



Eden Ajai Jones

A story of love, perseverance and family

Prologue

My name is Eden Ajai Jones, and I was born on January 27, 1966 in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Since that day, I've had highs and lows like everyone else in this world, but as you read, I hope you'll find something that resonates with you and helps guide you through any similar circumstances within your own life.

Childhood & Teenage Years

I'll start by telling you a little bit about my family. My parents, Royce and Esme Jones, raised me in a loving household and we had the best relationship while I was growing up. I had a sister via adoption named Jane, and two half-siblings (although I didn't have a relationship with them and don't know where they are now).

Unfortunately, my sister and I didn't get along that well when we were kids, but I really wanted her to like me because I thought she was so pretty and so cool.

Together, our family was small and mighty but it wouldn't have been complete without our many pets. Over the years we had dogs, a guinea pig, hamsters, a rabbit and even birds! Out of all of the animals we had when I was a child, my favorite was REEJ - the first letter of my dad's name (Royce), my mom's name (Esme), my name (Eden), and my sister's name (Jane). She was the sweetest teacup poodle - so sweet that I ended up taking her to college with me. My fondest memories with REEJ were when she would go on the campus of Florida A&M University with me and run around in the band room, or just keep me company by laying in my lap while we were at my apartment.

Not to get sidetracked with stories about puppies, my childhood was pretty good overall. My parents were fairly strict, so I didn't do a lot outside of their watch, and they also both worked at the schools I attended so I couldn't get into trouble if I tried! My mother was a guidance counselor at my elementary school and my father was assistant principal at my middle school.

Despite not being able to do much outside of their watch, I was able to spend time playing with the kids in our neighborhood. I was somewhat of an introvert and didn't have many friends like others appeared to have, but I really enjoyed playing outside with the few that I had.

Speaking of close friends, I can't forget to mention Wanda - my best friend then and my best friend now. One time I remember having an argument with her for the first time... ever. I liked a boy in high school and she kept telling me that he wasn't good for me and that he was cheating on me. I thought she was just mad because I was spending a lot of time with him and it was interfering with some of the time she and I could have been hanging out. We actually stopped talking to each other for a few weeks but it turned out that she was right.

I apologized to her and we have never been mad at each other since.

As if boy drama wasn't enough, I also remember getting teased about my dark skin. There were times when I would come home crying because it really hurt my feelings. I didn't understand why other black kids would make fun of me and call me black. My mom would have to console me and try to lift my spirits by telling me to tell them, "The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice." I would always laugh when she said that, but it still hurt.

One day I was with my high school cheerleading squad and we were traveling in our coach's van back to the school from a performance. I was the only black person on the squad but we were all friends. We were talking, laughing and having a great time when all of a sudden one of my "friends" yelled, "Hey y'all. Look at those n-word houses down there." Everyone got so quiet, you could have heard a pin drop. They all turned and looked at me. I was shocked and mortified.

My mom had always cautioned me about how some white people will pretend to like you because they have to, but I had never experienced it firsthand until that moment. My relationship with my cheerleading "friends" was never the same.

Despite that situation, I was able to round out my teenage years with lots of positive memories. Cheerleading was still my main outlet, but I really enjoyed football and basketball games. I did gymnastics, played softball, football and basketball, and even participated in recreational track. I also played the flute and enjoyed marching band and symphonic band.

I'll never forget my mom being so supportive of me by coming to watch me cheer or perform with the band. My father was a referee and umpire so some of his games conflicted with mine, but he was there when he could be, too. They were truly the most amazing and fun parents.

One of my fondest memories was traveling with them my sister, Jane, and my extended family to the FAMU football games in our RV. My mom and dad would cook, and my dad had a hospitality suite for our family and my parents' friends to eat, listen to music, and dance. To this day, Jane and I still travel with our families to Orlando each year for the FAMU game, but now, Jane's husband, John, is in charge of the hospitality suite.

Like I said, my childhood was pretty good and if I had the choice, I wouldn't change anything about the way I was brought up or raised by my parents.

I valued our close relationship and they always tried to guide me, no matter what the issue was - big or small, significant or minor.

During one particular popular (or embarrassing, depending on how you look at it) phase, it seemed like everyone had an afro. So I of course had to put my hair in an afro, too. My hair was shoulder length and kinky in the back, but it was a little more straight-textured in the front. My mom kept telling me that my hair wouldn't look right in an afro, but I just had to try it. I styled it in my version of an "afro", which was huge and floppy in the front. Cute right?! My mom let me wear my hair like that for a day and people looked at me like I was crazy. That's when I finally had to admit that my mom was right.

While my relationship with my parents was strong, I *would* change the relationship I had with my sister when we were growing up. I would have made us extremely close if I had the choice. We always stuck up for each other against other people and she really looked out for me when it came to other people picking on me, but I would have loved for us to hang out as friends even when no one else was around.

Education & Career

My sister and I got much closer after she moved away from home to attend college. I followed in her footsteps and attended Florida A&M University, pursuing a doctorate degree in pharmaceutical sciences. I always knew I wanted to be in the medical field, but I initially wanted to be a pediatrician. However, my next door neighbor, "Uncle Tommy," was a pharmacist and probably the biggest influence in my decision to become one as well. I knew I didn't want to be a retail pharmacist, so I searched for jobs in clinical pharmacy because I wanted to interact more with physicians and provide pharmaceutical care to hospitalized patients as part of a healthcare team. As a clinical pharmacist I really liked the direct interaction with physicians and patients.

Today, I am a Clinical Pharmacy Manager at a hospital. In my position, I like leading a team of clinical pharmacists and seeing how our clinical services positively impact patients' health outcomes. I dislike the fact that my job is so time-consuming because work-life balance is a serious issue.

But overall, I am happy and content with my current career.

If I could do anything else, I would be a physician (probably an OB/GYN), but I don't regret the path I took and I never had a strong desire to go back to school. Additionally, now I'm at an age where I want to retire soon. Hallelujah!

Romantic Relationships

While my education and career have always been important to me, relationships have played a major role in my life as well. My first love was Leroy. We met in middle school where he was a football player and I was a cheerleader. Classic.

He was outgoing, confident and funny, which were the qualities that attracted me to him, and I just knew we would get married one day.

Spoiler alert: We didn't.

I met Darnell during the summer leading into my freshman year and his senior year of college. I'd gone to Tallahassee to try out for the FAMU cheerleading squad and while I was there, KKY had a picnic. My sister was a KKY Queen and Darnell was the president. He saw me arrive with my sister and he asked her to introduce him to me. As I mentioned before, my sister and I had become very close by this point, and I credit her with introducing me to my future husband and father of my kids.

But let me not get ahead of myself. Jane introduced Darnell to me and shortly afterward, we officially began dating.

About 9-12 months after the relationship started, I knew I was in love. He was a drum major in the band and I was a cheerleader. He was very charming, outgoing, and personable.

Like my sister, I became a KKY Queen as well. Darnell and I really enjoyed dancing at KKY parties and trying to see who could dance better when we performed our respective dance routines for the band and cheerleading squad.

After he graduated from college, Darnell moved back to North Carolina, where he was born and raised. We maintained a long-distance relationship for five years. We visited each other frequently, so I got to know his mom and sister (who later became like another sister to me) and he got to know my parents.

I came to visit him one weekend and he was acting strange but I really didn't suspect anything. On the evening before I left to go back to Tallahassee, we were about to watch television. He left the room to get snacks and his jacket was on the couch. I picked it up to move it over and felt something in one of the pockets... It was a jewelry box. I opened it and there was an engagement ring inside!

He came back into the room, saw me with the box and just said, "I can't believe you found the ring. Well, will you marry me?" I said, "Yes." It wasn't nearly the proposal I envisioned and I always say that he didn't really ask me to marry him, but I guess I spoiled it by being so noseey...

Our wedding took place in Fort Lauderdale, Florida at my family's church. I didn't plan any of it, but it was beautiful. My mother, along with the wedding planner, planned most of the ceremony, and Darnell planned the music and entertainment. My sister, who was nine months pregnant with her second child at the time, was my Matron of Honor. In addition to my family, most of Darnell's family drove down from North Carolina, so we were truly surrounded by our family and friends. To this day, Darnell's cousins still talk about the trip to Florida and the adventure they had traveling with the older aunts in the family.

Looking back, our marriage was at its best during the first four years. We enjoyed spending time with each other and with other couples. I enjoyed supporting the high school where he was band director and going to the games and concerts. And when we had our children, we enjoyed taking family trips each year and just having fun with them.

I'll share more about my kids shortly, but Darnell and I unfortunately ended up getting divorced due to infidelity. I was going through a lot because my mother passed away eight months after I had my first child. I was very despondent, overwhelmed with grief and the day-to-day responsibilities of being a first-time mom, so I guess this is what caused him to stray away from our marriage.

To heal from that, I prayed a lot and poured myself into my kids, wanting to make sure they were okay. I also made a conscious effort to remain close friends with my ex-husband and his family (that I still consider my family). I learned that forgiveness is a choice and when you truly love someone, by the grace of God, the choice is easier to make.

That situation was difficult, but I didn't give up on love. Today, I'm dating James who I met at the grocery store. I was there to pick up a birthday cake for my son on his 6th birthday. He just happened to be in the area and dropped by to pick up an item. He stopped to tell me that I looked familiar, so we exchanged small talk about where he could have seen me before. It turns out that his daughter went to the same elementary school that my kids attended. After the short exchange, he asked for my number. I told him he could give me *his* number and I would call *him*. We have been together ever since.

I knew I was in love with James about a year after we met. He is very kind and attentive... a true gentleman. We enjoy spending time together, going to movies and having dinner at different restaurants. He is very much like I am... not very outgoing or sociable.

While he has (unofficially) asked me to marry him, there is a lot to consider when two people have lived separate lives and gained separate assets that they need to manage in order to do what is in the best interest of their children. I also think I'm afraid of how a permanent union will affect the dynamics with my kids, especially when they come home for holidays and vacations.

The dynamics with my kids, my ex-husband and his family (that I consider my family) have caused our relationship to be rocky over the years. We had to navigate many obstacles, but we have persevered. If anything were to ever happen to him (God-forbid), I would tell him that I love and appreciate him for who he is and for the impact he has had on my life.

Children

I've mentioned my kids a few times throughout this story, but it's time I told you more about them - Anikia and Darnell Jr. (DJ). With my daughter, I remember driving myself to the hospital when I was in labor. I was so blessed to have my mother there to witness my daughter's birth. She was so proud! Unfortunately, my mother passed away eight months afterward.

My cousin, Lisa (who was nine months pregnant herself) drove me to the hospital when I went into labor with my son. I "held him in" until his dad got there and remember saying, "That's Anikia!" when I saw him for the first time. He looked just like his sister when he was born. The kids' Aunt Jane came to help me after DJ's birth, since my Mom had passed. Jane was such a blessing. Once again, she was there when I needed her most. She was able to share the "mommy wisdom" that she gained after having three kids of her own (my wonderful nieces, Brandy and Sasha, and nephew, John Jr.)

Other memories that stand out from my kids' births are that I had both of them without an epidural... Whew!

I also remember the kids' grandmother, Winnie Mae and their Aunt Joy coming into the room and holding them after they were born. It's a sweet memory that I won't forget. Joy also has a son (my wonderful nephew, Cameron) and over the years, she was able to share nuggets of wisdom with me as well.

Since each of their births, I've enjoyed spending time with my kids most. I always tell them that I'm the happiest when I'm with them. When they were little, I would go and support them with their activities (Anikia - gymnastics and band; DJ - football, baseball, basketball, band). Just like my mom did with me, I was always at their performances and games cheering them on.

The only thing I wish is that my mother and father (who passed away when DJ was eight years old) and Darnell's mother (who passed away a few weeks before Anikia graduated from high school) could be physically present to see what an amazing young woman and young man their grandchildren have become. I know they are in heaven beaming with pride.

Although my parents have passed, I have had a tremendous support system from the amazing women in my life, whom I love dearly, including Jane, Wanda, Joy and Lisa.

Life - Altering Moments

I was distraught after my parents passed. I will never forget my father calling me and telling me that my mother was no longer with us. Her passing was particularly distressful to me because I was a new mom and I felt like I needed *my* mom to guide me through this new territory. My dad and sister gave me as much emotional and physical support as they could, but it was difficult.

I was there when my father passed away, which was also difficult but I was glad that my father had a chance to meet and interact with both of my kids for years before he transitioned.

I really missed my parents then...and I still do. I think about them all the time and the fun we had together. I think about my mom's infectious laugh and how much she loved watching Wheel of Fortune and Jeopardy. And I think about my daddy's love for sports, as well as his love for dancing and entertaining friends. The fond memories get me through the pain of not having them here.

If I had the chance, I would tell them both how much I love them and appreciate them for raising me to be the woman I am today. I told them that all the time when they were living, so I'm thankful to God that we had the type of relationship where we openly verbalized and demonstrated our love for each other. Jane and I continue to demonstrate our love for them by giving annual scholarships in their names to children at the elementary school in Fort Lauderdale where my mom was the founding principal. This allows us to keep their legacy in education alive.

In addition to each of my parents passing, other life-changing moments included when I got married, when I had both of my kids, and when I got divorced. Some moments were happy and some were sad, but all of these moments taught me different lessons and life skills. Sure, some things didn't turn out the way I expected, but they were necessary life experiences and made me who I am today.

So if I had to redo life through this point, I would do most things the same. What I would change is being less Type A about things and not letting things stress me out so much. I would try to get over my fears and travel more outside my comfort zone. I would explore the world and have more fun.

Epilogue

This is my story and what I hope you remember from it is the impact my parents, children, sister, extended family, and friends had on my life. My parents raised and instilled core values in me that I carried over into my adult life and that I used to raise my children. My kids subsequently taught me the meaning of selfless, unconditional love.

When I'm long gone from this world, I also hope you'll see and remember that I was a good person who tried to treat everyone with love and respect, and that I devoted myself to the people that I love.

Want to know more about my story?

Check out these fast facts:

Race:

- Black

Ethnicity:

- African American

Native Language:

- English

Religion and Beliefs:

- Christian
- I believe in the Trinity. I also believe in tolerance and acceptance of others and their beliefs.

Sex/Gender:

- Female/Woman

Medical Background:

- I have asthma that didn't develop until I was in college in Tallahassee, Florida. I never had trouble breathing when I was growing up but the pollen was really bad in Tallahassee compared to Fort Myers. I think those allergies may have triggered the asthma episodes, so now I take an inhaler daily to prevent and manage symptoms.

Where I've Lived:

- I was born in Fort Lauderdale, Florida and moved to Tallahassee, Florida to attend college. After I got married, I moved to North Carolina.

Historical Events I Remember:

- Black Lives Matter Movement; 911 (September 11, 2001): I remember feeling so sad during each of these tragedies and desiring a world where everyone got along and loved and respected each other.
- COVID-19 Pandemic: This is especially impactful for me since we're living it right now. The number of deaths (that were most likely preventable) is astonishing.

Parting Advice

- My parting advice for those reading this story is to be kind to yourself and others. Follow the path that God designed for you and live life to the fullest.



A LIFE TO SHARE