee State University in Nashville. I changed colleges three times

over a span of six years. Looking back on it, attending Tennessee State was a mistake. It was selfish of me. As a 16-year-old who was free and independent, it was the most fun time of my life, but my parents couldn't afford it. I remember the first day of freshman registration, having to go to the university president's office to apply for a parent loan. I knew they couldn't afford the out-of-state tuition, and I didn't qualify for financial aid, but I insisted on going. I just had to go because most of my closest friends were headed to out-of-state colleges. Again, there's that compare-and-contrast that guided my esteem and my decision-making.

After a year of fun and independence, my grades were in the tank. They were so bad that I hid my report card from my parents. I watched the mailbox every day, and eventually, when my report card arrived, I intercepted it and threw it in the garbage, for it never to be found. My parents finally came to the realization, without even knowing about my grades, that they couldn't continue to swing the out-of-state tuition. I did not return to Tennessee State for the second year. It was such a disappointment because I had made amazing friends, many of whom I never spoke to again. And even worse, one of my best friends from home, Daphne, who was one year younger than me, enrolled at Tennessee State to join me there in my second year, and I wasn't able to return. I hated not being there with her and showing her the ropes. Out of embarrassment, I distanced myself from Daphne and her family, which is something I regret even today. Daphne's cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents were like family to me throughout high school, and I let embarrassment end a special bond, without even an explanation.

From there, I went to live in Delray Beach, Florida, with my sister Michelle and her husband, Rodney. I attended a nearby university, Florida Atlantic University (FAU) in Boca Raton, where I met my husband, Morshee. I got a job to help my parents pay my tuition and my car payment. It was challenging to juggle work and school, particularly since FAU didn't offer many evening classes.

I decided to transfer to Nova Southeastern University because it was more conducive to working professionals, and I could take a heavier course load in the evenings and work during the day. Finally, I graduated with a bachelor's degree in business administration from Nova in 1992. I was extremely proud of myself for not giving up. A college degree was very important to me. I had seen both of

my brothers give up their college dreams for jobs because of financial challenges. I couldn't fault them for that, but I refused to do the same, even if it meant financing my education myself through student loans.

By the time I graduated from college, I had already let my fears from middle school and high school paralyze me to some degree. Had I continued my education at Tennessee State, I think I would have had a better chance of shaking my fears because, like in elementary school, I had a lot of friends at Tennessee State and people were very accepting of me. For some reason, I had friends of all ages (freshmen and upperclassmen), most of them from Florida, and I recall several times on Sunday mornings my phone would ring off the hook with numerous invitations from every girl in my friend group inviting me to walk over to the cafeteria for breakfast. I recall my first semester roommate, Lavonne, telling me how I was so popular among the girls. I honestly couldn't reconcile why, but it felt good. Looking back, it's apparent that my confidence and courage were directly related to whether I had trustworthy friends in my life—both people I could look up to and ones who might look up to me.

Shortly after graduation from Nova, I landed a job with Cigna Healthcare and got married the same year. I took advantage of Cigna's full tuition reimbursement program and enrolled in Nova's master's in accounting program shortly after. I felt like I was already behind because it took me six years to finish my bachelor's degree. I worked full-time while working my way through grad school. I didn't join any sororities, and I didn't form friendships outside of work friendships. My priorities were shifting. By the time I graduated with my graduate degree, I was feeling the pressure to succeed. While the pressure was motivating, and I therefore viewed it as a positive force, I now recognize that I was determined to prove that I could be successful . . . meaning my sense of worth was coming from external sources to some extent.

Again, I was running to catch up. This time, I was running to catch up to my friends that took a more traditional college route and graduated in four years. Many of my friends were already working in their chosen fields and were making enough money so that they were having fun, traveling, and living balanced, fulfilling lives. I was just getting started.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Stephanie “Steph” Jones is a successful executive, wife, and proud mother of two remarkable young men, Mikel and Miles. In her debut memoir, *Running to Catch Up: Winning in Spite of Myself*, she chronicles her personal journey of confronting her fears and rediscovering her authentic self—beyond her identity as a businesswoman and mother.

Born and raised in Miami, Florida, Steph holds a bachelor’s degree in business administration and a master’s degree in accounting from Nova Southeastern University. With over 30 years of experience in the healthcare industry, she has worked for leading organizations like Cigna, Coventry (now Aetna), and UnitedHealth Group. By the age of 32, she was already serving in leadership roles for one of South Florida’s largest health plans.

In 2005, Steph joined Convey Health Solutions, a healthcare technology and service company, to lead the Managed Care division. Over the years, she was progressively promoted and, in 2021, she was appointed as the president of the Technology Business division. This role led her to one of her proudest career moments—ringing the bell on the New York Stock Exchange when the company went public. Most recently, Steph was promoted to Enterprise Senior Vice President and Chief Operating Officer of the \$400 million business.

Despite her professional accomplishments—serving as a dynamic leader, strong negotiator, change agent, and trusted advisor—Steph was determined to add “legacy builder” to her résumé. The transition to an empty nest sparked her to face her lifelong fears, apply her problem-solving skills to overcome personal challenges, and, inspired by her 11-year-old self, transform her life . . . and write a book about it all.

Alongside her husband of over 30 years, Morshee, Steph is an active philanthropist. She holds the position of chairman of the board for Miami-based nonprofit, Girl Power Rocks, and is an active member of International Women’s Forum of Florida. Having rediscovered her childhood passions, she is also a fitness and fashion enthusiast, columnist for *Legacy Magazine*, and enjoys spending quality time with friends and family.

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