

# Standing Tall



AT 6-FEET-1-INCH TALL, Jennifer Cameron was used to towering over people. In some ways she'd carried that mindset with her three years ago when she'd accepted a job as project director for a senior

—would end up teaching her some life-changing lessons.

“Being from the area, I knew they were set in their ways,” recalls Cameron, 28, a doctoral student. “I thought it would be kind of easy. I didn’t

## Seniors Helped Cover Model Winner **Jennifer Cameron** Overcome Body Image Issues

citizens program. Stressed from the demands of raising infant twins alone while her husband, Nayari, a U.S. Army captain, was deployed, she thought she had it all figured out: She'd be a glorified babysitter to the graying denizens of her hometown of Indianola, Mississippi, and expose them to new things. She never imagined these men and women—some more than three times her age

expect them to have as much of an impact on me.”

The job was not as effortless as she'd predicted. Many of the seniors didn't take too kindly to the idea of a svelte 20-something being in charge. And the fact that the previous director had worked with the program for 30 years made the situation that much more difficult. Cameron, however, persisted in her efforts to break the ice.

Written by  
Chandra R. Thomas

Photographed by  
Keith Major

They responded with overwhelming support. "I began to see that even though they were aging and their bodies were changing, they were very comfortable in their own skin and that gave me the strength to feel better about myself," she says. "They gave me the encouragement I needed at that time. They were like a second family to me."

Cameron's candor inspired her new family to embrace her and her programming ideas. Soon their days were packed with events she coordinated: health fairs and special events like a formal senior prom and "Rocking Through the Decades," a program where participants shared special memories from different eras. "I wanted to show them that just because they had gotten older they didn't have to stop living," she says. "They built me up and I built them up. They gave me an understanding of what life is really about."

Now Cameron's struggles with bulimia are behind her, she sticks to a healthy diet and she sees a counselor for support. She had to leave her position at the center when her family was relocated first to Fort Knox, Kentucky, and then Fort Polk, Louisiana, where they currently live. The impact of her time with the seniors, she insists, has left an indelible mark on her life. "Now I see that I don't have to be a size four to be beautiful. I don't define myself by size anymore," she says. "I'm finally comfortable in my own skin. Now I walk tall with my shoulders back. They gave me a whole new outlook on life!" ♥

*Chandra R. Thomas is an award-winning Atlanta-based writer and co-founder of the African-American discussion group, TalkBLACK.*

# 10 Meet the Runners-Up

—Sherrie Johnson  
Maryland



So many of our readers are healthy, wealthy and wise that they made choosing a cover girl difficult. Check out the 10 ladies who came in just behind our winner.

—Nichole Means Colorado



—Angella Holliday Colorado



—Joetta Black Texas



—Danée Gaines Adams Maryland



—Tashica Morgan Maryland



—Erhivie Abu Maryland



—Shantosh Lafayette Texas



—Shaqita Garrett Rhode Island



"It was hard. They were, like, 'you're young. You can't tell us anything,'" she remembers with a chuckle.

While the battle to gain the trust and respect of the elders played out publicly at the center, privately Cameron was battling excruciatingly painful problems within. Behind her friendly but tough exterior she was essentially crumbling inside. She'd always struggled with body image issues in school, where classmates nicknamed her the Jolly Green Giant. The fact that her maiden name was Strong didn't help, either.

"They would say 'Jen Strong is so tall that she knocked down a wall;' just hurtful things," Cameron says.

With the pressures of solo parenting heavy on her shoulders, a touch of post-partum depression and the overwhelming sadness and anxiety she was feeling over her husband's absence, she started to feel like a pressure cooker on the verge of imploding. "I was going through a lot; my husband was deployed," she says. "I developed an eating disorder as a coping mechanism with him being away. I'd eat and then vomit. My life felt so out of control. I felt like the only thing I had control over was what went into and out of my body."

She'd actually developed the condition, commonly known as bulimia, during her husband's earlier deployment to Korea prior to learning she was pregnant and before the senior center job. At that time Cameron, who normally weighs about 205 pounds, had plummeted to 150. She'd gotten so thin, in fact, that her husband barely recognized

**"Now I see that I don't have to be a size four to be beautiful. I don't define myself by size anymore."**

her during their first reunion at the airport.


"My husband was very concerned," Cameron says. "He kept telling me 'you need to get help; I don't know you anymore.'"

She managed to abandon the eating disorder during her long, difficult pregnancy with the twins, Chloe and Colton. But she gained 100 pounds with the pregnancy, and her husband was deployed a second time to war-ravaged Iraq. Within months she was back to working out fanatically, weighing herself obsessively, and bingeing and purging. She'd lost all of her baby weight by the time she started the job with the seniors at the Sunflower Humphreys Counties Progress Inc. community action agency six months later.

Her first turning point came months into her tenure when the director of the facility reached out. "I thought I had been hiding it, but she told me that she had always known something was wrong," Cameron says. "It was like a relief to have someone to talk to about what I was experiencing."

Their heartfelt talks inspired Cameron to open up to her senior clients. "I didn't tell them about the eating disorder, but I did tell them I was going through some things," she says. "I had to make myself vulnerable to them and it helped them to accept me and what I was trying to do for them."





**"I'm finally  
comfortable in  
my own skin.  
Now I walk  
tall with my  
shoulders  
back."**

Styling by Rick Ramsey  
Makeup by Jai Williams/MAC Products  
Hair by Daria Wright  
Manicure by Toya Carpenter