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Q. 4 2021 Rebecca Lynn

From a fearful "rebel" facing 15-30 years in prison to an open, strong, and compassionate woman and counselor, Rebecca Lynn serves as a powerful inspiration to her community. She has defied the odds and leaped forward from each drawback. When no one else believed that she could, she did. While she has endured a plethora of obstacles in her life including abuse, abandonment, academic failure, rejections from employers, and even criminal charges, all that strife has transformed her into an incredibly resilient woman.

Rebecca's life took a significant turn at the age of 21 when she was accepted at Illinois State University, amidst facing trial for a Class X felony. Growing up in a large, religious family, Rebecca faced challenges, including an abusive relationship that led to her involvement in illegal activities.

Arrested for her son's father's possessions, she faced a year-long trial and uncertainty about her future. Ultimately, he was sentenced to 49 years in prison, while she received two years of probation. Determined to turn her life around, Rebecca faced an identity crisis during her first year at ISU, but with support, she overcame academic struggles and earned a bachelor's degree in philosophy and psychology.

Rebecca's journey didn't end there; she delved into helping others by working at a homeless shelter, obtaining a Certified Alcohol and Drug Counselor credential, and earning a master's degree in Mental Health Counseling. Despite struggling with confidence, she became an effective counselor, eventually starting her private practice, Blue Skies Counseling, in 2018.

Her dedication to helping others continued as she worked in local schools and grew her private practice. Overcoming challenges, including leaving a secure counseling job, Rebecca embraced the growth of Blue Skies Counseling, becoming an inspiration to her community. She emphasizes the importance of healthy relationships for healing.

Rebecca's strength comes from her faith and family. Recognized as the first ExtraOrdinary Woman by the ExtraOrdinary Women Project BN, she sees it as an opportunity to embrace her journey's growth and express gratitude for her purpose.

Rebecca Lynn's extraordinary story is not just about her past but the resilience and transformation she has forged from it, making her a beacon of inspiration. Her dream is to write a book to encourage others facing similar struggles. Congratulations to Rebecca Lynn, a true ExtraOrdinary Woman whose journey exemplifies perseverance, resilience, and the power of positive transformation.

Rebecca joined the EOW Board of Directors in 2022.

Q. 1 2022 Candice Byrd

Candice Byrd's journey from homelessness to becoming an advocate for change and a coordinator at the YWCA is a testament to her resilience and determination. Pregnant with her third child, Candice faced eviction and lived at Home Sweet Home Mission for six months. Despite doubts about her parenting abilities and struggles with depression, she found solace in the encouragement of staff and the connections she made with others at the shelter.

Candice's turning point came when she began helping fellow residents and organizing collection drives. Her intrinsic value came from assisting others, leading her to overcome her own challenges. Battling predatory lending, she later volunteered for Illinois People's Action, advocating for systemic changes to the payday loan industry. Through public speaking and activism, Candice found empowerment and realized the impact of collective voices.

Born and raised in Bloomington-Normal, Candice faced rebellious phases and a traumatic experience at 14, leading to juvenile detention and probation. Despite challenges, she pursued her interest in psychology at Heartland Community College. Her journey involved setbacks, including a brief period of homelessness, but Candice eventually earned a degree in Business Management.

Working at the YWCA, Candice co-created the STRIVE program, empowering women to secure living-wage employment. She overcame self-doubt and found fulfillment in helping others transform their lives. Her advocacy extends to addressing the school-to-prison pipeline, emphasizing reformative practices over punitive measures for young individuals.

Candice's personal growth, dedication to change, and impact on the lives of others make her an ExtraOrdinary Woman. Despite facing turbulence, she has soared above challenges and become an inspiration for resilience and empathy. Candice's story reflects her commitment to making a positive difference in the community, showcasing the transformative power of perseverance and compassion.

Today, Candice works at the YWCA helping others.

Q. 2 2022 Rosemary Parker

Rosemary Parker, named the second-quarter ExtraOrdinary Woman of 2022 by the ExtraOrdinary Women Project BN, has dedicated her life to shaping and benefiting the community. Raised with values of honesty, integrity, hard work, and helping others, Rosemary's journey has been influenced by her parents' teachings.

Starting from her childhood, Rosemary actively participated in her father's grocery store, learning the importance of giving back to those in need. Her mother's patience, faith, and integrity further shaped her character. Graduating from Lincoln Community High School in 1960, Rosemary pursued elementary education at Illinois State University, marrying James "Jim" Parker in 1964.

Balancing her role as a parent and educator, Rosemary taught kindergarten and later served as the Title I Director, impacting students' lives positively. Her ability to inspire "light bulb" moments in children, fostering confidence and growth, has left a lasting impression. Former students have even become teachers themselves, inspired by Rosemary's dedication.

Amidst personal challenges, including caring for her aging parents and dealing with health issues, Rosemary discovered resilience and strength within herself. Currently, at the age of 79, she continues to contribute to the community's well-being. As the president of Living Well United Senior Center, Rosemary organizes resources, education, and activities for seniors and at-risk populations.

Her involvement extends to various boards and initiatives, such as Mercy Ministries, J. T. Crumbaugh Library Board of Trustees, and the Empire Township Historical Museum. Rosemary's leadership in projects like the healthy recipe book and The Support Squad reflects her commitment to addressing community needs.

A testament to her selfless efforts is the initiative with Faith in Action, assisting small community residents in need of transportation for medical appointments. Rosemary's new project, The Support Squad, aims to offer a respite for caregivers of Alzheimer's or dementia patients, inspired by her own experiences.

Known for her quiet yet impactful work, Rosemary's dedication to the greater good has positively influenced countless individuals. Her ability to organize resources and create meaningful connections reflects her tenacity and commitment to community well-being. Congratulations to Rosemary Parker on being recognized as the ExtraOrdinary Woman of the quarter, a true inspiration to the community.

Q. 3 2022 Alexis Kalish

Alexis Kalish has been named the third-quarter ExtraOrdinary Woman of 2022 by The ExtraOrdinary Women Project BN, recognizing her exceptional contributions, steadfastness, strength, and integrity to the community. A resident of Bloomington, Alexis has dedicated her life to uplifting others, a passion that continued even during her own challenging health journey.

Two years ago, Alexis faced a life-changing diagnosis of an incurable blood cancer, Multiple Myeloma. Despite undergoing an arduous treatment program, including radiation, chemotherapy, and a stem cell transplant, Alexis maintained her faith, supported by her husband, Mike, and her network of family and friends.

Before her diagnosis, Alexis had volunteered for 35 years with The STAR Literacy Program, helping adult learners enhance their reading, writing, and math skills. She also volunteered with Chestnut Health Systems, the Regional Alternative Schools, The American Business Women's Association, The Immigration Project (TIP), and the Heartland Community College Area Planning Council. Her involvement ranged from supporting literacy projects to working on naturalization applications and contributing to women's education.

As a patron of the arts, Alexis served two six-year terms on the Board of Directors for the McLean County Arts Center, receiving the Douglas C. Johnson Distinguished Patron Award in 2020. Despite health challenges, she continues to support the Arts Center by volunteering on the Events Committee. Alexis also contributes to the Women to Women Giving Circle.

At 73, Alexis's journey began on a small farm near Springfield, Illinois, instilling values of patience, strong work ethic, and the importance of family. She attended Illinois State University, majoring in special education, and later worked at State Farm for 34 years, retiring as the director in the Health Risk Management Department. Alexis met her husband, Mike, at State Farm, and their enduring relationship has spanned 31 years.

Throughout her life, Alexis has exemplified a commitment to community service, dedication, and determination. Despite her health challenges, she continues to volunteer, educate herself about her disease, and walk long distances with her husband. Alexis measures her success by the impact she has had on others, remaining a source of inspiration and light. Nominator Kimberly Babin describes Alexis as the definition of an "ExtraOrdinary Woman," facing challenges with resilience and lifting others up.

Congratulations to Alexis Kalish for being recognized as this quarter's ExtraOrdinary Woman. Her contributions to the community, coupled with her unwavering spirit, make her a beacon of inspiration and gratitude for all she does.

Q. 4 2022 Dorothy Deany

Dorothy Deany has been honored as the fourth-quarter ExtraOrdinary Woman of 2022 by The ExtraOrdinary Women Project BN, recognizing her exceptional dedication, heart, and fearlessness in serving the community. A true volunteer, Dorothy's tireless efforts at St. Vincent de Paul-Holy Trinity (SVDP), local schools, and area service gardens have made a significant impact.

Growing up as the oldest of seven siblings on a Chatsworth farm, Dorothy learned the values of hard work and responsibility early in life. Engaging in 4H throughout junior high and high school, she honed her sense of volunteerism and responsibility. Dorothy's commitment to community service, instilled by her parents, extends to her own family, with her husband Bernie and children actively participating in volunteer work.

Dorothy's journey with SVDP began in 2008 when she helped establish the St. Isidore's Garden, a produce garden at the old Central Catholic High School. Over the years, the garden has expanded, providing thousands of pounds of fresh produce to those in need. Dorothy's family farm in Chatsworth also contributes winter squash to the pantry.

In 2015, Dorothy joined SVDP as a volunteer, answering phones and later contributing to the customer-choice food pantry and clothing pantry. Her role involves client information management, organizing food deliveries, and providing creative recipes for food products. Dorothy became the vice president of SVDP-Holy Trinity in 2017, dedicating six days a week to its operations.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Dorothy and fellow volunteers at SVDP adapted their operations to ensure the community's needs were met. Despite facing challenges, they continued to serve, with Dorothy appreciating the support of dedicated volunteers.

Dorothy's life journey includes diverse experiences, from teaching junior high math to running a childcare center with her husband. She worked as a florist, engaged in politics, and served as a legislative analyst for the Department of Transportation. Dorothy's wisdom extends to advice for younger generations, emphasizing the reciprocal benefits of volunteering.

Congratulations to Dorothy Deany for being recognized as the ExtraOrdinary Woman for the fourth quarter of 2022. Her relentless acts of service and love continue to make a positive impact on the community, inspiring others to follow her example.

Q. 1 2023 Jerri Andrew

Jerri's life has been a journey of resilience, strength, and self-reliance. Born in Missouri, she faced early challenges with an alcoholic stepdad and her mother's illness, which led to her and her sister being placed in foster care after her mother's death. Adopted at 10, Jerri struggled in her adoptive home, feeling misunderstood despite her efforts to excel in academics and household responsibilities.

Determined to be independent, Jerri left home at 17, supporting herself while completing high school. In the 80s, she faced single motherhood, managing a household with three children, one of whom was hearing impaired. Despite financial constraints, Jerri graduated from Illinois State University in 2000 with a degree in social work.

Jerri's commitment to community service became evident in her role at the Chamber of Commerce, developing programs to empower low-resource populations. Her resilience and dedication led her to join the Navy Reserves at 17, initially seeking financial support but eventually serving for 23 years.

Deployed to Iraq and various military assignments, Jerri faced challenges but emerged stronger. Her leadership skills flourished, earning her the rank of Chief Petty Officer. She emphasizes the importance of mentorship, acknowledging those who guided her.

Returning home posed challenges as she adjusted to civilian life, but Jerri found purpose in her role as Community Service Block Grant Coordinator at Mid Central Community Action. Her passion for collaborative efforts to uplift individuals and communities became evident through her initiatives.

Jerri's journey includes overcoming personal obstacles, such as her son's murder, teaching her the power of forgiveness and love. Despite life's adversities, she remains an advocate for selfless service, continuous learning, and mentoring.

Named an ExtraOrdinary Woman, Jerri credits her mentors and encourages recognizing the extraordinary in every individual. Her advice to the younger generation is to make a plan, emphasizing the importance of perseverance.

Jerri's story reflects a life dedicated to service, learning, and inspiring others to recognize their inner light. In her words, everyone is extraordinary, and encouraging others to let their light shine brighter can make the world a brighter place for all.

Q. 2 2023

Q. 3 2023 Linda Randle

Linda Randle, a Bloomington resident, has been honored as this quarter's ExtraOrdinary Woman for her exceptional bravery and dedication to helping others through sharing, listening, and empowering women. Linda defines an ExtraOrdinary Woman as every woman, emphasizing that each person is uniquely created in the image of God, making them extraordinary despite negative experiences that contribute to their individuality.

Linda's journey began in central Illinois, moving to Bloomington in 1993 to attend Illinois State University, majoring in Public Relations. Her passion for speaking and writing emerged during her undergraduate years. Later, she pursued a master's degree in Spiritual Formation at Lincoln Christian University, focusing on spiritual transformation through silence, solitude, and prayer.

Currently employed as a Senior Billing Specialist at a local insurance company, Linda reflects on her spiritual journey, highlighting her introverted nature and the significance of alone time in

connecting with God. Despite being initially drawn to Bloomington-Normal for job opportunities as a single mother, Linda's deeper spiritual journey unfolded, leading her to faith in 1998 during a challenging period.

Encountering Christ in a church, Linda's life took a transformative turn. She became involved in women's ministry, feeling a calling to support women facing mental, physical, or sexual abuse. Drawing from her own experiences, Linda shared her story, providing a safe space for others to open up about their pain and find healing.

Linda's involvement with Women Standing on The Word Ministry and the Jesus House Women's Ministry showcased her commitment to helping women overcome hardships. She wrote for newsletters, expressing her passion for writing, and contributed to the empowerment of women through various events and platforms.

Participating in the Women's Empowerment Event and "That's What She Said," Linda shared her story of forgiveness and healing, emphasizing the need for women to have a safe space to express their pain and find transformation. Her goal is to inspire and support other women, fostering a sense of community and vulnerability.

Linda's speaking engagements and leadership roles, despite her preference for a behind-the-scenes role, demonstrate her dedication to empowering women. She acknowledges the inspiration she draws from other women and aims to offer the same encouragement and support she received when she was struggling.

Ultimately, Linda Randle's journey exemplifies an ExtraOrdinary Woman, someone who transforms personal hardships into opportunities to heal and uplift others. Her commitment to creating a space for women to find strength, healing, and transformation reflects the essence of an extraordinary life dedicated to empowering others.

Q. 4 2023 Verneice Prince

Verneice Prince, recognized as an ExtraOrdinary Woman by the ExtraOrdinary Women Project BN, epitomizes resilience and determination, serving as an inspiring leader who overcame adversities to achieve extraordinary success. Verneice's unwavering belief in the transformative power of perseverance and positive external influences has shaped her journey.

Born into challenging circumstances, Verneice was placed in the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) care at the age of one. Growing up in foster care, often separated from her siblings, she faced traumatic experiences, including sexual abuse. However, her faith and religion instilled in her a profound belief that she could overcome these challenges and define her own path.

From a young age, Verneice aspired to become a social worker and serve as a positive role model. Emphasizing the importance of education, she recognized its value as a tool that no one could take away. Despite frequent moves within the foster care system, Verneice prioritized staying in school, eventually graduating from Chicago Vocational High School.

After aging out of the foster care system, Verneice joined the U.S. Army as a truck driver, viewing it as an opportunity to continue her education. Motivated by success in a business management class, she gained confidence in her academic abilities. During her military service, she met her first husband, and they had a son together.

Upon leaving the military, Verneice faced the challenges of being a single mother and worked various jobs to make ends meet. Her journey led her to Detroit, where she connected with her church community and sought stability for her son. Working in adult foster care, Verneice not only cared for her own children but also took in other children, embodying her commitment to helping others.

Verneice's pursuit of education continued through community colleges, leading to an associate's degree in general studies. Despite facing personal and marital challenges, including homelessness, Verneice persevered, earning a bachelor's degree in social work from Illinois State University after moving to Bloomington.

In 2020, Verneice achieved her dream of homeownership and obtained a master's degree in social work from ISU in just one year. Undeterred by advice against the accelerated program, she saw it as a challenge to overcome.

Currently working as a part-time counselor at INtegrItY Counseling, Verneice volunteers with community programs, including her nonprofit startup, Cruisin' Outta Poverty Services (C.O.P.S.) Thrift Store in Normal. C.O.P.S. is more than a store; it serves as a homeless outreach program, providing emergency funds, transportation, housing assistance, and counseling.

Verneice's commitment to helping others is evident in her dedication to addressing poverty and homelessness through C.O.P.S. NFP Thrift. She founded the organization to offer an array of services, including counseling, entrepreneurship programs, and a mini-mart providing food to those in need. Verneice's vision is to empower individuals to overcome poverty and fulfill their potential.

Reflecting on her journey, Verneice acknowledges the angels on earth who have supported her. She firmly believes that everyone is capable of success and emphasizes the importance of providing encouragement and assistance to those who need it. Verneice has found her calling in helping others, demonstrated through her counseling work, community outreach, and the impactful services provided by C.O.P.S. Thrift. Her unwavering dedication to making a positive impact on the lives of others reflects a lifelong commitment to service and compassion.

Q. 1 2024 Dameka “Meka” Kirkwood

On October 3, 2018, Dameca “Meka” Kirkwood faced a devastating loss: her father, a pillar of support, passed away. The next day, she found herself consoling her grieving mother and forgot her own son Trevonte’s birthday. "Oh my God, I’m so sorry I forgot to get you a birthday gift!" she exclaimed in distress. Trevonte, despite his own sorrow, reassured her with kindness: "It's okay, Ma. There's always next year."

Just weeks later, tragedy struck again. On October 30, 2018, Dameca received a call that would forever change her life. Trevonte, only 27 years old, had been shot and killed. The sirens Dameca had heard earlier were for her son, who would never again celebrate his birthday or take his daughter trick-or-treating.

Dameca's life has been marked by challenges and resilience. Born and raised in Bloomington, she struggled with dyslexia throughout her schooling, often misunderstood and labeled unfairly. "As a little girl who is a minority, who already feels different, to be labeled as 'lazy'... is frustrating," she reflected. Despite these challenges, Dameca persisted, supported by a loving family and close friends who held her accountable.

At 15, Dameca became a mother to Trevonte. Her family stood by her, providing unwavering support during a tumultuous time. She eventually returned to school, earning her GED after years of self-doubt. "I was shocked... I didn't have the confidence that I would pass," she admitted, but she persevered with encouragement from her teacher.

Her career path led her through various roles, from The Salvation Army to Marcfirst and Prairie State Legal Services, where she found fulfillment in helping others. "I feel most proud when I was able to get people to talk, and get to the root of their problems," she shared.

Despite the pain of losing her son, Dameca continues to be a source of strength for her community. Her home has become a gathering place for Trevonte's friends, now grown with families of their own, who seek solace and support from "Ma." "It's been six years, and I still don't know how to cope with losing him," she admits tearfully.

In advocating against gun violence and honoring her son's memory, Dameca has found a way to channel her grief into action. "To be ExtraOrdinary is to naturally do what's right. To stay true to who you are," she affirmed, reflecting on the impact of her experiences.

Through it all, Dameca Kirkwood exemplifies resilience, empathy, and the extraordinary strength found in community and family support. Her journey is a testament to overcoming adversity with grace and determination.

Q. 2 2024 Leslie Adams

Today, Leslie Adams stands before you with a heart filled with both sorrow and gratitude. Her journey, like many of ours, has been one of profound challenges and unexpected turns. Yet, through it all, Leslie has discovered resilience, community, and a deep-seated purpose.

In January 2011, Leslie's life, and her children's lives, were flipped upside down. Her husband of eight years died by suicide, leaving her to navigate a world suddenly turned unfamiliar. Leslie found herself in survival mode, a single mother to their four young children, ages nine, seven, five, and one at the time.

Leslie never anticipated this path. They had plans to raise their children together. Instead, she was thrust into roles she hadn't prepared for—mom and dad, provider and comforter—while grappling with her own grief.

But amidst the chaos, Leslie found a community that embraced her when she felt lost and alone. They reminded her that we are never truly alone in our struggles. And so, Leslie

encourages each of you to share your stories, even when they are painful, because sometimes, knowing that we are not alone is all we need.

Rather than letting her husband become a mere memory, Leslie chose to keep his spirit alive within herself and their children. He lives on through them, his legacy a guiding light in their lives.

Leslie is fortunate to have an amazing support system—friends and family who have been her rock through it all. Without them, she wouldn't be standing here today.

Leslie's journey began in Bloomington, where she grew up surrounded by the warmth of her family's bakery, Cotter's. From a young age, Leslie learned the value of community and hospitality—traits that have shaped who she is today.

Despite early hardships, including her parents' divorce and moving schools, Leslie found solace in music and the arts. They became her refuge during turbulent times and taught her resilience.

Becoming a first-generation college graduate was a milestone, albeit one with its own set of challenges. Leslie juggled coursework, part-time jobs, and parenting, navigating a path that eventually led her to a degree in Public Relations.

Life seemed to stabilize until tragedy struck again. But from the depths of despair, Leslie found purpose in advocating for suicide awareness and prevention. Participating in the "Out of the Darkness" community walk became a beacon of hope—a way to turn pain into action.

In 2013, a friend offered Leslie the opportunity to provide stability for her family—a home of their own amidst uncertainty. It was a lifeline during a tumultuous time.

Through it all, Leslie discovered the Boys & Girls Club, where she found not just a job, but a calling. Today, she serves as the Family and Volunteer Coordinator, a role that allows her to give back to a community that supported her in her darkest hours.

Being an ExtraOrdinary Woman isn't about the hardships we face—it's about how we rise above them and lift others along the way. It's about finding strength in vulnerability and using our voices to create change.

As Leslie stands here today, she hopes her story reminds you that we are all capable of resilience, compassion, and making a difference. Together, we can build a community where everyone feels seen, heard, and valued.

Leslie's dedication to community service extends beyond her professional life. In 2017, she became a volunteer co-facilitator for an LGBTQ+ youth group, creating a safe space where young people can express themselves freely.

Inspired by her commitment to inclusivity and support, Leslie founded an LGBTQ+ kickball team in 2023, using sports to promote unity and raise funds for charitable causes.

Additionally, Leslie facilitates a LGBTQ+ book club at The Bistro, fostering discussions and connections within the local LGBTQ+ community. Her involvement in these initiatives reflects her belief in the power of community and the importance of creating spaces where everyone feels welcomed and valued.

Her coworker and EOW nominator Laurie Moore says, “Leslie pours herself into everything she does. She is never afraid to be vulnerable in sharing her thoughts and feelings, making sure others feel safe in their imperfections. She is an advocate for families in this community 24/7. It’s important for her to raise awareness of inequalities and injustice, and to always use her voice to shine light where it is needed.”

Laurie adds, “She is determined to pay back to the community what she received in her darkest hours and for that she is extraordinary.”

Leslie’s journey exemplifies resilience, compassion, and the transformative power of community support. Through her advocacy, volunteer work, and dedication to uplifting others, Leslie Adams continues to make a profound impact on her community and beyond.

Q. 3 2024 Frances Maddox

Frances’s journey is one of resilience and profound love, shaped by the tragic loss of her stepson, Anthony Maddox. Anthony, a dedicated soldier in the U.S. Army, lost his life in a petroleum incident while deployed in Afghanistan in 2013. For Frances, this loss is more than sorrow; it marks the beginning of an emotional journey filled with love and memory. She often reflects on the “empty seat” at family gatherings, a poignant reminder of Anthony’s absence.

She describes her grief as a series of “tidal waves”—initially overwhelming, but gradually becoming more manageable. This journey is not just hers; she actively supports her family as they navigate their own feelings of loss. Open communication is vital to her approach, as she encourages her family to share stories about Anthony, keeping his memory vibrant in their lives. “Memories, pictures, keeping him close to heart—these are the tools we have to overcome the heaviness of grief,” she emphasizes.

Growing up in Normal-Bloomington, Frances was instilled with a strong sense of family and resilience. In her blended household, she learned the values of love and respect, which guided her through various challenges, including facing discrimination in school. After graduating high school and completing cosmetology school, she pursued a successful career at State Farm while furthering her education.

In the wake of Anthony’s death, Frances channeled her grief into advocacy. She became involved with America’s Gold Star Families and helped establish the Fallen Heroes Tree of Honor, a project that commemorates military heroes and provides a space for families to express their grief. This initiative has grown significantly, showcasing the importance of community engagement in remembrance.

Frances’s commitment to honoring Anthony is further exemplified by the stretch of highway named in his memory—the “Sgt. Anthony Maddox Memorial Highway,” dedicated in 2019. This recognition ensures that his contributions and sacrifice are acknowledged by all who travel that route, solidifying his legacy in our community.

In addition to her advocacy work, Frances has received a distinguished honor alongside her mother, both nominated for the prestigious Woman of Distinction award by the YWCA. This recognition highlights their shared commitment to community service and empowerment.

For those interested in supporting Gold Star Families or learning more, Frances encourages participation in local initiatives and outreach programs. America's Gold Star Families, Inc. offers various ways to get involved—whether through volunteering, attending events, or contributing to projects that honor fallen heroes. To learn more about their efforts and how to contribute, you can visit the organization's website or reach out to local chapters.

Ultimately, Frances Maddox stands as a beacon of resilience, demonstrating how one can transform grief into meaningful action. Her faith and dedication to helping others serve as a powerful reminder that strength can emerge from the deepest sorrow, fostering a community that uplifts and honors those who have made the ultimate sacrifice.

Frances is not just an extraordinary honoree; she is an extraordinary person. Her infectious enthusiasm and genuine kindness resonates with everyone she meets. Whether mentoring young minds, leading community initiatives, or simply lending a listening ear, Frances embodies the essence of uplifting those around her. Her ability to inspire and connect with people from all walks of life is truly remarkable. It's her unwavering belief in the potential of others that makes her a beacon of hope and strength for our community. Today, as we honor her, let's celebrate not only her achievements but also the incredible person she is—someone who continually encourages us all to strive for greatness even through unbearable moments.

Q. 4 2024 Kimberly Ku

Kimberly Ku's life story is a testament to the power of authenticity, resilience and self-discovery. Raised in Troy, Michigan, as the middle child of Chinese immigrant parents, Kim was shaped by the values of hard work and introspection. Her father, a mechanical engineering professor, and her mother, who worked in food services, encouraged her to be true to herself — even when the world expected otherwise. “If it's not you,” her mother advised, “you've got to stop doing it.”

From an early age, Kim was driven by curiosity. She explored the world through a lens of deep reflection, trial and error. While her path to medicine wasn't linear, a devastating loss at age 19 — the death of a close friend to colon cancer — became a defining moment that fueled her desire to understand life more deeply. This tragedy pushed her toward internal medicine, drawn by its flexibility and intellectual challenges.

As her medical career blossomed, so did the pressures of leadership and motherhood. In a male-dominated field, she wrestled with identity, struggling to lead without being labeled “bossy.” Her most courageous decision came when she asked for more time before taking on a partnership, a choice rooted in honesty and self-awareness. “It was probably the most amazing risk I ever took,” she says.

But even with a successful medical career, Kim felt something was missing. Her search for deeper connection and authenticity led her to the concept of tactical empathy — a transformative philosophy she discovered through the Black Swan Group, founded by former

FBI negotiator Chris Voss. Learning to understand others without judgment became a personal and professional superpower.

This shift opened new doors. Kim was invited to collaborate on a TV project with Voss, entering the world of storytelling, documentary film and social media. Once reluctant to share her life publicly, Kim found joy in revealing her true self — and in hearing how her story resonated with others.

Motherhood became another pivotal chapter. The births of her three children — Jordan, Darian and Lucian — deepened her spiritual connection and sense of purpose. Remarkably, all three were born on the 17th of their respective months, a meaningful coincidence that underscores the magic she sees in life.

Today, Kim embraces her multifaceted identity: physician, film producer, author, mother and advocate. She champions vulnerability, empathy and the courage to reimagine one's life. "The stories we tell ourselves can either be a superpower or they can limit us," she says.

She dreams of collaborating with other extraordinary women — Oprah Winfrey, Michelle Obama and Melinda French Gates among them — and envisions a world where women empower each other to pursue bold, authentic lives. Her journey is far from over, but her message is clear: fulfillment comes not from playing it safe, but from being true to who you are.

Kim Ku's story is one of reinvention, risk, and rising into one's own truth. Her life serves as a powerful reminder that authenticity is not a destination — it's a lifelong dance.

Q. 1 2025 Kiasha Henry

Kiasha Henry is a lifelong Bloomington-Normal resident who embodies the spirit of community service. Proudly identifying as a "townie," Kiasha's dedication to her hometown is the natural result of a childhood surrounded by people committed to making a difference. From a young age, Kiasha was immersed in a culture of giving back. Her earliest influence came from Dorothy Deany, her daycare teacher, who instilled the value of service by taking children to volunteer at local nursing homes. This simple but profound act planted the seeds of a lifelong commitment to community engagement.

Throughout her upbringing, Kiasha's role models — including her Aunt Gloria Jean, who worked to develop Bloomington's west side, and her late uncle Willie Brown, a revered community leader and State Farm executive — demonstrated how meaningful change could begin at home. Willie Brown's numerous accolades, including the NAACP's Roy Wilkins Lifetime Achievement Award and a school building named in his honor, offered a powerful blueprint for community-centered leadership.

That influence culminated in the founding of Charm Inc., a nonprofit Kiasha co-founded with her family in 2020. Representing Community, Humanitarianism, Assistance, Revitalization, and Mentorship, Charm Inc. began as a way to build neighborhood relationships through an annual block party. Originally a gesture to help their daughter feel more connected after a move, the event grew rapidly — offering school supplies, games, and connections to vital services. As

more organizations joined in — Kiwanis, the Bloomington Police Department, and Mid Central Community Action among them — the initiative evolved into a full-fledged resource fair. Eventually, the event outgrew Kiasha’s home and was passed to a larger organization to continue its positive momentum.

Kiasha’s commitment to service is matched by her passion for uplifting women. Inspired by the strength of her grandmother — who raised four children alone while securing property ownership — and her mother, who led her union while raising a family, Kiasha learned early that extraordinary women can do extraordinary things. Yet despite her accomplishments, she once viewed her own efforts as modest until her husband, Arthur, nominated her for the ExtraOrdinary Woman Project, recognizing her strength and perseverance.

Kiasha’s journey has also been marked by deep personal loss. In a heartbreaking four-month span, she lost her grandmother, mother and younger sister. The grief pushed her into a period of intense depression, during which she withdrew from the world. But ultimately, it was faith that helped guide her back. Leaning into the Bible she once resisted as a child, Kiasha found comfort, strength, and eventually, growth. She emerged with new emotional awareness, learning the power of asking for help and embracing vulnerability — a lesson she’s now passing on to her children.

Today, Kiasha continues to serve her community not only through organized initiatives but also as a housing mediator. In that role, she works to bridge divides and promote unity between neighbors, landlords and tenants, and other conflicted parties. She dreams of a world less burdened by political and racial divisions and more focused on collaboration and peace.

Her ultimate goal is simple but profound: to “infect” the world with kindness. She believes the best legacy isn’t a name etched in stone but a ripple effect of compassion. Through her example, she’s already inspired her children — and likely many others — to live lives of empathy and action.

Kiasha Henry’s story is not just one of personal resilience and leadership; it’s a shining example of how a single life rooted in service, inspired by family, and driven by faith can build a more connected, compassionate world.

Q. 2 2025 Vera Traver

Vera Traver’s life is a powerful testimony of resilience, faith, and transformation. Born in Los Angeles and raised in Bloomington, Illinois, Vera spent her early childhood in the loving care of her grandmother, Annie. But at age 12, when Annie became ill and hospitalized, Vera was placed in foster care—where she experienced heartbreaking abuse from her foster father. Despite the stability of staying in one home, Vera’s childhood became a fight for survival.

As she entered adolescence and adulthood, Vera’s trauma led her down a dark path. She dropped out of school, became addicted to drugs and alcohol, lost her housing, and eventually custody of her five children. Her life spiraled through jails, institutions, and the deep spiritual despair of addiction. Everything changed, however, when she entered treatment again—this

time pregnant with her sixth child. A simple moment, watching a woman push a baby on a swing, stirred something deep within her. It was the spark of hope she had long been missing.

That moment marked the beginning of Vera's recovery journey. She surrendered to God and committed to rebuilding her life through church, Bible study, therapy, and 12-step programs. Slowly, she reclaimed her education by earning her GED and began creating a stable, sober life. One by one, her children came back into her life. In 2018, Vera realized her dream: all six of her children—A'Dream, Tasheka, Tashawna, Dajaun, Aironna, and Natalia—were together at the same table.

Her recovery was tested again when, just one year in, Vera was diagnosed with breast cancer at age 35. Even in her weakest moments, she stayed connected to her recovery community, who rallied around her in love and support. Despite difficult surgeries and setbacks, Vera remained determined and strong, eventually winning custody of her oldest daughter and embracing the wholeness of her reunited family.

Today, Vera has been sober for 19 years. She works as the Program Coordinator at YWCA Labyrinth House, where she uses her lived experience to mentor and support women in recovery. She also actively serves at her church, Christ Fellowship, and is a passionate advocate for mental wellness, hope, and second chances. Vera believes no one is ever too far gone and dedicates her life to helping others find their way home—emotionally, spiritually, and physically.

Her journey is a reminder that even from the deepest darkness, healing and restoration are possible. Vera Traver is living proof that with faith, support, and courage, lives can be rebuilt, families can be restored, and dreams once lost can come true.

Q. 3 2025 Martha A. Hillmer

Martha A. Hillmer's life is a testament to the quiet power of service, resilience, and faith. As a military wife who moved 18 times in 30 years, she transformed constant upheaval into opportunity, always anchoring her family with love and stability while giving generously to every community she joined—from leading Girl Scouts overseas to volunteering in schools and later supporting local seniors in Bloomington, Illinois. Raised on a farm near Danvers, Illinois, as the eldest of eight children, Martha learned early the values of hard work, faith, and service that would guide her life. She earned her teaching degree from Illinois State University at just 20, balancing education and leadership while forging a deep connection with the Bloomington community. Throughout decades of moves, Martha prioritized family unity, built a strong home

life in diverse environments, and found fulfillment in acts of compassion—whether through substitute teaching, church service, or supporting children in developing countries through Unbound. Her deep humility belies her impact: driving thousands of miles for Faith in Action, mentoring others, and serving with unwavering dedication. Honored for her contributions yet never seeking praise, Martha lives by the belief that true extraordinariness lies in doing small things with great love—quietly shaping lives and communities with kindness, constancy, and grace. With that, that makes Martha extraordinary.

Q. 4 2025 Karisma Morris-Bush

Karisma Morris Bush’s story is not one of ease or privilege, but one of endurance shaped by love, faith, and intentional choice. Named an *ExtraOrdinary Woman* in her community, Karisma embodies what this recognition truly honors—not perfection, but perseverance; not flawlessness, but authenticity; and not arrival, but the courage to keep becoming.

Karisma often says she began life “behind the finish line.” Born into circumstances she did not choose, she was raised by a single mother whose relentless determination held their family together. As the eldest child, Karisma learned early that survival was not optional—it was a responsibility. She watched her mother stretch scarce resources and still find ways to provide, teaching Karisma that resilience isn’t about comfort, but about doing what must be done.

While other children played, Karisma came home from school to cook, clean, and care for her siblings. Childhood innocence was quietly exchanged for duty. Responsibility became her rhythm, and perseverance became her first language.

Behind that strength, however, lived silent pain. Karisma endured abuse without speaking out, believing it was better to carry the burden herself than risk tearing her family apart. Though she would never recommend that choice, she recognizes what it taught her: physical pain fades, but emotional wounds linger. Those experiences shaped her deep empathy and her fierce instinct to protect the people she loves.

Hardship followed her into adolescence and eventually into homelessness. Karisma spent nights in cars, temporary hotel rooms, and group homes. In those moments, gratitude took on a new meaning. Even simple spaces—like the quiet aisles of a Barnes & Noble—became places of refuge. Today, she measures progress differently. An outdated bed is not discomfort; it is evidence of how far she has come.

After dropping out of high school for a year, a persistent whisper followed her: *There has to be more to life than this*. That belief eventually pushed her to leave a toxic work environment, return to school, and reclaim her education. Karisma graduated high school with honors, proving that her past would not define her future.

As an adult, healing became possible. Therapy and education helped untangle years of trauma, fear, and misinformation. Faith also played a central role. Returning to church grounded her through life's hardest seasons and reshaped how she understood struggle. She learned that storms are not punishments—they are realignments.

When diagnosed with depression and anxiety, Karisma chose compassion over shame. She learned that anxiety teaches boundaries and depression teaches grace. Emotional lows became signals—not failures—that her spirit needed care.

One of the most defining moments of her life came through intuition. After years of no contact with her mother, Karisma sensed something was wrong and reached out. That decision saved their relationship. Her mother had been quietly battling cancer, and their reconnection allowed them to rebuild a bond once fractured by pain. When the time came to make the heartbreaking decision to remove life support, Karisma stood in courage, love, and duty—grateful she had followed her inner voice before it was too late.

Today, Karisma is the mother of three children: Massiah, Andre, and Amaneigh. Motherhood reshaped her understanding of strength and legacy. As she says, *"I'm starting a whole new set of family values."* Breaking generational cycles, for her, is not about perfection—it is about choosing healing so her children don't have to carry what she did.

That belief was tested when her daughter Amaneigh was diagnosed with Stage Three Hodgkin's Lymphoma. Karisma watched her daughter face treatment with remarkable bravery—doing TikTok dances during appointments and asking thoughtful medical questions. In some of the hardest moments, Amaneigh comforted her mother, saying, *"It's okay, Mommy."* Karisma realized then that the resilience she had built through survival was now reflected back to her through her children.

Today, Karisma serves her community as a Parent Advisor on the McLean County System of Care Parent and Youth Advisory Board, a certified trainer for Support Over Silence for Kids, and an Advisory Board Member for The Baby Fold. She has shared her story publicly, believing deeply that honest stories strengthen communities and remind us that none of us succeed alone.

Programs like Dreams Are Possible helped Karisma rediscover her power, return to school, and pursue entrepreneurship. Through education and sisterhood, she learned it is never too late to start over.

Authenticity remains one of Karisma's greatest gifts. She shows up as her full self—not polished or perfect, but real. As her nominator Kalyn Patterson shared, Karisma empowers others simply by being who she is.

Karisma rejects the idea that any woman is ordinary. To her, extraordinary is choosing healing over bitterness, growth over comfort, and love over fear. What surprises her most is that she is still standing—and still soft. Her resilience did not harden her heart; it expanded it.

Karisma Morris Bush's journey reminds us why the ExtraOrdinary Women Project exists: to honor women whose lives speak not just through success, but through resilience, honesty, and heart.

**Complete stories can be found on the EOW website,
<https://www.theextraordinarywomenprojectbn.org/features>**