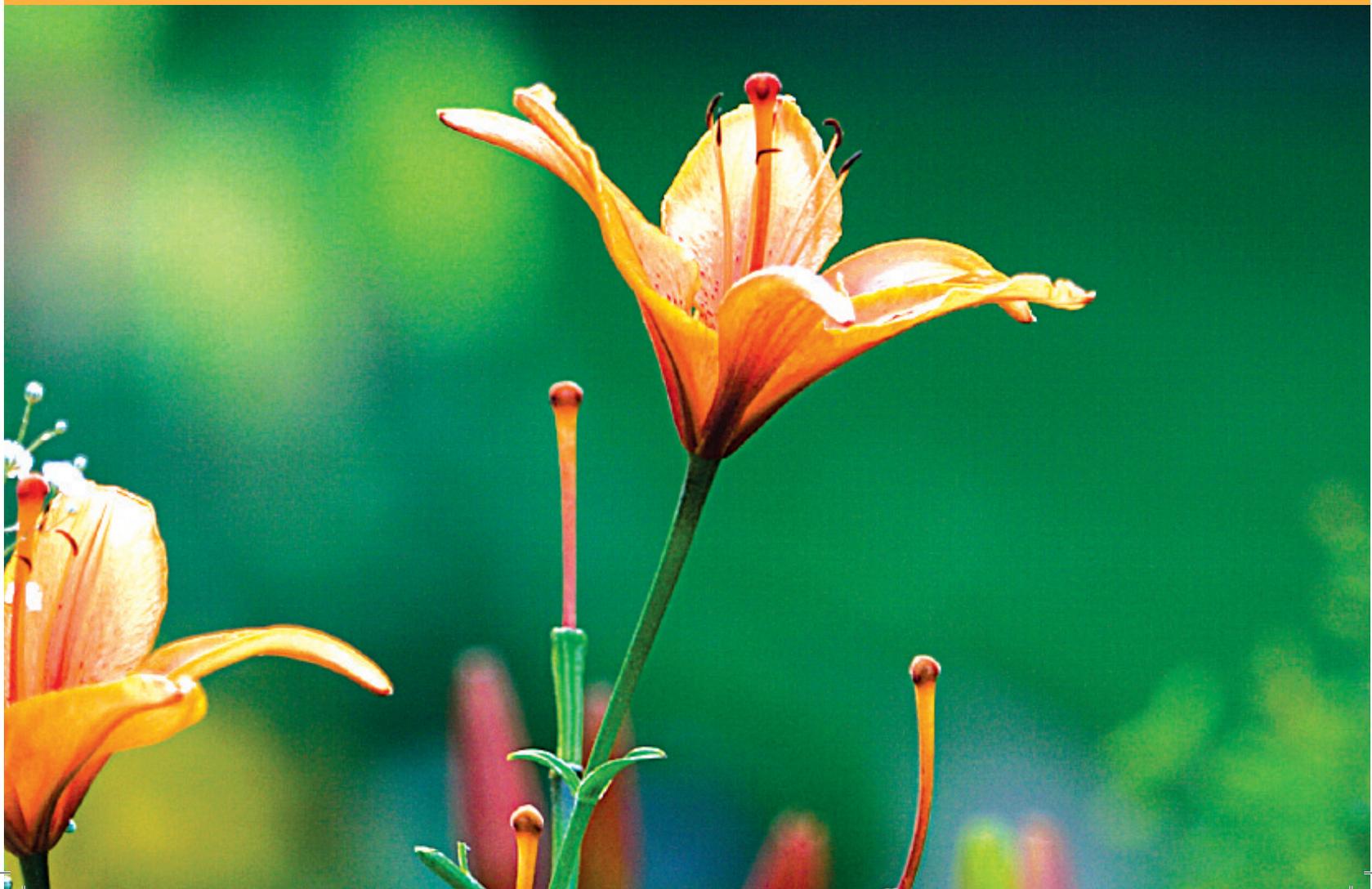


LIVIN' LIFE POSITIVE

By Kim Harris

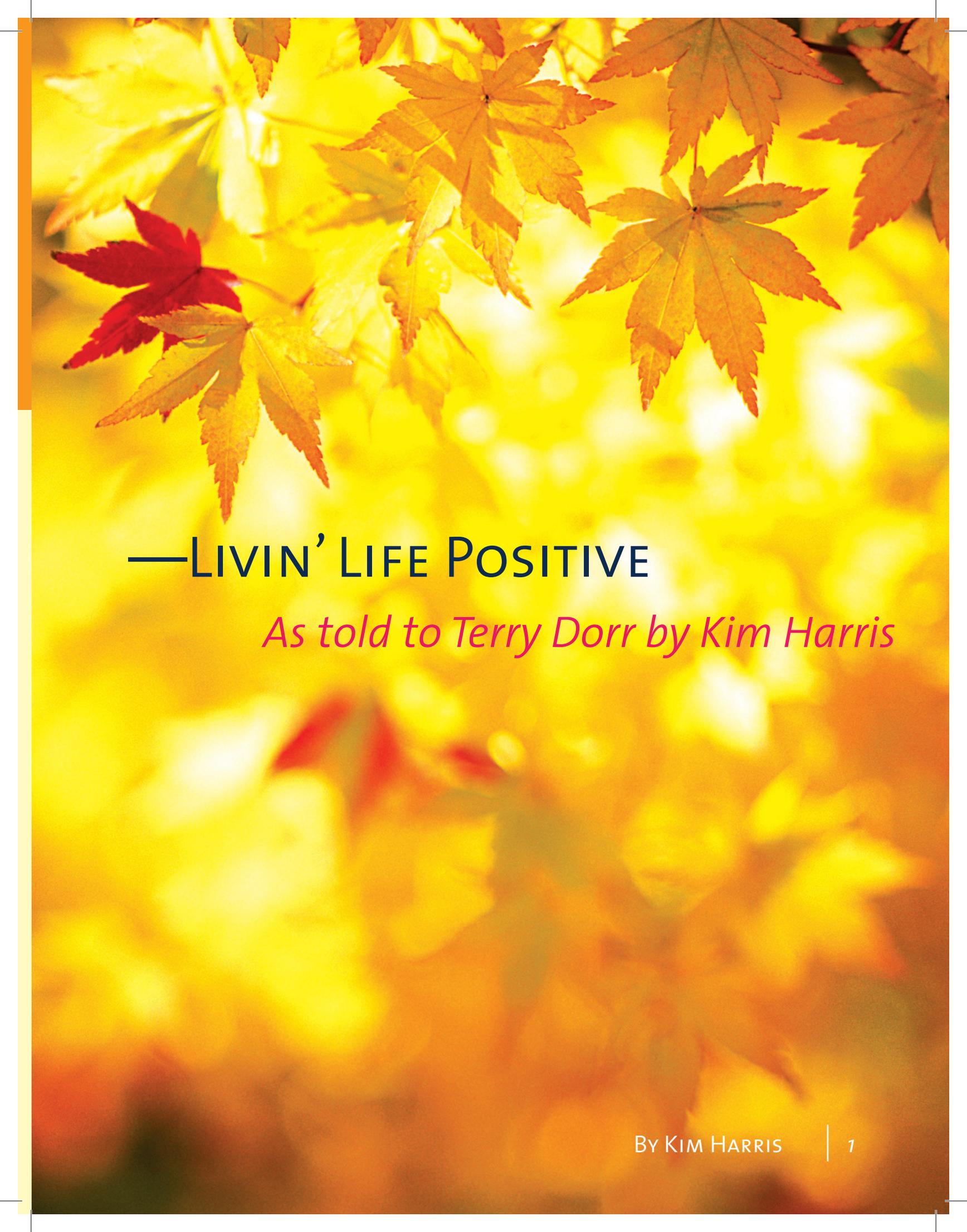


2 My Family

5 Lisa's Life

8 My Childhood

10 Through the Grace of God



—LIVIN' LIFE POSITIVE

As told to Terry Dorr by Kim Harris



Pastor Mary Martha Kannass with Kim's husband Ronnie and Lisa Marie at her baptism.

My Family

The first thing I show people when they come to my house is the closet. It's got white double doors with six sparkling white shelves on both sides. The closet is jammed full. Each item on the shelves is painstakingly labeled and everything is organized from top to bottom. But my closet doesn't contain toys, sheets, towels, coats or canned goods. This closet is bursting with medicine, medical supplies, feeding tubes and IV bags of liquid food. Every item has a label and every medication is carefully recorded in a chart on a daily basis. It's so well stocked and organized, a visitor might think she's just entered a hospital storeroom.

My husband and I have been labeled by others as "slow." That's how we've thought of ourselves since we started school. We met about 10 years ago when we were both working

at Industries for the Blind as machine operators. The very first time I met him I was drawn to him.

Something about him caught my attention. Maybe it was the way he talked about politics and sports. Or maybe it was the fact that he didn't just want to hang out in a tavern. I could tell he respected women and that we shared values and interests. He was living at home with his parents and didn't have any children. After our first meeting I asked him out, plain and simple, cut to the chase—"Ronnie do you want to go out?" I said. We went out for a candlelight dinner and he brought me flowers. It was very romantic. I liked his energy and his personality. It wasn't about his looks, or my looks for that matter. I go by what's inside of you, that's what really counts.

We were both in special education in school and back then, guys didn't find me attractive. Ronnie has been visually impaired since birth. But it's not about looks. I know what's really important—things like values, personality, being able to talk to someone about all kinds of things. This is what I found in Ronnie right from the beginning and I was hooked. Ronnie has personality for days. When I got pregnant with Lisa, (that would be Lisa Marie, named after the daughter of Ronnie's favorite singer, Elvis) Ronnie's family questioned our ability to handle having our own

family. They said things like, you'll be stressed out, this is a full time responsibility, can you handle this? Little did anybody know, what was in store for us.

When we started to plan our wedding, we wrote a letter to both of our parents, explaining what really mattered to us. We poured out our thoughts so they would understand our value system better and how we wanted to live moving forward. It wasn't about a big showy wedding that cost \$5,000. It was about a small church wedding and owning a home. I got married in a simple powder blue dress and Ronnie wore a matching blue suit.

Ronnie lights up a room the minute he walks in. He is a caring, hard working and cheerful man, and having Lisa demonstrated that he would become a devoted father. I've never heard him be negative or complain about anything. And around the house, man, he's organized. He's the one who keeps everything spotless, not me.

Lisa was born

One month after we got married, Lisa was born. It was November 1, 1998 and everything seemed perfect up until then.

Lisa was born at St. Mary's hospital about one week before my due date. I had an emergency C-section and almost died. My vitals shut down and I couldn't even see Lisa until she was 3 days old. After a week's stay in the hospital we brought her home. It became apparent that Lisa wasn't eating properly. She screamed in the bath tub and we knew something was wrong. We brought her in to the doctor and she was admitted to Children's Hospital. I'll never forget the day we admitted her because it was cold and snowing. Lisa wasn't eating, her lungs were deflating and if we hadn't brought her in, she would have died in her sleep.

Lisa remained in Children's Hospital for two months. I was scared, angry, upset and confused. I blamed myself. I even thought, why don't they just take her? At three months, she had half of a lung removed. She had bad reflux, and couldn't eat or swallow. We didn't know from one day to the next if God was going to take her. These were hard, stressful, scary times for all of us.

We brought Lisa home but her health problems were far from over. We called 911 a lot. She had breathing issues and was fed through a tube in her nose. Eventually they put a feeding tube in her stomach and because her stomach was so small, she could only be fed a little bit at a time.



Lisa's First Years

The first years were the hardest for Lisa. Her breathing problems were the worst and she wasn't progressing. We took her to Children's Hospital day care until she was three and when she couldn't go there anymore I was a basket case. There she had

a full time nurse and the best care for all her issues. Everybody loved having her there, they were always so happy to see her.

During her second year Lisa got a lot of ear infections and she had a cyst on her neck that was

interfering with her breathing. She had the cyst removed but was still not breathing right. Her tonsils were infected, so we had her tonsils and adenoids removed and tubes put in her ears. Then she had surgery on her stomach because she was not healing from having the tubes put in.

Gradually I learned how to get support from my church and family. I learned not to give up but to work through things. Ronnie and I have taken care of her and survived many health crises. One of her doctors said she wouldn't live to be six years old. He also said she would never walk or stand and always be small.

Lisa Now

Now age 9, Lisa doesn't talk or hear. Unable to swallow, she is still fed through a tube in her stomach. She may need surgery for scoliosis. I'm also watching her eyes closely because she may need to have her eyes corrected. She goes to the dentist every 6 months for gingivitis because she won't let you brush her teeth.

Lisa is in a special ed classroom but you often wonder what are they able to teach her. God forgive me for thinking like that



but it's hard. I know I shouldn't think like that but it's hard, they are in a world by themselves. At school she terrorizes everyone. She is the only one that is walking. There are four kids in her class and they are all in wheelchairs. She throws fits, that's just part of being Lisa. She gets into things and throws tantrums.

I believe strongly that Lisa has autism. Others don't agree with me. She does everything that kids with autism do, so I say, keep it real, tell me what she has so we can get the help that she needs.

Don't shut me out. The doctors are thinking they don't want to stress me out and give me that information and I say she needs to be re-evaluated so we get her the help that she needs.

Ronnie and I have stepped up to the plate to care for Lisa. I say to you, 'Come and live in my world for 3 or 4 days, step into my life and I'll show you what it's like to have a child who can't take care of herself.' Other people take for granted what it's like to have children who can ride a bike or go out and play. I say to them: 'Don't take that for granted. It's always a blessing to have children, no matter what their abilities are.'

My Childhood

School was hell for me. It was really total hell. I was picked on a lot; the kids called me four eyes and bifocals. I was teased because I was in special ed even though the other kids who teased me were also in special ed. One girl kicked me in the butt for no reason. I would get off at the wrong bus stop just to avoid the teasing. One girl tormented me so

much I paid her to stop. I would take 50 cent pieces from my grandma to pay the kids to stop teasing me. One day I even took a \$10 bill to buy candy to get them to stop teasing me. Nothing worked.

I was an automatic target for the kids at school and in the neighborhood and I never stood up for myself. One time I

was playing with the neighbor kids and one of them took my glasses and put them on a dog. He thought it was funny. It was painful. It's still hard for me to tell people how I really feel about things, I'm afraid they will be upset with me.

One day on the school bus it got so bad I threw down my books and got into a fight with another girl. I won and she stopped messing with me. Year after year I got tormented. Never told anybody about it. I'd come home dirty, my clothes messed up, my hair pulled. It was rough. It wasn't until my mother reported it that it stopped.

And those girls next door, I get so tickled. They had boyfriends, they got married and told me that nobody would ever want me. Now they're living at home 'cause they're divorced. I'm still married after 10 years and I'm not living at home like they are now.

I was pushed through school. I didn't get the right type of attention that I needed and the teachers either didn't care or understand how to work with handicapped kids. I taught myself how to read and write and really didn't deserve a high school diploma. My grandmother raised me and she didn't have the knowledge to get the resources that I needed in school. Now we're smarter, we know more about educating kids with handicaps. There's a lot more loving.

Furthering my Education

Five years ago, I decided that I really wanted to go back to school and pursue my goals of reading and writing better. Lisa was in school, Ronnie was working and I had been sitting in my house looking at four walls. I knew it was time that I had to do something for myself.

I started going to the Dominican Center to reach my goals. The sisters are so nice and witty. And they make it clear that this is not a place for negative attitude. You need to go home if you're not there to learn. I get excited about going someplace and I like being there with others because we give each other support. When you leave the Dominican Center, you leave with a nicer attitude than when you came in.

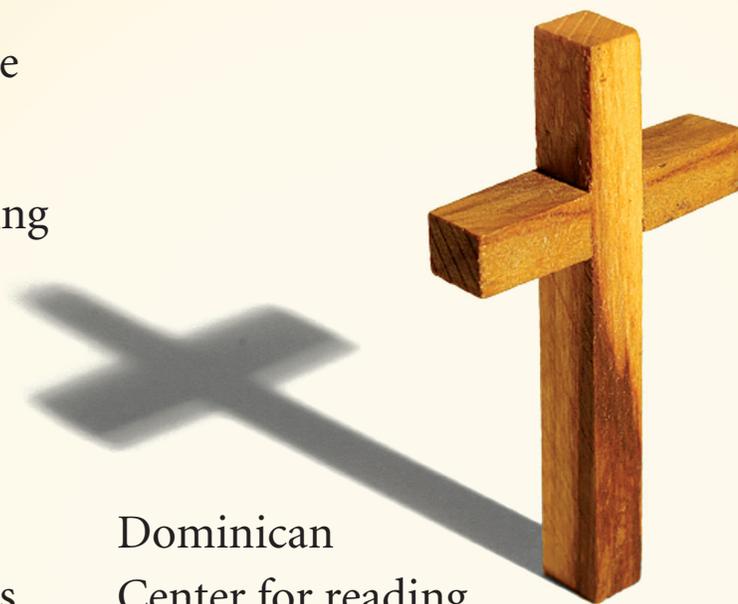
Through the Grace of God.

Last year things fell apart for me. Ronnie was laid off and we started over-spending and doing crazy stuff. I let everything go and was scared to get a check up for my health issues. I was terrified of getting a mammogram. I felt that if I go to get checked up they're going to find something wrong. Ronnie and I were not getting our medications updated. We both have high blood pressure and when he lost his job, we lost our insurance. We were scared and confused. We had no insurance and no money.

Now Ronnie's back at work, praise God. We have insurance and we're both back on the right medications. I've conquered all my doctor's appointments. I had a mammogram and thought, man, how come I didn't do this 2 years ago? We're back on track

and trying to eat healthy. We're livin' life positive.

Lately my vision has been getting worse than it's been and the doctors have told me that they can't help me anymore; they can't correct my glasses enough for my vision. They told me that I can't ride the bus anymore. And that just makes me want to fight harder. My bad vision has made me stronger. I want to stay focused and not dwell on my eyesight. Recently I went to Independence First and a lady asked me what I wanted to do. I told her I wanted to go to MATC and continue taking classes. She said that MATC is too dangerous for me. It's very irritating and annoying to have people tell you what you can't do. The bottom line is I'll do what I need to do. Nobody is going to stop me from getting my education. I have to eventually move on from the Dominican Center and this summer I'm going to MATC and the



Dominican
Center for reading
and math.

Some people think Ronnie and I can't manage or think for ourselves but that is not the case. Through the help of church, my mom and through the grace of God, we're gonna make it. Our parish nurse, nurse Louise comes every week. We are under control and I'm not afraid to say, I need help when I need it. That's the key. I can't continue to pretend that things are OK when they aren't. I advocate for my family because if I don't stand up for them who will? I used to shy away from things but I can't continue to do that.

We're livin' life now.

*This story is dedicated
to all the children
and families who struggle
with disabilities.
They are God's special children.*



AUTHOR—KIM HARRIS

This book is the author's own story based on personal memories and represents her understanding of life experiences. It is written in the author's own words with the help of a life story coach and is intended to instruct, enrich and inspire. Professional Dimensions and the story coaches assume no responsibility for the contents of the story or the accuracy of the facts and events discussed therein.

