

Palladium-Item

SUNDAY, MAY 8, 2011

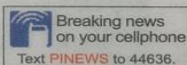
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Making her own way as a mom

'Once I had children, my whole outlook on life changed'

By Rachel E. Sheeley
Staff Writer

Abandoned at birth by her mother, Jacqueline M. Bell grew up moving from home to home in foster care, mostly in Indianapolis.

At one time, she even lived at Wernle Youth & Family Treatment Center in Richmond. She didn't finish high school.

She married at 20 and had her first child at 22. Five more children and a divorce followed.

Bell didn't know her mother and had few role models. But, she said, "Once I had children, my whole outlook on life changed. I wanted to provide them with the support I never had in my life."

Bell saw education as the ladder out of the pit of poverty and

INSIDE
Honor your mother by making her proud of you. Dear Abby, Page B2



Jacqueline Bell, a single mother of seven — five of whom are in college, will receive a bachelor's degree in business administration from IU East this week. STEVE KOGER / PALLADIUM-ITEM

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Mom

Continued from xx

violence in which her family dwelled. She started taking classes and seeking opportunities for her kids.

In 2001, she sought to further improve their circumstances by moving from Savannah, Ga., to Richmond. She chose Richmond because she'd once lived at Wernle and because the community located her near relatives in Indianapolis, but allowed her to avoid big-city crime and costs.

Today, on Mother's Day, Bell and her seven children — another daughter was born after her move to Richmond — will lovingly celebrate her perseverance and their educational achievements.

Next Friday evening, after 12 years of part-time schooling, Bell will receive a bachelor of science degree in business administration, with a major in accounting, from Indiana University East.

Two days later, her oldest son, Eric Bell, 24, will graduate from Valparaiso University, having earned a master's of business administration (MBA) with a specialization in accounting.

Four more of Bell's children — Ebony Bell, 23; Esaias Bell, 22; Elaine Bell, 20; and Elise Bell, 19 — are college students. Two others are still at home; Elijah Bell, 14, is a freshman at Richmond High School and Kayvonne Ferguson, 8, is a fourth-grader at Charles Elementary School.

Reflecting on his family's educational successes, Eric Bell gives the credit to his mother, calling her "a true hero."

"There is no adequate amount of words that can begin to describe the struggles and obstacles that my mother has had to overcome in order to accomplish what she has in her life," Eric Bell wrote in a



Jacqueline Bell poses with her seven children in 2004. In the back row are Esaias, left, and Eric. Center row, from left, Elaine, Ebony, Elise, Kayvonne and Jacqueline. In front is Elijah. Jacqueline Bell says that with five of her children in college, it's difficult to get everyone together for a photograph these days. SUPPLIED PHOTO

recent email. "... My mom is a testament to anyone who aspires to achieve any goals in life and garner success from the drive to prevail despite the odds."

Her son's admiration has touched Bell greatly.

"It's a great Mother's Day present for me to see that my son understands and appreciates all I've done for him, and his making the best of it. ... Things could have gone so wrong with me as a parent," Bell admits. "I haven't had a blueprint or a whole lot of examples. I've had to be pretty resilient."

As the oldest of the seven, Eric Bell has the most memories of the family's troubled past.

"Though my mom tried to shield us from the violence that is ever present in inner-city neighborhoods; violence was the norm and

seemed synonymous with poverty, therefore hard to escape," he said. "I vividly remember the low-income apartment complex that we lived in during my elementary school days; particularly the scene of a shooting which resulted in a bullet-riddled laundry room located just yards from my school bus stop."

There was violence at home as well. Bell said it took a lot of nerve for her to file for divorce and leave her husband when she didn't know what to expect going into the world alone with her children.

"It's hard to realize you can do it by yourself," Bell said. "You never want to get complacent with failures or things that are not working."

Bell had to figure out how to make a \$4-per-hour, 20-hour per week job at

Toys R Us pay for all the needs of a large family. She asked for government assistance with child care and was offered just \$30 a week. However, the cheapest she could find was \$55 a week. Desperate, she asked if the child care would accept her \$30. Amazingly, they did.

When she wanted to move the kids to a safer, better quality private school, she ferreted out scholarships. Each step taught her to take a chance and ask for what she needed. The worst reply would just be no.

While Bell was setting an example for her kids by working on her education and sometimes two or three jobs, she also made an effort to find role models for her kids.

Eric Bell vividly remembers his mother taking him

along as she attended the Black Executive Exchange Program at Savannah State University where she was a student.

"The program ... boasted the nation's top African-American corporate entrepreneurs, and brought community leaders to the campus to exhibit minorities in critical positions of leadership, also to speak on career development issues for the encouragement of aspiring African-American professionals," Eric Bell wrote. "These executives ... had no idea the level of inspiration and motivation that they were providing to a then-adolescent kid."

"... A seed was planted by my mom bringing me to school with her that day and showing me where I could see myself in the future. The experience

opened my eyes to the opportunities in existence if I matched action with the vision of being a successful African American professional. She has taken all of us to similar events throughout our lives, but this occasion stuck out to me and created the spark that has pushed me all the way to starting my first career job at a public accounting firm this coming fall."

Bell said she remembers that being the first time she heard Eric talk about accounting and can't believe he's stayed with it all these years. It's something they share. Both will be taking the certified public accountant's exam this year with the hope of being classified a CPA.

Bell never passed up an opportunity to introduce her children to examples of successful, educated people. She took the kids to class with her, introduced them to her professors and encouraged them to talk with her co-workers and bosses about what it took to develop their careers.

She pushed and pushed, and is still pushing. She believes in rules, boundaries and structure.

"They're not going to respect you if they can run over you. I know, I was one of those kids," Bell said. "I know there were times they probably thought I was hard on them."

"Colleges don't just let you in because you're poor or you're cute."

She has made it her mission to be an advocate for her children, to believe in them when others don't and to teach them to believe in themselves.

"Just because you're poor, you don't have to be a certain way," Bell said. "You still have to tell your family, 'You can do better than this.'"

Reporter Rachel E. Sheeley: (765) 973-4458 or rsheelley@pal-item.com

ABOUT JACQUELINE BELL & HER CHILDREN

»Age: 46
»Born in Indianapolis, grew up in foster homes and for a while lived at Wernle Youth & Family Treatment Center in Richmond
»Education: Received a G.E.D. and has been pursuing a bachelor's degree for 12 years. Graduating May 13 from Indiana University East with a bachelor of science degree in business administration with a major in accounting.
»Work: Serves as an English tutor and adjunct instructor in computer information systems at Ivy Tech Commu-

nity College in Richmond. Also an independent sales representative for Avon Products Inc.

SEVEN CHILDREN:

»Eric Bell, 24, is scheduled to graduate May 15 from Valparaiso University with a master of business administration (MBA) and a specialization in accounting. He also received his bachelor's degree from Valparaiso. The Richmond High School graduate has accepted an accounting position in Indianapolis.
»Ebony Bell, 23, a Rich-

mond High School graduate, is a student at the University of St. Francis in Fort Wayne.
»Esaias Bell, 22, a Richmond High School graduate, is a student at Ivy Tech Community College in Lafayette.
»Elaine Bell, 20, is a student at Indiana University in Bloomington. She completed high school at the Indiana Academy for Science, Mathematics, and Humanities in Muncie.
»Elise Bell, 19, a Richmond High School graduate, is a student at Purdue University in West Lafayette.

»Elijah Bell, 14, is a freshman at Richmond High School.
»Kayvonne Ferguson, 8, is a fourth-grader at Charles Elementary School in Richmond.

Did you know? Living on limited funds, Jacqueline Bell said she has learned to cook chicken and rice a million different ways. When one of her children was served steak at someone else's home, the child later told her that they never wanted "chicken" cooked that way again.

Elijah Bell, 14, writes about his mother

My mother is a strong, independent, African-American woman. She's not just my mother, she is also my role model and my best friend. I trust her more than I trust myself.

She has sacrificed so much in her life for me and my siblings. Her children come first before anything else in the world. She always made sure we had a meal to eat and clothes on our backs.

My mother is the wisest and most experienced person I know. Her intel-



Elijah Bell with his mother, Jacqueline Bell, at his sister Elise's graduation from Richmond High School in 2009. SUPPLIED PHOTO

ON THE WEB
Comments from Elise and Elaine Bell with this story at www.pal-item.com.

why not and I say the same thing every time. I don't want to experience any of those things while I'm in high school. My education is more important to me than a quick high or a few moments of pleasure. I don't want to ruin my good future that I plan to have.

My mom taught me common sense. I made a

"She is ... my role model and my best friend."

ELIJAH BELL, AGE 14

when I look back at my life I'm not going to regret a thing. I listened to my mom when she told me not to do something and I'm thankful of her for doing it.

I'm proud of the person I am today and I would never want to change who I am. Instead of being like most kids who talk back to their parents and never

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My mother is the wisest and most experienced person I know. Her intelligence made me who I am today and its one of the things I am most grateful for. It took me years to realize that all the times my mom would punish me or yell at me she was trying to teach me an important lesson. Each lesson would later help me out in my life. Now I tell my mom every day how much I appreciate her.

To me my mom is like a super hero, she doesn't



Elijah Bell with his mother, Jacqueline Bell, at his sister Elise's graduation from Richmond High School in 2009. SUPPLIED PHOTO

ON THE WEB
Comments from Elise and Elaine Bell with this story at www.pal-item.com.

why not and I say the same thing every time. I don't want to experience any of those things while I'm in high school. My education is more important to me than a quick high or a few moments of pleasure. I don't want to ruin my good future that I plan to have.

My mom taught me common sense. I made a promise to my mom that I will never do any of those four things and that's a promise I plan to keep. I don't want to become another one of those kids you see in the news that got arrested for making a bad choice. I don't think it's worth going through so much for so little.

So when the kids at my school laugh at me and call me "white," I let them. I know 10 years from now

"She is ... my role model and my best friend."

ELIJAH BELL, AGE 14

when I look back at my life I'm not going to regret a thing. I listened to my mom when she told me not to do something and I'm thankful of her for doing it.

I'm proud of the person I am today and I would never want to change who I am. Instead of being like most kids who talk back to their parents and never listen to them. Screaming at them saying I hate you and blaming them for their own mistakes.

I want to thank my mom for what she has done in my life. It's a blessing that God gave me her as a mother because I couldn't dream of a better parent or a better family to be a part of. This is why I love my mom and I want to show her how great she is for Mother's Day.

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