

Yasmin Cunningham: Faith built on the waters of a storm

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Yasmin Cunningham is no stranger to maneuvering through the curveballs and circumstances of everyday life. Throughout her journey, she has experienced moments of happiness, but she has also experienced storms and feelings of sadness, uncertainty and the lack of faith to move forward.

Twelve years ago, during a hot summer day in August, Cunningham witnessed an unforeseen storm that turned her life upside down but prepared her for the woman she would become 12 years later: A woman who deeply became rooted in her faith with God.

As a child, summer months were those that parents allowed children to play outside with friends in the neighborhood, to laugh and to enjoy moments of being a child because, after all, they do not last long. Cunningham was no different.

"My sister (Jasmine), my cousin and I would walk the streets and just play with the kids outside until my grandmother or mother would call us inside to eat and do homework," Cunningham said. "The other kids would make fun of us for having a curfew but my mom did not play that. We knew when those lights on the corner flashed on, we had to hurry and get inside."

The New Orleans native would spend summers at her grandmother's house, which was only a few blocks away from her own home, and the place where all her family would come together to spend quality time.

Young, wild and free, Cunningham never thought that her routine summer days of spending time with family members and playing outside with her friends as a child would become a distant memory at the forceful hands of Mother Nature.

On Aug. 29, 2005, however, the cherished family moments and the childhood friendships that were created went swirling

through the flood waters and 140-mile per hour wind produced by Hurricane Katrina. For Cunningham, a storm that lasted a period of hours changed everything that she knew and understood about her life.

"Every year, in late August, I always think of my family," Cunningham said. "It reminds me of how Katrina changed my entire life. It reminds me why I no longer value material things because they can all be gone within hours."



Yasmin Cunningham

Cunningham, 24, grew up in the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans with her sister in a single-parent household. She knew that hurricane season was a normal when it came to living in the Big Easy.

In August 2005, Cunningham was starting her first week of eighth grade at St. David Middle School. Two days before the storm hit, she watched her mother tirelessly pack their car to evacuate the city.

"I didn't understand how serious the storm was because in the past, we stayed home during hurricane season," Cunningham said. "I remember waving goodbye to my friends in the neighborhood and cracking a joke about seeing them in a few days. Everyone treated evacuation like a mini-vacation."

This evacuation, however, was not her usual "mini-vacation". It became the start to the storm that she would face

to become the woman she is today.

After Cunningham's family evacuated and spent more than 20 hours on the highway, they stopped at a hotel in Houston, Texas.

To take her mind off things for a while, Cunningham decided to hang out with some of her cousins in another room. When she returned to her room, she noticed her mother and grandmother crying, along with her other family members visibly sad.

"I never saw them cry before, so, I knew it was bad," Cunningham said. "They pointed at the TV, and what I saw was New Orleans filled with water, bodies floating, and everyone in the room trying to find our family members who decided to stay in New Orleans."

From that moment, Cunningham's mother, Rosemary, took charge of holding their family together by discussing the next moves they would make.

As for Cunningham, her life that was now turned upside down led her to question her faith in God.

"I struggled with my relationship with God," Cunningham said. I doubted Him entirely. I didn't even open up to my mom about how I was feeling but I felt that God didn't exist. We lost everything and had to start from scratch. It was hard, and it was the first time I had to learn how to develop a personal relationship with God."

Things continued to change for Cunningham and her family. They moved from Houston to Daleville, Alabama, to stay with some other family members for three months.

What more could happen to Cunningham than losing all of her childhood experiences in a

catastrophic storm?

After a brief stint in Daleville Alabama, Cunningham's mother's job led to her moving she and her sister to Jackson, Mississippi, forcing Cunningham to leave more of her family members and to embark upon a new transition.

During her stay in Jackson, Cunningham and her family went back to New Orleans to visit their home after New Orleans city officials gave people the opportunity to enter damaged neighborhoods to recover their belongings.

But for Cunningham, seeing her home for the first time since before the storm was a very emotional experience.

"I had to put on long sleeves,

tennis shoes, masks, gloves and a hat," Cunningham said. "When I walked in, I remember swallowing constantly to prevent myself from crying."

"Everything was covered in mildew. It was dark, muggy, wet and damaged. I remember thinking that my whole childhood was gone and my memory of our first house was filled with darkness."

New transitions became the norm for Cunningham and her family. With each move, it felt like things were getting harder before they were becoming easier.

"My mother did everything she could to make my sister and me feel at home," Cunningham said. "She surprised us with

new décor for our new place and even bought us a cell phone so that we had little room to complain about what we didn't have."

As Cunningham adjusted to Jackson, she would face another storm during the storm. One of her favorite cousins, Randy, was killed in a car accident.

"It was so hard because while living in Daleville, Randy brought me and my sister to school each day and cracked jokes to keep us smiling," Cunningham said. "I could not believe it because it seemed like nothing good was ever coming our way."

In Cunningham's eyes, things were going from bad to

See Cunningham on 13A

2017 WellsFest, WellsFest Art Night and Golf Tourney benefit Methodist Children's Homes

JANS – The 34th WellsFest will be held Saturday, Sept. 30, at Jamie Fowler Boyll Park next to Smith-Wills Stadium on Lakeland Drive. Presented by Wells United Methodist Church, WellsFest 2017 will donate all proceeds to the Methodist Children's Homes of Mississippi.



A'AKEELA will perform (solo) prior to the auction from 5:30 p.m. until 6:40 p.m. at WellsFest Art Night Sept. 26 and A'AKEELA AND THE BEATS (R&B, Funk) will perform on the East Stage from 12:45-1:30 PM on Sept. 30. For a full list of performers, visit www.wellsfest.org.

Through on-campus residences, foster care and adoption, Methodist Children's Homes helps neglected or abused children surmount their challenges and mature into productive, satisfying lives.

The event is family-friendly, alcohol- and drug-free with no admission or parking fee.

Brenda Ferguson, chair of the 2017 festival, said, "The church is dedicating this year's WellsFest to our beloved pastor of 48 years, Keith Tonkel, who passed away this year.

Our 2017 logo for posters and T-shirts includes one of Keith's favorite sayings, 'Always love, always.' Among his many contributions to our state, Keith nurtured WellsFest from small beginnings in the 1980s to becoming a major charitable fundraising event that countless people support."

In honor of Keith, the 5K WellsFest race has been renamed the "Wells Done Run," a tribute to his life and long service at Wells. Tonkel died in March at age 81.

The Rev. Heather Hensarling was recently appointed pastor at Wells United Methodist.

"With this WellsFest and all WellsFests to come, we'll have Keith in our hearts," Hensarling said. "We will keep alive his vision of WellsFest as a gift of love to our state and to the service organizations, which receive each festival's proceeds. WellsFest is a wonderful way for families to have a day of fun for not a lot of money while helping people in need."

"Methodist Children's Homes is delighted and grateful that Wells Church has chosen us as the beneficiary for this year's WellsFest," said Devon Loggins, CEO and president. "The proceeds will allow us to renovate several small apartments at our Jackson campus for clients who have aged out of the foster care system, but still need help in making their way into adulthood and into their careers."

For more information about WellsFest, please call 601-353-0658 or visit www.wellsfest.org.