# HOPE for the FUTURE

Inspiring Women's Stories Showing the Way

Dr AMANDA NICKSON

First published by Ultimate World Publishing 2024 Copyright © 2024 Amanda Nickson

#### ISBN

Paperback: 978-1-923255-11-1 Ebook: 978-1-923255-12-8

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Cover design: Ultimate World Publishing

Layout and typesetting: Ultimate World Publishing

Editor: Alex Floyd-Douglass

Cover Photo: Amanda Nickson, Sunrise, Central Australia



Ultimate World Publishing Diamond Creek, Victoria Australia 3089 www.writeabook.com.au

# **Testimonials**



"Not only is Amanda qualified to speak into the area of overcoming and having hope for the future, but she exemplifies a life where this is her default position. She radiates joy regardless of the circumstances and it's evident that there is a depth of not only knowledge but vast experience that enables her to speak to others and encourage them on their journey."

#### Jo Geerling, Senior Pastor, iSee Church

"I am very honoured to introduce Amanda as a genuine and true friend, a fellow traveller, living an abundant life of genuine faith in a big God. Despite experiencing seasons in her life of pain and suffering, moments of despair and discouragements, Amanda's personal testimony of learning to overcome against all odds, is a remarkable testament of faith and hope for the future in a big and loving God."

Emeritus. Rev. Emmanuel Fave (M.A. in Th/Min)
Pastor, Teacher, Church Leader and
Missionary at-Large

"When I became a Christian, I said that I had invited Jesus into my life, my story. However, the reality was that becoming a Christian was the moment I realised that I am part of God's amazing story that begins in a garden (Genesis 1) and ends in a city (Revelation 21–22), and which is all about Jesus and his kingdom. The Bible is full of stories: of complicated people depending on a God who steadfastly loves them. Jesus told stories: stories that made people laugh, get upset, be full of wonder, or simply be stunned at his wisdom. Stories are how we learn, they are the foundation of our relationships, and they inspire us. Amanda Nickson has gathered some incredible stories together. I challenge you to try and stop reading this book. They are stories of joy, heartbreak, hope and deep understanding. Stories shape us, and these stories will help you become more like Jesus."

#### Kara Martin, Mentor, Speaker, Adjunct Professor and Author of Workship

"Having had the privilege of reading Amanda's earlier books, I was inspired by her character and prose. I can attest to the fact that this book is profound, inspiring and impactful. Through heartfelt narratives, Amanda beautifully captures the resilience, courage and triumphs of women from diverse backgrounds. Each story serves as a beacon of hope and empowerment, inspiring readers to embrace their own journeys with newfound strength and determination. Amanda's passion for uplifting women shines through every page, making this a book a must-read for anyone seeking inspiration and motivation."

#### Kelly Markey, Bestselling and Award-Winning Author, Ambassador of Hope, Publisher

"When I think of Dr. Amanda Nickson, I am reminded of sunshine. But this is not ordinary sunshine, it is that sunshine that breaks through a cloudy and rainy day, to turn the sky into the most beautiful blue. It's a blue that not only beautifies the skies, but a blue that gives hope to all those who look up to catch a glimpse of its loveliness. I have known Amanda for almost 20 years now. Over the years, I have had the opportunity of understanding that life hasn't been always easy for her. Against all odds, she has continued to surely and steadily defeat her mountains, one of which is her well-deserved PhD degree which she completed eight years ago. Amanda is a true picture of hope, and a gift to all those who may have given up on their dreams, a gift that is living proof, that all things are possible."

Pastor Ulemu Nyasulu, Streams International Church

# Disclaimer

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Some of the following stories in this book raise serious issues that happen in life. For anyone who has experienced trauma and can be triggered reading about childhood abuse, domestic and family violence, suicide, severe injuries, medical conditions, disabilities, death and loss, the introduction gives a brief overview of the types of issues covered in each chapter.

This disclaimer serves as a trigger warning. It is not the author's intention to cause any harm or distress by the stories in this book – quite the opposite. The author believes these stories will show women courageously moving forward to live in victory over differing circumstances and provide hope in the challenges life can throw us.

The author has made every effort to ensure that the information in this book was correct at the time of publication. However, the author and publisher accept no liability for any loss, damage or disruption incurred by the reader or any other person arising from any action taken or not taken based on the content of this book.

# **Dedication**

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To all the brave women over time who have defied the odds, moved forward and hoped and believed for a better future.

To all the women, who in the future, will take steps of faith with hope and expectation.

To my mother, Olive Middleton Wright, a courageous and inspiring woman who always had hope for a better future.

And to all the women who have inspired me.

Thank you.



Testimonials	iii
Disclaimer	vii
Dedication	ix
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Samantha Leonoski:	
How Does Hope Bring Transformation?	5
Chapter 2 : Karene Gravener:	
He Will Make a Way Where There is No Way	21
Chapter 3: Julie Mengel:	
How Does Hope Bring Dreams and Possibilities to Life?	35
Chapter 4: Sharon Henderson:	
How Does Relying on God Bring Hope?	45
Chapter 5: Ruth: How Hope has Given Me a Future	57
Chapter 6: Dr Rhonda Emonson:	
How Does Hope Overcome Obstacles?	67
Chapter 7: Dr Amanda Nickson:	
How to Have Eternal Hope and Overcome the Impossible	75
Chapter 8: Uma Rani Turimella:	
How to Move from Despair to Hope	85

Chapter 9: Jill Sutcliffe Everett:	
How We Can Have Hope Because God Has a Plan	103
Chapter 10: Jenni Sedon:	
How to Move From Hopelessness to Hope For the Future	117
Chapter 11: Soleil Nyirabyiza:	
How to Be Confident For the Future	125
Chapter 12: Ann-Marie McCann:	
How Hope Can Bring Provision	135
Afterward	147
Additional Information and Resources	151
Discussion Questions For a Book Club or Discussion Group	153
Biographies	157
About the Author	163
Other Books by the Author	165
Acknowledgements	167
Speaker Bio	169
Offers	171

# Introduction

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I have lived in Townsville in North Queensland for over 30 years. A while back, I was reflecting on the number of truly inspiring women I have met in Townsville; some in my local church, some in other churches and some as colleagues through my previous workplace. I was astounded and inspired by the resilience and tenacity of woman to keep going and to hold on to hope for a better future, even in overwhelming circumstances.

I decided I would approach these women and see if they would be prepared to share some of their life story to bring hope and inspiration to other people – perhaps struggling with their own challenges. I suggested I could interview them, transcribe their words and craft them into their chapter. A couple of the women opted to write their own stories without the interview process. Most have been interviewed and a version of their stories now makes up the chapters in this book in their own words.

We all need inspiration that hope is possible and that we can achieve amazing things – despite the challenges that can happen to us.

I want to sincerely thank the women who have been open about their life experiences and how hope has been part of their journey

and for their bravery in sharing their personal challenges with readers. Their stories of how hope has evolved are found in each chapter, outlined here. Thank you:

- Samantha Leonoski, for your courage and determination overcoming childhood abuse, foster care and health challenges and thriving in life.
- Karene Gravener, for sharing your journey with Cerebral Palsy and being an advocate for others with disabilities.
- Julie Mengel, for your determination to never give up on your dreams as a single parent for many years, overcoming a difficult childhood and battling health issues.
- Sharon Henderson, for pressing into God after domestic violence, raising seven children as a single mother and caring for a child with multiple disabilities.
- Ruth\*, for shifting from being a victim of childhood abuse to being an overcomer full of faith and peace with children with rare medical conditions.
- Rhonda Emonson, for moving forward with unexpected and life altering injuries to completing studies and now being able to share part of her story to encourage others.
- Amanda Nickson, for sharing your journey with dyslexia, anxiety and depression and a belief that you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you.
- Uma Rani Turimella, who has endured devastating grief during the COVID-19 pandemic, and yet has found that the joy of the Lord is her strength.
- Jill Sutcliffe Everett, who as a single female has boldly travelled to Iran and Turkey where God called her to missions, and has found her own path, defying some expectations.

<sup>\*</sup> Ruth is a pseudonym chosen by one of the women in this book who wished to keep her identity private.

#### Introduction

- Jenni Seden, who has known the hopelessness of a loved one's suicide and has found comfort in a God who treasures her every tear.
- Soleil Nyirabyiza, who has known the isolation of moving to a new country as a refugee, struggled with cultural differences, trying to fit in and has found her confidence and identity in a renewed relationship with God.
- Ann-Marie McCann, who has learned to trust God for provision in tough circumstances and is eager to see what God has for her to do on her next assignment.

At the end of each woman's chapter, I have added a couple of questions to consider, which I trust will help make connections between the chapter, yourself and your situation.

Two verses continue to resonate with me on the topic of hope. These are:

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." (Rom 15:13)

"Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer." (Rom 12:12)

It is my prayer that you may overflow with hope from the inspirational stories of these women. It is also my prayer that every reader will have hope for their eternal future.

"I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people." (Eph 1:18)

# Chapter 1

# Samantha Leonoski

# How Does Hope Bring Transformation?





My biological mother, Vonette Leonard, gave birth to me at Royal North Shore hospital in St Leonards, Sydney. It was a close call as I nearly arrived in the back of a combi van which at the time she was living in. She left me at the hospital claiming that she wasn't ready to have a child to raise and I spent my first two years being cared for by my Aunty Berris and Nana Esma.

After two years, my mum decided to collect me, punching my aunty in the face in the hallway, reefing me out of her arms and we were off to live a life of varied adventures. I did not know any different

when I was a small child growing up in these circumstances, but it was a life of abuse of all kinds – homelessness and poverty. I learnt how to survive. My start to life was precarious and full of ways to overcome adversity.

I lived with my alcoholic biological mother until I was eight years old. I had four sisters, however, my eldest sister never lived with me at any stage of my life. She was left at the hospital and taken into my Nana's care. She had a serious skin disorder known commonly as a "cotton wool" baby. This proved too difficult for my mum who, at that time, was 23 years old.

I'm the second eldest of five girls. I was the eldest to my three younger sisters who I looked after as best I could – even though I was a child myself. We lived in the bush, refuges, squatted in abandoned houses until finally, we were eligible to move into a housing commission home in Byron Bay. It wasn't long after this time that a lot of the homeless people of Byron Bay would come and stay in our home.

My sister Olivia and I attended Byron Bay Primary School as much as we could. I loved school as it was where I could play all sorts of sport at lunch and escape the responsibilities of looking after my younger sisters. Olivia and I would go out to steal food for everyone and make cubby houses in the bush for a place to get away. I have memories of going to the back of *Woolworths* where they'd throw out their old produce and we'd get what we could. On other occasions, we'd walk into *Woolworths* and fill a trolley full of food and then walk straight out. No one ever stopped us and to my knowledge, never suspected us of stealing.

My mother was rich every fortnight from welfare payments that seemed to all go on alcohol. She turned into a nasty person and I

would find myself standing up to her. I put salt and pepper in her *schooner* once at the main beach pub. She humiliated me and poured the beer all over me and made a big scene. I had to wash off in the surf and something in that moment changed for me.

In my mind, I was trying to stop her from drinking the poison that in turn would ruin our life. Mum was evidently kicked out of every pub in Byron Bay and knew the local constable all too well. There was a time where she stabbed me with a fork when I was trying to protect one of my sisters from another drunken beating. There were other times where she burnt the back of my hand with her cigarette butt. To this day, I have a constant reminder of hardship every time I see my burn scars – this can be very humbling during difficult times.

My mother was very paranoid about doctors so we would have a nurse visit our home to give us our immunisations and look in on my youngest two sisters who had complications. My sister SR was born brain damaged and with water on her brain. SR had surgery to implant a shunt to drain the water from her brain. She was constantly bashed by my mother to stop her crying. There was an episode where Mum threw her against the wall and then down the stairs. The final straw before SR was taken away into other permanent care was when she was raped at two years old and required surgery. Her rapist, who was a homeless junky, visited our housing commission home for shelter like many others. He ended up hanging himself in Grafton Jail. My youngest sister, Shana, had to wear leg braces as she was born with a turned in foot and required surgery to correct it.

One time, I was playing chase with Olivia and she was running after me and I stood behind the bedroom door waiting for the precise moment to slam the door in her face. And that's exactly

what happened, however the doorknob hit her straight in the middle of her forehead giving her a massive lump. The lump receded and then two black eyes appeared on her face just before school photos. We did our best to try and hide them so we could still get photos, but it was suspected that something else untoward went on. I found this an opportunity for me to reveal what a turbulent environment we lived in, so I lied in an interview at school on that account. I said that Mum had hit her. Mum would never hit Olivia as she was her favourite. Olivia was the only child that didn't challenge her.

Not too much longer after this event the day came when my class was in the media room watching *Free Willy* and I was asked to go to the office where waiting for me was my ticket out of my current life with my mum.

While reflecting on who or what gave me hope for the future, there were many impactful individuals that God has put on my path who have given me hope and there have been crucial interactions for me to make certain choices. My sisters and I went through the court system and my mother even turned up for a session in Ballina where she stood up and proclaimed that she was raped by her brother-in-law growing up. She was told to sit down but continued to shout and was removed from the court.

This was the first time I witnessed my mum fight for us. It was too late. All three of us were put into the custody of my Aunty Berris (Aunty B), her husband (Uncle T) and my cousins in Toowoomba. This was a great time as I had boy cousins to play sport with, a huge yard, delicious meals and family time. Plus, I had a loving aunty and Nana who were so patient and kind.

We went to church and I attended a Christian school (Christian Outreach College) where I respected my teachers as they seemed more caring and compassionate and somewhat different to what I'd known in my previous life. I also delved into reading. I couldn't get enough of books. I'd have up to five books on the go at once and would sit high up in a tree and would read for hours on end. I also discovered a side of me that investigated things in the world from a scientific view. I'd collect butterflies and insects and find out their scientific name. I found so much joy in knowledge. I just couldn't get enough information and I felt safe and supported in this learning. I dove deep into studying the Bible at this young age and began my relationship with God. All I wanted to do was to help other people and be the best person I could be. I was always positive which later I learnt can be a protective mechanism and you can slip into toxic positivity. I still needed to be able to deal with conflict which came much later in life.

I played soccer, basketball, tennis and did athletics, softball and cricket. I excelled in anything sport and had so many best friends. My sports teacher, Mrs Harch, had taught Kathy Freeman and saw great potential in me too. Her daughter, Lana, was one of my best friends. We played representative soccer and were great at running. Pastor Hands was my headmaster at the school I attended and he'd often give me tips and valuable pointers that I've hung onto my whole life. At my local church, Pastor Shelton was also someone I listened to and took advice on how to transform my life into something and into someone worthy of helping others.

Three years into this life, the beast of abuse raised its ugly head once again and my sister Olivia revealed that she'd been sexually abused by Uncle T. Subconsciously, I took this on as not being able to protect her and felt guilty for this for a good chunk of my life. And so off we were again to yet another home. My guard went back up.

Some foster parents were incredible and others were in it for the money. There was abuse and addiction all through this system. I learnt to protect my sisters as best I could. Not many families wanted us three girls together, but we did our best not to get separated as long as possible.

From the age of eight to 13 years, I was in and out of 13 different foster homes. My sisters and I never returned to my mother's care. My sisters and I were split up shortly after living with my Aunty B and her family for three years. There was and still is a shortage of foster carers so we had no chance of sticking together.

At 13, I was finally placed with a family in Byron Bay – or rather Suffolk Park. Sue White and Peter Emery were my new parents. Both ex-Navy, I was faced with a regimental way of living. This was a catalyst time for me and the beginning of something great. Structure and stability is what they offered and I thrived on that. They hadn't had children together and they really didn't want any more foster children, but the department was desperate and pleaded just to have me for the weekend.

That was the start of my new life. I walked in with a bit of a hardened attitude and stated that I wanted a dog, I only wore name brands and I didn't eat chocolate, I only ate carob. Sue and Peter stated that there were three rules: Don't steal, don't lie and the rest we'll make up as we go along.

That weekend we all grew to know one another more and they softened and so did I. To this day, I still call them Mum and Dad – although not directly but in reference. Although Dad sadly passed away peacefully in his sleep at the tender age of 59.

From the support, encouragement and unconditional love I received from my new parents I decided that I could live out my dreams and in order to do this I had to start with small goals. I attended Byron Bay High School and I had a Maths and an English teacher that saw my potential and wouldn't let me just fly under the radar and not work towards my full capabilities. I continued to excel academically and more so in sport. I made the State and National teams for running and soccer. This gave me scope to gain a sports scholarship at a private school in Lismore called Trinity Catholic College. With my achievements, I told myself I'd focus on education, career and buying a home and having a family.

I made it into the shadow Australian Matilda's soccer team at the age of 15. A season later, I then discovered I had significant scoliosis. I had an S-shaped spine with 53 and 47 degrees curvature. The curves were so severe that surgery had to occur within a month. My future soccer dreams of representing the Matilda's were shattered.

At the age of 17, I had two Harrington rods inserted on the sides of my spine with bolts and screws to hold them in place. The rods were supposed to stay in for life. I even grew 3cm after the eighthour surgery. I couldn't bend or twist and walked around with perfect posture.

After I graduated from school, I figured it best to get a career where I was able to retreat to a desk to be ergonomically correct with a combination of outside work to remain relatively active. The surgeon had suggested to always lead an active life as this gave me structural strength and integrity for my spine and had saved me from a more serious condition.

I was successful in gaining a traineeship with surveyors in Lismore. This position also allowed me to venture further into surveying for a council job. Three years after the surgery, I had a horrible infection throughout my spine and the rods were removed after three more surgeries to flush the infection.

I then set my intentions on property ownership. I worked three jobs to save for the purchase of my first home when I was 20. I met my first daughter's father at this time and had Lydia when I was 23. Lydia went to full time day-care at five weeks old so that I could continue to work full time and uphold the mortgage and keep our little piece of Australia. This occurred due to me securing a stable job.

Shortly afterwards, her father and I separated. We didn't have the same morals and values to raise a child together and I never wanted to become a statistic of a broken family, but conversely, I didn't want my daughter to endure an unhappy household.

It was revealed to me – ironically after a Pinktober Pedal 50km cycle ride for cancer – that I in fact had thyroid cancer. The director of my branch at council, Debra Howe, had been through her own ordeal with cancer and supported me having time to heal after treatment and surgery – along with offering her research of food recipes to combat cancerous cells and positive affirmations to assist with recovery and a healthy mindset.

Throughout this time, I then had another evaluation period of life during my sick leave and chose to apply to several universities for full time study in order to be a sports teacher. Coincidently, I chose the University of the Sunshine Coast to study a dual degree in Secondary Education and Science. I'd gained confidence and assurance that I was capable of university studies through all my

support networks and I had faith I was able to succeed. Uni was tough at times and I met a few demons and anxiety blocks that I had to conquer in order to overcome and prevail. Constant self-reflection and having hope that God had my back got me through the many challenges.

During uni, I had a tutor that recognised and respected my papers I submitted for my teaching degree subjects and he encouraged me in my final year that doing a remote placement would be advantageous due to my life experiences. His name was Kenneth and he stated that I could either be a missionary or mercenary during my time in a remote community that had such little to no access to opportunities.

After four years of university studies, my daughter and I moved to Doomadgee due to me successfully acquiring a permanent teaching placement. During this turbulent yet exciting time, I learnt not to be narrow-minded and have an appreciation for the doors of opportunity to success that potentially opened up. I wanted to show initiative in areas of my life I felt compelled to travel towards. Insightfully and through mindfulness and meditation, I have proven to be quite the strategist to systematically have a goal to work towards constantly. If something changes along the way, it's on me and my ability to overcome a setback and create a renewed goal. Constant management of dealing with failing attempts enables me to be grateful for that opportunity overall. It's all about attitude.

Doomadgee was an experience next to none, but nothing surprised me. My daughter Lydia and I endured severe prejudice, and she was subjected to bullying and saw me when I had my wrist sprained by a student when I was trying to apprehend a weapon. Lydia witnessed a baby being delivered at the front gates of the school. One time on playground duty, I felt a cloud of dust rise as a crowd was running and a passing student informed me that they had

Lydia. I immediately went to the playground where my daughter had been cornered and rocks thrown at her calling her all the names under the sun. She was seven and didn't quite understand what was taking place. She was encouraged by other students to bash others in order to have friends. Lydia was even tripped over, held down and strangled during a cross country run.

Although these events occurred, we managed to stay there much longer than most and I was convinced to finally move when one of my fellow teachers had her horses set free and some mutilated and she was cornered and came very close to being raped. Other teachers had their car windows smashed and things taken.

Furthermore, students would make weapons like shanks, spears and slingshots and hide them in the gutters for easy access. Classrooms had to be locked and I still found myself years later in other schools ensuring doors are locked properly three times over. My saving grace was being invited by the Elder Aunties of the community to join them at church on Sundays. This is where I found myself enjoying cups of tea and listening to their voices bellowing the choruses of old tunes I'd remembered from visits to the Salvation Army with my Nana Esma when I was a child. It felt safe. I donated a great deal of clothes, gym equipment and even a trampoline to the community. I could sense these niceties were welcomed with open arms like I was to the church. I didn't know that this was a Brethren Church initially, and I was the first unmarried women to come to their church, so that was something I cherished.

When I moved from Doomadgee to Townsville for my next teaching placement, I decided to attend a church that was recommended by the Elders which was one they visited if they went to Townsville for health, school or family reasons. Here I connected with more people of like minds. I continued to meet more wonderous people

in the Townsville community, including Amanda Nickson. It's amazing who is placed in your life at certain times and there are a select few in life who I've felt safe to reveal my past to. There have also been a couple of times where I have mistakenly told people I naively trusted and they have either run for the hills and never wanted to have anything else to do with me or expressed pity and labelled me incorrectly as unstable. Wanting to be accepted over the years, these responses have made me very cautious of what and who I tell my story to, as ignorance can breed fear. Another protective strategy of mine.

It is this time that I feel comfortable and have let down many walls to acknowledge that perhaps my story can do exactly what I've always wanted... To help others. Thanks to Amanda for planting the seed to share my story so many years ago. I've considered and started many times but to no deadline and would put it aside when times got busy. Fortunately, I've always kept diaries since before I was put into foster care and all throughout my life to date.

While in Townsville, and a year before my boomerang transfer back to the coast, my dad passed away. The night before, we'd spoken about the importance of putting family first and me being able to make his 60th birthday in the August. The next morning, I went for my usual trek up Castle Hill where I had one of the regular walkers say good morning and point at the stars and said it was some special alignment. At that moment, I thought how much Dad would appreciate that as he studied astronomy as one of his interests. I learnt later that it was that exact time that he died. It struck me that such a knowledgeable human can just be gone and I've always said I wished he'd written a book. He had helped me so much over the years in his own way. He had a way and always meant for the best. He believed that you can always better yourself no matter what background you come from. Mum supports this

and says that an individual ultimately has the power to make their own choices.

A year later, I was transferred to a teaching role on the Gold Coast. It took a good amount of sacrifice and hard work and I was able to set up a home for my daughter and I. I joined a running and walking group called *Twin Towns Runners and Social Walkers* who I consider family. It's so very comforting to be surrounded by supportive and reliable people and in this club I found some more lifelong friendships.

While in this group, I met my now husband, Andrew Schostakowski. He is everything I've desired and more. My heart is truly his as there were sparks from the very first time I set eyes on him after a running meet at Tallebudgera Creek. It may sound cliché, but it was love at first sight. I had a sudden feeling that I would marry him. It felt so organic, and I was instantly filled with admiration for him as he loyally respected and showed compassion and love for me. We instantly started to build a foundation together. He is my rock and I'm safe. He always supports my need for betterment and continues to encourage me to follow my dreams. With his intelligence, he has taught me to think more critically and I've been able to manage situations of conflict with greater perspective and awareness – whereas in the past, I'd shut down and move on.

Andrew and I are now married and share a beautiful daughter, Evelyn. We decided to create a new surname by combining parts of both our surnames and to essentially start life afresh. Andrew and I are now Mr and Mrs Leonoski. We have been fortunate enough with God's grace and favour to endeavour in starting a new family tree. I'm currently on maternity leave from my teaching position on the Gold Coast. I'm now residing in Abu Dhabi due to Andrew's work.

It is at this time where I'm blessed enough to be able to have time off to be a full-time mother. I never had this time with Lydia but that was a very different life back then. I'm so very grateful and appreciative of this most important and empowering time in our lives. This would never have been able to happen if I didn't make those initial sacrifices and worked hard and endured and conquered the many adversities along the way. God has always been there paving the way.

Looking back on my past now, it has been pivotal that I find myself victorious and not a victim of the system. I attest my victorious attitude to having faith in God's plan along with my many positive influences of which I only mentioned but a few. Additionally, my thirst to learn and listen to podcasts, read literature and conduct research to better myself in order to be the person worthy of this life and to help others know their own potential and worth.

My current goal is to begin postgraduate studies in a Doctor of Medicine here in Abu Dhabi at Khalifa University. In the meantime, I will continue to immerse myself in motherhood and be fully present in these precious moments with my baby daughter. Life is so very fleeting. It's what you do with it that counts.

I believe that in every adverse situation there's always hope and there's a reason why you need to endure hardships in your life – to build resilience and solidify your worth. Your story may very well help others someday.

#### Samantha's favourite scriptures:

"I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from?

2 My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.

3 He will not let your foot slip—
he who watches over you will not slumber;
4 indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

5 The Lord watches over you—the Lord is your shade at your right hand; 6 the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.

7 The Lord will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life; 8 the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore." (Psalm 121)

"6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

(Philippians 4:6-7)

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law." (Galatians 5:22-23)

"I can do all this through him who gives me strength."
(Philippians 4:13)

### **Questions to consider:**

- 1. Is there someone I could share my current struggle with who could help me and bring me hope?
- 2. Is there someone that sharing some of my own story with could encourage them and give them reason to hope?