

# PITTING HERSELF AGAINST ADVERSITY

A Fulbright Scholar returns to Drexel to tell her story and inspire others

BY ERICA LEVI ZELINGER



**L**auren Pitts has spent her 49 years on an unlikely, winding road to self-discovery and success. This impeccably dressed mother and astute business owner spends her days trying to empower and improve the lives of young girls. She was raised by her mother and grandparents in a devout Christian household where they embraced Proverbs 22:6: “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” But never having met her biological father and always battling a strained and volatile relationship with her mother led Lauren not on the way she should go, but on a detour into self-sabotage.

Which is why it is astonishing how, at 47, Lauren finished Drexel’s Couple and Family Therapy Master’s Program and received a Fulbright Scholarship to Barbados in 2014 where she studied the impact of home (paternal absence or presence) on the educational outcomes of Barbadian adolescent girls.

Lauren herself always dreamed of going to college and owning her own business. But the path Lauren took to these ends was riddled with frustration and obstruction.

“My life is no fairy tale,” Lauren says. “In fact, it has been rather difficult being Lauren Denise Pitts.”

Low self-esteem and feelings of abandonment gave way to thoughts of suicide. Lauren’s stepfather abruptly left when she was in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. At 11, a family member began molesting her. She turned to drugs, alcohol, and a life of promiscuity. Then, 14-year-old Lauren, an eighth grader in Quinton, New Jersey, hit the worst possible obstacle: cancer. Doctors gave her six months to live.

For the next 10 years, Lauren was under the care of the University of Pennsylvania Hospital Malignant Melanoma clinic. She hadn’t yet received a clean bill of health, but she found her way back to the way she would go: She set off in 1986 for her freshman year at Howard University.

Another roadblock: While at college, Lauren was raped and left school after one semester.

Green light: Lauren transferred to Johnson & Wales in the fall of 1989, after making up credits at a community college. Her enrollment in the Cultural Enrichment Program there was a chance to mentor young girls whose experiences were comparable to her own. Her work with at-risk youth was also an opportunity to begin her own healing process and realize her true calling.

Pit stop: In September 1987, after being intimately involved with a guy she grew up with, Lauren found out she was pregnant.

She gave birth to her son Andre the following spring, and spent the next 19 years on an unpaved road with potholes and detours, going to school, caring for her son, and finally obtaining a B.B.A. in Organizational Management from Edward Waters College in Jacksonville, Florida.

It was her son, Lauren explains, that gave her life purpose and new meaning. Prior to that, “I was an extremely broken little girl, adolescent, and young woman. More times than not, I felt all alone and at life’s mercy. I realized then that I wanted to be instrumental in alleviating the pain of hurting people, especially children.”

Lauren returned to New Jersey after living in Florida for several years. She was done with people trying to convince her that she was her own problem.

“I believed that the root cause of my problems ran far deeper than myself. Earning a degree in Family Therapy would teach me how to address the systemic issues that I believed were fueling the antisocial behavior and educational achievement gaps among children just like me across the nation and around the world.”

Lauren enrolled in Drexel University’s Masters of Family Therapy Program. Six weeks before Lauren graduated from the full-time MFT program, she received a letter from Pennoni Honors College and the Drexel Fellowships Office acknowledging her academic excellence and commitment to

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justice and equality. The letter invited her to attend an information session about the Fulbright Student Program.

“I was extremely intrigued and saw it as an opportunity to explore familial and systemic issues in another country, if selected,” she says. “I was also intrigued by how highly competitive it was and that I was told that I had a better chance of winning the lottery than being named a Fulbright Scholar. I always welcome a challenge.”

She began the application process in May 2013, a self-proclaimed “phenomenal period of introspection,” under the guidance of Meredith Wooten, Director of the Pennoni Center for Scholar Development, which houses the Fellowships Office. Lauren wrote about how the absence of her father from her life influenced both positive and negative behaviors and gave her insight into the lives of young women of color who had similar experiences. Lauren is half-Caribbean, which prompted her to propose Fulbright research on teenage pregnancy and other salient familial issues in Barbados — an area desperately requiring more research and engagement from stakeholders.

In April 2014, Lauren received notification that she received the Fulbright. At 47, she left for Barbados for a year.

“The experience was life-altering and by far one of the most invigorating experiences I’ve ever had,” Lauren says. “It served as a tree-shaking elimination in my life of people that I had to let go of. I grew, healed, and developed a level of comfort with my difference than ever before. My difference once made me feel like an outsider. However, the Fulbright experience helped me realize that it is my difference that sets me apart from the rest.”

Her own research findings – showing that Barbadian girls place very high value on education despite the quality of the relationship with their father – confirmed Lauren’s pursuit of education.

Lauren returned to Drexel to pursue her PhD in educational leadership and management and to speak at Fulbright events hosted by the Drexel Fellowships Office. The Fulbright U.S. Student Program also recognized her for her efforts to promote scholarship opportunities to ethnic minorities: Lauren was one of 20 Fulbrighters selected as an Alumni Ambassador to inspire diverse students to learn about educational and cultural exchange.

She is now completing her final year of doctoral study here at Drexel while working to secure operational funding for The Zeal Foundation, Inc. a non-profit organization she created to provide programs and services for marginalized and disenfranchised populations. She is also pursuing certification to become an educational trainer/consultant while earning the post-graduate clinical hours required to obtain her state license as a family therapist.

“Fulbright is strengthening my ability to effectively run my foundation and to continue in my pursuits to be a global agent of change and a transformational leader,” Lauren says.

And that pit stop she took when she was 20? Lauren’s extraordinary son Andre is currently pursuing his Master’s degree in finance at the University of Miami. He’ll finish in 2017. And Lauren will turn 50 in 2017. And she’ll celebrate her new title in 2017: Dr. Lauren Denise Pitts.