

# I Am the Master of My Fate; I Am the Captain of My Soul.

— from *Invictus*

Poet, William Ernest Henley, wrote *Invictus* from his hospital bed. He had contracted tuberculosis of the bone at age 12. In 1875, by the time he was 25, it had progressed all the way to his feet. Doctors told him they had to remove his most severely infected leg immediately, and that if he wanted to live, they would need to remove the other one as well.

Henley gave the doctors permission to remove just one leg, to the knee. The other one stays, he told them. *Invictus* is the Latin word for *undefeated*. Henley went on to live an active, productive life as a poet and a publisher. And...he kept his other leg.

Life is filled with challenges. While it might not seem plausible at the moment, life's greatest opportunities are often hidden in adversity.

Nyla Williams is in the seventh grade at Thurgood Marshall Fundamental Middle School in St. Petersburg. She has probably faced more hardship and adversity in her young 12 years, than many adults three times her age. Born into a woeful broken-family environment, her aunt Katherine and aunt Maxie took her in and brought structure, stability and most importantly, love into her life.

What Nyla has been through in the past doesn't really matter. What she is doing now is defining her. The one part of her past that she does bring to her present life, is her love of dogs.

"I have had dogs all of my life," she told us. She remembers her first dog, a Golden Retriever named *Butterscotch*. And even though the circumstances surrounding Butterscotch's death are sad, that part of the dog's life is in Nyla's past. She simply accepts the circumstances, and

has been able to move on.

It comes as no surprise to anyone who knows Nyla that she has set her sights on a career working with animals.

"I want to get a scholarship to attend the University of Florida veterinary school," she said. With her straight A record, perfect attendance, and college-level reading skills, she is well on her way. Her tenacity, poise and maturity (well beyond her years) should just about cinch it.

After settling in with her aunts in Gulfport, Nyla went in search of volunteer work to get some experience actually working with dogs. She called several Bay Area shelters, each time receiving the same answer: You're too young.

Undeterred, Nyla kept her eyes, ears and heart open. One day she happened upon *Pasadena Pet Motel*, a daycare, boarding, grooming and training facility in South Pasadena. Kristen Triplett, co-owner of the facility, was beyond impressed with the tiny young stranger standing before her.

"I remember thinking that she was small, but there was such a large presence about her. She and several of the dogs we introduced her to, took to each other right away, which was really pretty amazing."

Nyla reminded Kristen of her own daughter, Samantha, a dog trainer and the owner of *St. Pete K9*.

For her school project in the Gifted Studies Program at Thurgood Marshall, Nyla chose dogs as the subject matter. The project entailed creating a video and Power Point presentation. But first, she had to find someone willing to be her main interview subject.

She chose Samantha Triplett.

"Nyla, whom I had never met, called one day out of the blue, told me about her assignment and said that she wanted to interview me. We decided to meet at Starbucks for the interview," said Sam.

Nyla added, matter of factly, "I wasn't nervous about meeting Sam or doing the interview. I just dressed professionally, fixed my hair and came prepared with my notebook."

Later, after the interview, Sam could not get Nyla out of her mind. "I told mom that there was something very special about her and the connection she had with dogs."

Kristen and Sam both agreed that Nyla could spend more time at Pasadena Pet Motel, learning the ropes, helping out wherever needed, and especially being around dogs. Then, something remarkable happened.

Nyla has a sixth sense about her and an uncanny natural ability to read a dog's body language. Sam recognized this, and under her tutelage, Nyla began working in obedience training with some of the dogs that Pasadena Pet Motel fosters.

Fostering is something the Triplets regularly do to help out local shelters like *Pet Pal Animal Shelter* and rescue groups like *Florida Great Pyrenees Rescue*. One of those dogs, a Pit/Hound mix named *Peanut*, was a foster dog from Pet Pal.

Peanut was uncomfortable with anyone but Nyla. He had met his share of potential adopters over the last year, between the shelter and his temporary foster home at Pasadena Pet Motel. So Peanut had developed behavioral issues and for whatever reason, responded to no one — until Nyla. *Continued on following page.* 





Each day, Nyla worked with Peanut several times a day. She is happy to report that Peanut was recently adopted. As we were discussing the magnitude of her efforts, Nyla looked out towards an open field, seemingly contemplating what she would say next. Instead, she simply cocked her head slightly, shrugged her shoulders and smiled.

Sam, who started working with dogs when she was 13, has been mentoring Nyla for about seven months. While working on her associates degree, Sam worked for a veterinary hospital in Jacksonville. She interned at a Jacksonville Schutzhund club, *Marienhof Kennels*, where she developed a passion for sport dogs. Sam also trained at *Tarheel Canine Academy* in Sanford, North Carolina. During the six-month-long course, she earned her Master Training certifications in Professional Obedience Training, Behavior Modification, Personal Protection, Event Protection, Tracking & Trailing and Explosive & Narcotic Detection. She studied and worked with some of the best trainers in the country, gaining hands-on experience with police, sport and protection dogs. That eventually lead her to open her own business, *St. Pete K9*, which specializes in personal protection and obedience training.

We invited Sam to perform demonstrations at *Responsible Dog Ownership Day*



in October during *Florida's Largest Home Show*. It was there that we met Nyla for the first time. The pair drew the largest crowd of the day, as they silently worked with the dogs onstage, preparing for their presentation.

In addition to her work at Pasadena Pet Motel after school, Nyla is in the 4-H Club dog program, *Crazy for Canines*. The weekly classes are held at the Dog Training Club of St. Petersburg with training in Rally, Obedience and Junior Showmanship. Nyla works with *Colt*, Kristen Triplett's own dog she adopted from *Florida German Shepherd Rescue*. Colt is also a therapy dog, certified by *Therapy Dogs International*.

Samantha is a pretty amazing person herself. Patient and firm when handling and training dogs, she has earned the respect of her peers, many of whom are male. No doubt she is very good at what she does in a physically demanding

1) Sam hands Nyla *Tatanka's* leash as he begins the tracking exercise. *Tatanka* was originally purchased from a breeder by an 80-year-old woman who lived in a South Florida condo. She kept the dog in a crate most of his life, eventually relinquishing the dog she could not handle to *Florida German Shepherd Rescue*. *Tatanka* had some pretty heavy-duty behavioral issues when Sam and her mom met him. So much so that Kristen wasn't sure they should take the dog in as a foster. Sam insisted that they were not going to leave without the dog, and that she would work with him. Today, after having worked through all of his issues, *Tatanka* is good with kids, other dogs and has been trained in Obedience, Track and Bite work. He suffers from hip dysplasia and myasthenia gravis, a neuromuscular disease.

2) Nyla praises *Tatanka* at the end of the tracking exercise. 3) Nyla, Sam and *Niko* head out for a tracking exercise. *Niko* is 11 months old. He and Nyla are in training together.

profession that involves acting as a decoy during bite work. (Translation: she puts on bite gear, acts like a bad guy, is chased by a huge dog — generally a German Shepherd or Belgian Malinois — and is apprehended in the jaws of the dog until a handler commands release). Even with the bite gear on, it can still hurt. "But, you get used to it," she said.

Nelson Mandela, imprisoned for 27 years in South Africa, recited *Invictus* to himself and fellow prisoners as a way to bolster their spirits, inspiring them to press onward. With her aunt Katherine and aunt Maxie providing a stable home life — and people like Kristen, Samantha and Clarke Triplett in her world — Nyla will surely press onward...and upward. 🐾



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