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STORIES THAT
INSPIRE



**When PHYLLISA
DEROZE
experienced
a health crisis
followed by
the loss of her
home, she
found a fierce
will to survive
—and thrive.**

By Christina Frank

PHYLLISA DEROZE felt like she was at the top of her game in January 2011. She had recently moved to Fayetteville, NC, to take a job as an assistant professor of English literature. “I remember looking in the mirror and thinking I was just where I wanted to be. I had a great job, and I felt beautiful and healthy.”

A few weeks later, Phyllisa, then 30, passed out in her bathtub. “I hadn’t been feeling well and thought a hot bath might help,” she explains. “An hour later, I woke up in cold water, not knowing how I got there.” By the time she made it to the emergency room, her blood sugar was so high she was going into a diabetic coma.

In retrospect, Phyllisa realizes she had been having classic symptoms of type 2 diabetes—excessive thirst, blurred vision and disorientation—for a few weeks beforehand.

“After I had my fainting episode, I spent six days in the



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hospital. It was so scary," recalls Phyllisa. "All the pamphlets they gave me about diabetes showed older people who looked unhappy. In particular, the statistics about African-Americans were dire. I cried all the time."

To help lift her spirits and inspire other young people like herself with diabetes, Phyllisa started a blog called *Diagnosed Not Defeated*. "I wanted people to see a smiling face, to see someone who was saying, 'I have type 2 diabetes and I'm still living my life. I'm living with diabetes, not dying with diabetes.'"

A few months later, another crisis tested her mettle when a tornado leveled her apartment complex. "First I lost my health, then I lost my home," she says. "I was completely devastated." This time, she held herself together by forcing herself to count one blessing every day. "I was thinking, 'How can I feel blessed? I have a chronic illness and I just lost my home in a tornado.' But then I thought, 'Well, at least I still have my car.' And the next day I thought that at least I wasn't in my apartment during the tornado, or I might have been killed. Finding those blessings, one by one, was very important."

Dealing with the aftermath of the tornado really motivated Phyllisa to take charge of her health. "Everything around me was gone," she says. "The one thing I was able to control was eating right and taking my medications." She started by rigorously counting carbs, and she learned to make healthy meals; then she began working out at a local gym and participated in her first diabetes walk.

Phyllisa has continued to put one foot in front of the other and has come a long way—physically, emotionally and geographically. In 2013, she received a Fulbright scholarship that brought her to Dubai, where she now teaches and lives with her husband and their infant daughter, Jananah. She is managing her diabetes through diet and exercise alone and has participated in several 5K walking races.

"Having diabetes is frustrating and lonely sometimes. But my motto, 'diagnosed not defeated,' keeps me focused on taking care of myself and feeling hopeful."



Three generations of strong women: Phyllisa (center) with her mother, Phyllis (left), and grandmother, Josephine (right)



Phyllisa with her husband, Thierry, and daughter, Jananah.