

Against the Odds – Living the Dream

Lieutenant Kristal Turner-Childs

By Mikell Worley



Lieutenant Kristal Turner-Childs’s voice took a reverent tone when she described to me the reason why she became an officer in the Pennsylvania State Police force. When Kristal was in fifth or sixth grade, she made a phone call to 911 that set her on the path of a future career in law enforcement. “I was leaving my house when I saw a fight up the street. A man was hit and I saw blood running down the street. I ran back into the house and called 911,” she explains.

Kristal assumed that her part in the event was over, but later that day a uniformed Har-

risburg City police officer knocked on her door. “I thought I was in trouble, but he was there to thank me for calling 911. He stated, ‘You probably saved that young man’s life.’ I was feeling on top of the world! I wanted to feel like that again! That’s when I started thinking about being a police officer!”

Kristal, the oldest of four children, was born and raised in a small town in North Carolina. In the 1970s, when she was six years old, the family moved to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Her step dad was a construction worker and obtained a job working on Interstate 81 in the

Harrisburg area. She attended a local school, where her first grade teacher, Ms. Gordon, fostered a love of school in her young student.

As the years went by, family members encouraged her to be a nurse or a lawyer, and she lost sight of that grade-school vision of working in law enforcement. After graduating from high school, Kristal attended Indiana University of Pennsylvania in 1983. She was in her junior year, driving back to college after a break, when she had another experience that reminded her that there was still something that she wanted to pursue.

Kristal admits that she was speeding when she was pulled over by a Pennsylvania state trooper. "I was shaking when I heard the siren and saw the lights. My knuckles turned white as I gripped the steering wheel to pull the car to the side of the road. But when I looked in the rearview mirror and saw the handsome uniformed officer walking towards me, everything turned to slow motion. He looked ten feet tall! He was so professional and polite! Receiving the ticket was painful, but my interest in being a law enforcement officer returned. When I got back to college, I immediately began researching the [Pennsylvania] State Police."

Following college, Kristal took a job at the Dauphin County Prison in Harrisburg, but she remained focused on becoming a police officer. "I took the first [entry] test and didn't score well." Rather than give up, Kristal persevered and passed the test on her second try. However, there were additional hurdles for Kristal to cross—the cut-off age for entrants was 31, and Kristal would be 31 on her next birthday. The waiting list for applicants was long, with up to 12,000 names on it.

Then "a letter arrived stating that I had been removed from the waiting list [because of my age]. I was discouraged but decided to push on. At the time I weighed 240 pounds. Even if I had been considered, I wouldn't have passed the physical requirements. I began to work out and sought the help of a nutritionist and lost 70 pounds."

One year later, another letter arrived announcing that 40 was the newly instated cut-off age. "I was called for an interview, and they scheduled my physical testing. I did not pass the body fat test and was told I needed to lose 30 pounds. I had to lose it by the next scheduled PT test . . . within 30 days."

By the next scheduled PT test, Kristal had lost the weight within the necessary time frame. Weighing in at 130 pounds with 24 percent body fat, Kristal completed the series of intense trials. Through her hard work and

Pennsylvania State Police CALL OF HONOR

I am a Pennsylvania State Trooper, a soldier of the law.

To me is entrusted the honor of the force.

I must serve honestly, faithfully, and if need be, lay down my life as others have done before me, rather than swerve from the path of duty.

It is my duty to obey the law and to enforce it without any consideration of class, color, creed or condition.

It is also my duty to be of service to anyone who may be in danger or distress and at all times so conduct myself that the honor of the force may be upheld.

determination, she accomplished what had seemed impossible and passed the test.

Kristal's preparation for the PT training meant she was in prime physical condition for the necessary 29 weeks of rigorous training at the State Police Training Academy in Hershey. She arrived fit, polished, and perfectly groomed. "I'm a girl through and through, so I was determined to keep my fingernails and hairstyle. As I started climbing the ropes, my nails dug into the palms of my hands. That night, I went back to my room and cut off every nail. I put on a baseball cap and reminded myself that I had to let go of the vanity for 29 weeks in order to reach my goal."

Out of the 88 recruits in Kristal's class, only five were women. The vigorous training program whittled the graduating class down to 73 men and four women. Kristal states proudly, "We are all a team. As long as everyone carries their load and looks out for one another, we remain a team."

Kristal brings this team mentality to her outlook on society as a whole. "When we function as a team we can accomplish so much more. I tell women there is plenty of pie for all of us. We need to cheer, support, and care for each other."

It is this attitude that has helped Kristal change lives in our community as an advocate for our youth. They respectfully call her TC, a nickname she acquired during training. She is a sought-out speaker at events for youth, while parents frequently ask her to talk to their chil-

dren. "I make it clear [to the kids] that I'm not taking a parental role. I'll talk to them and I don't sugarcoat it. I explain reality." A mother recently thanked her for helping her daughter who was headed for trouble at the age of 13. Following TC's frank discussion, the girl got back on track and has recently graduated from college.

Empowering women is another passion that has driven Kristal to help others. "It's 2010 and there are a lot of opportunities for women, but we don't take advantage of them. We put everyone else's needs first — the children, the aging parents, etc. I'm conducting a series called 'Putting Yourself First,' through my business Eyes Wide Open LLC, to encourage women to take time for themselves. When we say 'no' we still feel guilty. We'll be exhausted and try to make everyone else happy and not take time for ourselves. I want to encourage each of you to make this the year you will take time for YOU!"

Her faith, determination, and strength of character saw her through seemingly impossible odds. Despite the roadblocks, Kristal's resolve has enabled her to become one of the most respected leaders in our community. ❖

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

On April 21, 2007, I attended the Pennsylvania State Police promotion ceremony out of respect for all of the work Kristal Turner-Childs does in the community with violence prevention and to support our youth. We know that police officers routinely put their lives on the line, but hearing it in a pledge to "lay down my life as others have done before me" puts it in a different perspective. Since attending the ceremony, I have an even greater admiration and appreciation for those who make and honor this promise.

There is so much we can learn from the State Police---their passion, professionalism, commitment, loyalty to one another, dedication to team, and to the concept of all of us being so much more as a whole than any one of us is alone. If we could allow those concepts to permeate throughout all aspects of our lives, we would have the basic values to solve many of the problems in our society. Heartfelt thanks to all of you!

Mikell Worley is an artist and writer. She is the founder and president of Mikell's Treasures. (www.mikellstreasures.com) She is the managing editor and feature interviewer for *Women-CONNECT*. Mikell has illustrated several books. She is an advocate for women and children.