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## **It's All About Perspective**

**By VIKKI PRYOR; as told to PATRICIA R. OLSEN**

I WAS born in Chicago and lived on the West Side, a tough neighborhood, for five years before moving to a suburb.

I'm the oldest of four. My parents made us try things on our own, even when we might be afraid or not want to. In their mind, because we were African-American, to make progress and to fully participate in society we had to make sure we had a seat at the table. Later I understood how courageous they were.

I went to several colleges. I started at Blackburn College in Illinois but wanted a bigger school, so I left. Then I got married and moved to New York City and attended Bronx Community College. Afterward I moved upstate and completed college at the State University of New York at Buffalo. I got my law degree there as well.

Law school changed my life. There's nothing like the training. You learn how to think analytically and critically. I became a trial lawyer specializing in tax law in the Department of Treasury in Chicago. Practicing law was an important part of my development, but I wanted to take what I knew and do other things with a range of people. I went back to school and got an M.B.A. at night.

When I applied for jobs in business, [Allstate](#) was the only company that would hire me because

I didn't have industry experience. They took a risk. I started in product development in the life insurance division and then moved into direct response.

I divorced when I was in my 30s, after my son was born. Having a child was a turning point in my life and a catalyst. I began to understand compassion, strategy and planning — all the big concepts. My son turns 20 this summer. Being the mother of a 20-year-old means I've had two full-time jobs for the last 20 years. It's difficult to be a working parent. You have a knot in your stomach every day when you have to get to day care.

Recently, when our subsidiary S.USA held an event on financial empowerment, a number of our female attendees thanked me for starting at 9:30 a.m. One person had suggested starting at 7:30. I said no, some people have to drop their children off at day care. Why would we add to that pressure? Parents are trying to present themselves as professional, as capable and competent workers, while still trying to take care of their children. We need to make more progress in the workplace to accommodate families.

Every single job I've taken has been a risk, because I've been fearful that I might not accomplish what I want, that I'd let my organization down. But I've had wonderful people along the way who have given me feedback that has grounded me. They have helped me keep things in perspective.

I believe in standing up for the underdog. At one company I worked for, a few executives wanted to stop providing \$6 in dinner money to employees who worked overtime. They said it wasn't worth the paperwork it took. I challenged them about who the recipients were. The human resources department conducted a survey and found out that most of the recipients were female employees making less than \$15,000 a year. I said: "Do you realize how important

this money is to those people? They might bring a cheese sandwich for dinner and pocket the \$6 for boots for their child.”

My grandmother, who had only a third-grade education, had my mother when she was very young. She was also a welder during World War II and brought me up to believe I could accomplish anything. I didn't understand how much she influenced me until she died. I had no financial help for college and I know what that feels like, so I decided to establish a prize in her honor to help deserving African-American students at four schools. The recipients have begun their own network to keep in touch with one another.

*As told to Patricia R. Olsen.*

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