

JENNIFER KYUNG



Turning Lemons into Lemonade

By Mikell Worley

Jennifer Kyung, the deputy director of the Governor's Advisory Commission on African American Affairs and a member of the Governor's Advisory Commission on Asian American Affairs, carries herself with dignity, grace, and an air of privilege. She gives the impression that she would be just as comfortable and gracious in the most elite, sophisticated environment as she would in the humblest of conditions. At 29 years old, she is successful, confident, and wise beyond her years.

Her story begins in Seoul, Korea, on June 11, 1980, the day she was born. Jennifer's father, an American soldier, was African American and her mother was Korean. In that place, at that time, a baby of mixed race was not accepted, so when Kyung was four days old her mother left her in a park. "Since I don't know the reason my mother gave me up, I can make up the story. I can decide if I will put a positive or negative twist on it. I choose to believe that she did what she thought would be best for me."

A woman found the abandoned baby girl and took her home. Jennifer was later told that the woman who had cared for her was a prostitute. "She kept me until I was two years old and then took me to an orphanage." Again, Jennifer gives a positive spin to the story. "She probably needed to remove me from that environment in order to protect me."

After spending a year in an orphanage, in 1984 Jennifer was sent to the United States, where she was adopted by a pastor, his wife, and three sons who lived in Pennsylvania. Unfortunately, the situation was not a happy one for Jennifer. "They had a family room in the basement with a television and only 'real' family members were allowed to go there. They called it 'downtown.' I remember lying at the top of the stairs with my ear to the door," says Jennifer.

"My first realization that I was different, that something was wrong with me, came in second grade. My teacher would write sentences on the board and the students were to complete them. When asked to complete the sentence 'My nickname is _____,' my response was 'Mutt.' I had never realized what it meant, but my teacher understood the implication immediately and I sensed her apprehension."

The difficulties that Jennifer experienced in that home went well beyond harsh nicknames. She was abused verbally, physically, and sexually. Jennifer's adopted mother would tell the little girl about the Ku Klux Klan and how they hated people of mixed race. The woman would then cruelly threaten to call members of the Klan as a means of disciplining Jennifer. Then one day when Jennifer was getting beaten as a punishment, she told on the oldest son who had been molesting her.

"The next morning, when I was walking out of the bathroom, he was waiting for me. He picked me up and slammed me into a metal railing. I needed ten stitches in my forehead." Her parents threatened her to keep her quiet and several weeks later sent her to live with other fam-



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ily members. She was then bounced around to the homes of various relatives living in Georgia, Missouri, and Florida.

At around 8 years old, Jennifer was put into foster care, where she was in and out of the system until she turned 18. She stayed with families in Missouri, Michigan, Maine, North Carolina, Florida, Maryland, Georgia, and eventually Pennsylvania. "I attended nine different schools." However, the system again failed Jennifer and the neglect, cruelty, and abuse continued throughout the remainder of her childhood.

Even so, Jennifer also remembers incidents of kindness and caring. "I lived in Georgia for less than a year with an aunt who was white and an uncle who was black (relatives of her adoptive father). There was a lake behind their house with swans. Once when we were feeding them, my uncle told me the story of the ugly duckling and how it grew to become a beautiful swan. He told me I had rhythm, I could play sports, and I was smart. It was then I realized that being different wasn't bad – it was simply different."

The most stable years Jennifer remembers were from seventh through tenth grades, when she lived in Baltimore, Maryland, with one family. "I stayed with another aunt and uncle, who took me in when I was 12. Their daughter, my cousin, and I became best friends. My cousin was very submissive, and she was learning to stand up for herself from me. The family felt I was a bad influence. Then my male cousin tried to molest me." This incident, combined with the family's concern about the impact she was having on their daughter, prompted them to return Jennifer to the foster care agency. "They sent my cousin away for the day and while I was in the middle of watching *Braveheart*, [they] told me to pack my bags because I was moving."

Foster care next placed Jennifer with a family in central Pennsylvania. "I was at war. I was angry, scared, and damaged. I entered Steelton-Highspire High School and was warned that I had to 'get under control. If you don't make this work, you are going to boarding school until you turn 18.'" Jennifer took the warning to heart and began to concentrate on her studies. During her senior year, she obtained a school internship working for the state. Jennifer attended school in the morning and worked for the Commonwealth in the afternoon. She did some mod-

eling at the King of Prussia mall in Philadelphia for extra money and had hopes of attending Florida State to study theater arts.

In 1998, a few months before her high school graduation, Jennifer's foster mom sent a letter to the foster care agency stating that when Jennifer finished school she would have to leave the home. Her foster mother was kicking her out. The woman carbon-copied the letter and slid it under Jennifer's bedroom door. Jennifer believed her dreams of college had been destroyed. "I didn't speak to her [for four years]. We reconciled eventually, but [she] had betrayed me and it wasn't the same."

At the age of 18 she was on the street. Happily, Jennifer's internship with the Commonwealth turned into a permanent, full-time position. She earned enough money to rent a place, but could afford little else. At night "I had to decide if my jacket would be my blanket or my pillow. But it was worth it. From that time on, no one could hurt me unless I allowed it. For the first time in my life, I was in control."

Jennifer cares passionately about the welfare of children. She is determined to change Pennsylvania state policy and legislation to improve the lives of foster children throughout the Commonwealth. Jennifer walks the talk. "In February 2007 my foster mom called crying hysterically. I knew that my [foster] cousin was incarcerated but I didn't know that her daughter was in jeopardy of being placed in foster care." Jennifer's former foster mother was no longer a foster parent. She had retired to travel. As a result, Jennifer became a mom to a six year old with whom she had had no prior relationship.

Jennifer is currently studying for a master's degree in human services at Lincoln University and wants to use her knowledge and past experiences to help others. She is an asset-based thinker, determined to focus on strength, not weakness; solving problems, not blaming people; and love, not hate. We are fortunate that when her bag was packed that fateful day, she was transported to our community. She is serving us well. ❖

Mikell Worley is the founder and president of Mikell's Treasures. She has spent more than 20 years designing and delivering self-improvement trainings, has had several cover stories in various magazines, and recently illustrated her first children's book. She is an advocate for women and children.