



Giselle

Story by: David Carlson
Eau Claire, WI

Background Note: David attended martial arts and met a Mayo Clinic Health System colleague's husband there. David was being discharged from the military and needed an outlet for his PTSD. His personal story is very impactful with a very positive turnaround.

I have a large family. Among my siblings and I, we count that our father had over 20 children, but there are only ten of us who feel like we are one family. I should say nine, because our oldest sister Giselle died last February. Giselle's nickname was Gigi. It was our term of affection for our eldest sister who, like the rest of us, had been offered little in life but somehow always managed to create abundance from scarcity. For those whom Gigi loved, her presence brought warmth, affection, and understanding.

I did not meet my oldest sister until I was thirteen years old. By the time we met, our siblings had been scattered throughout the United States, from Florida to Minnesota and all the way out to California. Now living in Minneapolis, MN with my mother, I was on the run from the Minneapolis Police Department and found shelter some nights at my sibling's homes. Other nights I curled up in a spot on the ground where no one could see me, whether that was in a friend's basement or a spot on the side of a house that offered cover from the wind and potential predators.

It was my oldest brother Nate who introduced me to Gigi. Nate had been carting me around with him when he could try to help keep me out of trouble or from getting myself killed. The moment we met, Gigi embraced me tightly, as if we'd known each other our whole lives. Her light-skinned complexion matched mine and Nate's. Her dark brown eyes communicated compassion and ferocity all in a glance. It was immediately apparent to me that Gigi was a part of who I am. She too was negotiating the most dangerous realities of this country, and she was doing it all while taking care of her firstborn son, De'ceon.

As with all my siblings, we were in and out of each other's lives throughout the 1990s. This was also the case for Gigi and me. I ended up incarcerated in the Minneapolis juvenile detention center, and later Hennepin County Homeschool, where I didn't see any of my family until I made furlough and went to our sister Mozell's house for my welcome home party. Gigi was there, and it was like not a day had passed since we'd last seen each other. Gigi was always there when it was her family who needed her. I imagine this was probably the first time—but far from the last—that my sister would tell me how proud she was of me.

Gigi was at my sendoff to Iraq in 2003 with the Wisconsin Army National Guard. She was also there when I returned for leave. And then when I returned home for good from that combat tour, Gigi had a barbeque at her home for all of us. Gigi acted as an anchor in each of our lives, despite her life still having many ups and downs. All my siblings struggled every day with a past that none of us had chosen but each continued to move away from.

During my second tour to Iraq, I did not see or talk to my family before leaving or on my mid-tour leave. The first tour had taken something out of me that I felt could only be filled if I were back in combat. I was wrong. The void that had been manageable to ignore after returning from my first tour took over my life when I returned home for the second time in

2008. It was in my lowest moments that Gigi and my other sisters tried to lift me up. They wanted to protect me even though each of them had their own responsibilities and their own demons. Despite her own challenges, I can still hear my sister's constant reminder, "David, I'm so proud of you."

But then in 2009, Gigi's mother passed. I saw the impact of this loss strike my sister to her core. At Gigi's mother's wake, I embraced my sister and asked her if there was anything I could do. She said to take care of myself. That is all she wanted. I often felt that Gigi put others before herself because she did not feel worthy of love. But this was not the case. Standing in the parking lot of the funeral home where her mother laid in presentation for those she left behind, I saw in Gigi's eyes the same compassion and ferocity that I saw the day I met her—she was a protector who had just lost one of the closest people in her life. As a soldier, I understood wounds like these sometimes never healed. Despite her emotional suffering, Gigi still took the time to tell me how proud she was of me.

It was March 1, 2020. I was at a local CrossFit gym warming up for a workout when I saw my phone light up from a call. It was my younger brother Rashad. As soon as I answered, I could hear Rashad bracing his voice. "Hey bro, I have some bad news." My heart sunk. My family has suffered so much loss, that when a call begins this way, we know it means we are never going to see one of our loved ones alive again. "Gigi's dead, bro."

My oldest sister died before the pandemic turned each of our lives upside down. She died before George Floyd was murdered at the hands of the same police department that had harassed her for so many years. It was only two days prior to me receiving news of her death that she and I had been on the phone laughing until tears over some menial topic. I struggle with the fact that I cannot remember what that part of the conversation was about. I do remember why Gigi called me, though. She needed someone to listen to her explain the harassment she was facing from the police department in St. Louis Park, Minnesota. She was at a breaking point with the additional stress they were adding to her life. I knew she was reaching out to me for emotional support. And I felt that by the time we were laughing to tears I had provided that. Amid near despair, Gigi took at least two minutes of the conversation to tell me how proud of me she was, listing off specific recent feats of mine so I knew she meant it.

In the funeral home's lobby, my siblings and I sat planning our final goodbyes to our oldest sister. My brother Rashad, my sister Rachel, my sister Tasha, my brother Josh, and my sister Mozell. Life has given us many blessings, but it has required us to suffer almost unbearable amounts of loss to reap these rewards. Our sister died of complications related to drug use, leaving behind a beautiful three-year old daughter Savannah, and two adult children, Aleah and De'ceon. People like Gigi are consumed with the love they have for others, and as is often the case, this burden wore away my sister's defenses, leaving her emotions bare in a country that punishes Black women for showing any vulnerability.

Rashad and I said our last words to Gigi together. The viewing room was large, but our gathering was intimate. We each are children of every discrimination, every racist system, every negative health and social outcome; yet, we are still standing here, in some cases hardened by adversity, but standing, nonetheless. And we have lost one of our own. I look at my family, especially my sisters, and it pains me to see the suffering they are going through. Ships do not sink from the water without; they sink from the water within. Our loss

of Gigi has left a crack in our ship that feels different than the storms we have weathered before.

Since Gigi's passing, I've turned my attention to supporting my nieces and nephews who have been devastated by the loss of their aunt. They ask questions about why there is so much loss and sadness. The answer to this is because we are Black in the United States. Many of my nieces and nephews have already lost people they care about to murders and other unnatural causes. They are not even 18 years old but have already experienced the emotional chasm caused by the abrupt absence violence creates. Death is an expectation when you are Black in America. Absence is a constant.

My work for the ACLU of Wisconsin and my work as a mentor is for the purpose of ending the pattern of loss unique to Black families and Black people in the United States. The loss of my sister has strengthened my resolve to either educate the uninformed or to de-platform the willfully ignorant regarding matters of race in this country. I believe beyond a shadow of a doubt that mass incarceration, law enforcement's war on Black people, lack of funding to mental health resources and institutions for education and personal development are all factors that contributed to the loss of my sister Giselle. These factors led to the murder of my best friend George in 2017. They led to the murder of my brother Rashad's best friend, Timothy. They led to the murder of my niece Jules's half-sister, Sadeya. The law enforcement infrastructure of the United States is practicing a policy of direct and indirect genocide on Black people. My family's story may seem extraordinary, but in the Black community, I assure you, it is not.

Coming up on one year since my sister passed, I am grateful to have this moment to sit and revisit my memories with her—to feel again the unconditional love she always showed me, especially in the moments when she told me she was proud of me. Wherever she now rests, I know that she can feel my commitment to changing the cycles that have negatively impacted our lives—the cycles of racism and exclusion that we were born into—and that continue to resurface in our lives the moment we forget life, liberty, and happiness were not words written with Black people in mind. I hope now that Gigi is at rest, and she can be proud of me for carrying on a fight that will forever give meaning to who she was as a Black woman and mother.

In my full-time occupational capacity, I provide mentorship and peer-support services for participants in Comprehensive Community Services, a government program under the Department of Human Services. The work that I do with youth and adults is informed by my experiences growing up in several impoverished communities, where I was exposed to violence and crime on a continual basis. These experiences contrasted with my life after I was adopted at 15 years old to a relatively safe community. They have also provided me a lot of insight into how to effectively advocate for youth and adults disadvantaged by their external circumstances. My experiences taught me how to survive—and in some cases progress—under extreme stress, instability, and threat, which are tools I impart to the individuals who I work with. There is no instant cure for poverty and suffering, but an individual can be equipped to navigate these realities much more successfully than if they are underequipped.

Many of the mental health struggles I had to overcome—struggles that were residual effects from my upbringing—were exacerbated during my two tours to Iraq in my 20s. After my

second tour, I went on a tailspin into addiction to cope with the symptoms of what I would come to find out was PTSD and depression. It took inpatient treatment programs at Veterans Administration Hospitals and nearly five years in prison to acquire the tools I needed to move past the trauma of my childhood and two combat tours in Iraq. These experiences are the events I use to inform my work with youth and young adults, predominantly Black Indigenous People of Color [BIPOC] youth and adults.

I am also a regional organizer with the ACLU of Wisconsin's Campaign for Smart Justice. In this role, I advocate for marginalized populations within the western region of Wisconsin and spread awareness on the importance of reducing the prison population in Wisconsin, eliminating as many prisons as we can in this state, and funding treatment and rehabilitation services instead of penal institutions. I also fight to eliminate disparate adjudication and sentencing outcomes for people of color in the criminal legal system. My role as an organizer has allowed me to positively impact the larger societal structures that—as a youth—were so detrimental to my development, as well as being instruments that threatened to diminish the quality of my life and level of freedom I would enjoy permanently had there not been key people, at key moments, to mentor me.

Artist Tanya Meyer
Eau Claire, WI

Tanya Meyer is a self-taught Intentional Creativity Artist, Intuitive Energy Practitioner, Aerial Yoga Instructor and Vibrational Sound Medicine Healer. She began a journey of self-exploration and healing through her art five years ago after leaving a 17-year career in nursing, when she decided to pursue a more holistic, spiritual, and creative path. She has dedicated her life to assisting others in experiencing a free, expanded and mindful life with focus on aligning mind, body and spirit through creativity, movement, breath and sound.

Tanya's art has taken many forms over the past five years, each piece reflecting the healing journey and expansion of her awareness. Her goal is to create something that will make a meaningful and powerful first connection and then continue the spiritual growth between the person and the vibration/energy artistically represented in the piece. Tanya believes art is an amazing way for the Imaginal Realm to become more tangible. It creates a bridge of communication from the Divine that we are graced with connecting, respecting, and expanding upon. At the core of all her work is love. More of Tanya's work is shared at her website, www.divinelight777.com.

To see more of her amazing work please visit her website at <https://www.divinelight77.com/>

The initial opening on the canvas and the circles around her face represent her circles of support from the realms above, all those who support her and all whom she protects. The symbols written around her face represent all the scars and wounds she has endured in this lifetime, and they are transmuted into light language through the painting. The lines of red thread and vines around her represent her connection to all those she has loved and all

those loved ones that have come and gone before her time. The dots and leaves are the wounds of her family, as well as the ancestors that she has been carrying, as they, too, are being healed.

The messages she wishes to bring forth are written upon her. The Lotus upon her head symbolizes the ability to come from a place of suffering into the light, much like the lotus whose roots start in the muddy earth and dirt and rise up through the water to the light of the sun. This reminds us that we too can rise from any difficult situation and reconnect to the light that surrounds us. As I painted on her and added layers, she wanted wings, a glowing heart and beautiful garden of roses.

Giselle's message:

✧ She who runs through the flames, through the pain, the wounds, the shame, and the chains... She seeks to illuminate others by awakening them to love.

It is time to see one another for the light that we are. It is time to be the change. Love is the most powerful force in the universe. Educate, mentor, inspire and most importantly love one another. Be open to receiving love. You are all worthy of greatness. Assist others in seeing it within themselves. It's through our wounds and our scars in which the light appears and shines through the cracks. That light is how we inspire and create change. Forgiveness is key. Hold compassion in your heart, and be the change you wish to see in the world. Rise up from the difficult situations and reconnect to the light. ✧

View all the pieces in the *Healing Reflections* [online gallery](#).