

"Moving . . .
Teens' own words
stress the importance
of resilience."

MARIAN WRIGHT
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Children's Defense
Fund

INSIGHT
THE
INDEPENDENCE
STRUGGLE
RELATIONSHIPS
TO BE
INITIATIVE
STRONG
CREATIVITY
True stories by Teens About
Overcoming Tough Times

HUMOR
Edited by

Al Desetta, M.A., of Youth Communication
Sybil Wolin, Ph.D., of Project Resilience

MORALITY

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Praise for THE STRUGGLE TO BE STRONG

**"Where does the ability to be strong in the face of adversity come from?
The many teen authors of this book wrestle with this question.
Their answer? From the inside. It's all about resilience."**

—Youthworker

"When I feel like whining about my hard life, I instead page through *The Struggle to Be Strong*. After a few paragraphs, I've usually gotten some much-needed perspective from Danielle, Jamel, Craig, or one of the book's other young writers."

—Ronnie Polaneczky, *The Philadelphia News*

"Thought-provoking, easy to read, and often inspiring."

—*School Library Journal*

"Explores a world that is the other side of the Taste Berries and Chicken Soup for the Soul series."

—KLIATT

"A beacon of hope and good sense for young people and their counselors."

—Martin E.P. Seligman, Ph.D., author of *Learned Optimism* and *The Optimistic Child*

"Inspiring and provocative. . . . A ray of hope at a time when too many youth are pushed out and pushed away."

—Peter L. Benson, Ph.D., President, Search Institute,
author of *What Kids Need to Succeed* and *All Kids Are Our Kids*

"Moving. . . . Teens' own words stress the importance of resilience, building on inner strengths, asking tough questions, being one's self, connecting with people who matter, taking charge, using imagination and humor, and doing the right thing. . . . Very important resources for all working to improve the lives of young people. Adults should act on these valuable insights."

—Marian Wright Edelman, President, Children's Defense Fund, author of *The Measure of Our Success: A Letter to My Children and Yours*

"Touches the heart of human relationships."

—The Right Reverend Jane Holmes Dixon,
Suffragan Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington

"Wonderful—and so needed, as my experience is that adults are talking about youth resilience with other adults, but not nearly enough with the kids themselves. This book is the best: Kids to kids."

—Nan Henderson, M.S.W., President, Resiliency In Action, Inc., author of *Resiliency in Schools: Making It Happen for Students and Educators*

"Refreshing and truly empowering. . . .

An excellent resource for changing hearts and minds!"

—Erik K. Laursen, Ph.D., President, Strength Based Services International,
Director, United Methodist Family Services Residential Treatment Center

THE STRUGGLE TO BE STRONG

True stories by Teens About
Overcoming Tough Times

Edited by
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To the teens at Youth Communication,
who have courageously shared their stories
of persistence in the face of adversity.

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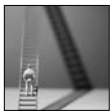
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A MESSAGE TO YOU

“Things will get better.”

I remember my guidance counselor telling me that while I was in his office. I had just gotten into a fight in the schoolyard with this kid who thought it was a good idea to smack me in the head and run away. (Ha! I showed him.) I was about to get suspended. I thought to myself, “Things will get better? Yeah, right.”

After school, that same kid was waiting for me with a bunch of his friends. They beat me bloody, and no one tried to stop them. “Things will never get better,” I thought to myself.

But you know what? Things always get better. Maybe not today, tomorrow, or even the next day, but they will, and that’s what resilience is all about—regaining self. If I told you half the things I was able to bounce back from, you’d be mortified. You might even reexamine your own problems and decide they’re not as bad as you thought. I hope the stories in *The Struggle to Be Strong* help you realize that there’s always a way out of “no way out.”

Lenny Jones*

*Lenny wrote the story “My Hair Is Blue—But I’m Not a Freak!” in this book. See page 126.

INTRODUCTION

A Way Out of “No Way Out”

by Veronica Chambers

Where does it come from—the ability to be strong? How do you struggle to survive when it feels like you’ve been born in the wrong skin, the wrong body, the wrong family, the wrong neighborhood, or on the wrong side of the tracks? How do you make your way when grown-ups, who are supposed to take care of you, fail miserably at their jobs? How do you try to move forward with your life when your parents, friends, or the kids at school don’t know where you’re coming from or what you have to deal with every day?

The teenage authors of *The Struggle to Be Strong* don’t have all the answers, but they do a hell of a job wrestling with the questions. The wisdom they’ve gained is what makes this book so powerful, and what can help you face tough issues as you move toward adulthood. These thirty stories offer many lessons learned, from Younique Symone’s painful reckoning with her drug-addicted mother in “I Don’t Know What the Word Mommy Means” to Artiqua S. Steed’s exploration of interracial dating in “I’m Black, He’s Puerto Rican . . . So What?” to Tamara Ballard’s story of becoming tight with a girl she never thought she’d be proud to call sister in “She’s My Sister (Not Foster).”

These stories first appeared in two youth magazines in New York City called *New Youth Connections* and *Foster Care Youth United*. The young writers wrote their stories to help teens like you with similar problems and stresses. No matter what your life is like, the stories can help you realize your own strengths so you can face the future with greater confidence.

As you read these stories, don’t think these kids are different from you—that because they’re published in a book, they’re somehow more special or together than you are. They’ve dealt with many of the same difficulties and challenges you’ve dealt with, and there’s no shame in having problems. When you find ways to

struggle through your challenges, you're already more remarkable than you may realize. The very things that seem to be ruining your life right now—having trouble controlling your anger, having an alcoholic parent, being too shy to make friends, living in a foster home—may be the very things that will give you the strength to face and deal with future obstacles as they come your way.

A person who keeps going despite hardships and setbacks, who learns positive, powerful lessons from these experiences, is a person with resilience. Resilience means inner strength. Since this is a book about resilience, in a way it's a book for everyone, because we all have the ability to bounce back from setbacks, disappointments, and loss. But this book will be especially valuable to young people who have had more than their share of troubles.

I know, because when I was sixteen, it seemed like there was nowhere for me to go but straight down the gutter. I had moved out of my mother's house because I didn't get along with my stepfather. Then when I moved in with my father and stepmother, the abuse just hit a whole new level. I spent many nights at the homes of friends, working in restaurants as a bus girl so I could get something to eat, or just walking the streets, hoping nobody would see me or hurt me.

I used to look at reruns of old TV shows like *The Brady Bunch* and think, "I bet every one of those cabinets in that TV kitchen has food in it. I bet those kids are never hungry." I liked school, but it's hard to study when you're afraid to go home. By the time my junior year rolled around, I was just trying to make it through each day. I had always dreamed of going to college, and I carefully avoided both sex and drugs because I didn't want an unplanned pregnancy or an addiction to derail me as they had some of my friends. But the question I had to wrestle with was: If I couldn't finish high school, if there was no safe place for me to live while I finished high school, how was I ever going to make it to college?

If you have a dream for your life, and if you try hard enough and you knock on enough doors, eventually you'll find what you need. With the help of my guidance counselor, Mrs. Chatmon, I applied to and was accepted at Simon's Rock, a college for kids who want to go to college early. I just knew that if I didn't find a way out of my situation, I wouldn't survive. My dream was to go to college,

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but the longer I stayed in my abusive household, the more I felt the dream slipping away from me.

So I went to college early, and it saved my life. Without really being fully aware of it, I was taking initiative, forming relationships, and trying to become independent. That's what the authors in this book, who are no different from you or me, have done in their lives. They haven't always succeeded and their problems haven't completely disappeared, but they have gained strength and grown through their efforts.

I once read something I've never forgotten. Angela Davis, scholar and activist, was talking about the Black Power movement of the 1960s. Here's the gist of what she said: "The thing we didn't understand back then is that freedom is an inside job."

I believe that with all my heart: "Freedom is an inside job." It may take you years to change your outside world and realize your dreams, but it's within your power to change your heart and mind. You might not think you have the power to change whatever in your life is causing you pain. But these teenage writers provide some valuable clues about how to begin tapping into that power.

Resilience isn't one specific magical quality that you're either born with or not. There are many kinds of resilience, and all of them can become part of you. This book is about seven kinds of resilience identified by Sybil Wolin, coeditor of *The Struggle to Be Strong*, and Steven Wolin. Together, the Wolins founded Project Resilience to conduct research and provide training in resilience. Learning about these resiliencies can help you think about ways you struggle to be strong. Each suggests actions you can take to survive, grow, and learn from the difficulties in your life. The seven resiliencies the Wolins identified are:

- Insight, or Asking Tough Questions
- Independence, or Being Your Own Person
- Relationships, or Connecting with People Who Matter
- Initiative, or Taking Charge
- Creativity, or Using Imagination
- Humor, or Finding What's Funny
- Morality, or Doing the Right Thing

You may feel you already have many of these resiliencies. Or you may feel you have none of them—or only one or two, in the tiniest portions.

Don't worry. It's not how often you act in these ways that counts—rather, it's your willingness to *build on what you've got*. You can learn to recognize what your strengths are and use them for all they're worth.

This book isn't called *Triumphant Stories of Teenagers with Unbelievable Will and Might*. It's called *The Struggle to Be Strong*, and the key word here is *struggle*. Struggle means making the effort to be strong. You have the power to “walk out” your anger, as Tamara Ballard did. You have the power to step in and be an example to your brothers and sisters when your parents are behaving irresponsibly, as Charlene Johnson did. You have the power to befriend someone living with AIDS, as Max Morán did.

If every day you do one little thing to make your life better, then guess what? You win. Because if you make that effort every day, your life will change. As teen writer Lenny Jones puts it, “If I told you half the things I was able to bounce back from, you'd be mortified.” Still, Lenny insists, “But you know what? Things always get better.”

That's what the stories in this book are about. By reading them, thinking about them, and trying to see how they relate to your life you can, as Lenny says, find “a way out of ‘no way out.’”

Veronica Chambers is the author of several books, including the young adult novel *Marisol and Magdalena* and *Mama's Girl*, a memoir. She has worked as an editor for *Premiere* and *The New York Times Magazine*, and is presently an editor at *Newsweek*. She is a graduate of the Youth Communication writing program.

A NOTE ON FOSTER CARE

Some of the stories in *The Struggle to Be Strong* were written by young people living in foster care. They refer to foster homes, group homes, social workers, and other aspects of what is commonly known as “the system.” While these stories deal with themes that everyone, not just foster children, can relate to, you may not be familiar with the foster care references and will need some explanation.

Nationwide, about 500,000 young people live in foster care. Some are removed from their homes when the courts determine that they’ve been abused or neglected by their parents. Others go into foster homes when poverty, death, illness, or other circumstances beyond their control prevent their biological families from properly caring for them. Some older children go into foster care when their families feel they can no longer supervise them.

Once a child goes into the system, he or she lives in one of these settings: with a foster family (where the child doesn’t know the family), with a kinship foster family (where the child is related to the foster family), or in a group home (a residence mainly for older foster kids). Some young people end up being adopted out of the foster care system, but many others spend months or even years in foster care. These teens often lack stability in their lives and have no real sense of home.

“THINK ABOUT IT”— and Maybe Write About It

At the end of each story, you’ll find a couple of questions under the heading “Think About It.” These are to help you reflect on what you’ve read and find parallels between your experience and the writer’s. Take a few moments to read them over. There’s no need to write anything.

However, if you feel like it, jot down some of your thoughts. You don’t have to write a lot—a few sentences can help you clarify your reactions to what you read.

Maybe you’ve had the experience of keeping a diary or journal, or writing letters. If so, you know that writing helps you learn things about yourself and gives you a good way to deal with difficult emotions. Putting feelings on paper can help you gain more control over them.

Terry-Ann Da Costa has written a story called “How Writing Helps Me,” (page 112). Here’s how she describes the importance of writing:

“I remember one day I was really depressed. I wrote about how I felt and what made me feel that way, and then I read over what I’d written. That helped me feel a lot better, because when I read it I couldn’t believe I was capable of having those harmful, dangerous thoughts and feelings about myself.

“Writing helped me when I was going through difficult times with my family—when they didn’t or couldn’t understand me, or when they didn’t understand why I would cry for no reason. Writing helped me when I needed someone to talk to. Writing is like both my friend and my family, because it’s always there for me whenever I need it.”

Lenny Jones, author of “My Hair Is Blue—But I’m Not a Freak!” (page 126), has this to say about writing:

“I realized there was always something going on in my life that I could write about from my own point of view. I could tell the stories I wanted to tell, and no one could tell me if I was right or

THE STRUGGLE TO BE STRONG

wrong. I started to see writing as a really fun way of expressing myself and what I felt inside.”

You certainly don't need to write answers to the questions under “Think About It.” Just thinking about the questions is enough. But if you feel the urge to do so, writing your responses may deepen your enjoyment and understanding of this book.

Note: Many stories in *The Struggle to Be Strong* include slang, or possibly unfamiliar, words. The glossary on page 170 provides definitions of some of these words.

Each story ends with information about the author. In some cases, we've lost contact with the writers. When possible, however, we've briefly described where the author is now and what he or she is doing.

THE RESILIENCIES

INSIGHT

Asking Tough Questions



Insight is asking tough questions and giving honest answers about yourself and the difficult situations you find yourself in.

The opposite of **insight** is avoiding a painful truth.

Insight is hard because the urge to blame others for your troubles, instead of looking honestly at your own role, is powerful.

Insight helps you see things as they really are, not as you wish they would be.



Insight, our first resilience, is the habit of asking tough questions—about yourself and about the situations you find yourself in—and giving honest answers. With insight, you can face a painful truth, instead of avoiding it. Insight is a resilience because it helps you open your eyes to situations as they really are, not as you wish they were.

The stories in this section are by teens who have struggled with difficult truths about themselves, their families, and their communities. You'll see them examine their own actions, face problems, and risk being hurt. As you may know from your own experience, it's often easier to ignore or deny what you don't like about yourself or your life than it is to face your problems squarely.

Having insight means you don't blame others for your problems. You take responsibility for yourself. It takes work—and courage—to face the truth this way. But insight helps the teens in this section become the people they really want to be. Insight can do the same for you.