

WORTHY

2021 Worthy Women's Scholarship – Finalist Essay

Cleopatra Williams

From a very young age, I knew I wanted to be a professional ballerina. To attain this goal, I spent over two decades training intensely, remaining focused, making daily and life-altering sacrifices. After becoming Houston Ballet's first and only African American Clara in their production of The Nutcracker, traveling the world performing for thousands and becoming a staple in Houston's performing arts community, many truths became apparent. As one of very few African Americans in a predominately Caucasian field, my career and experience taught me a vital lesson— Representation, Diversity, and Inclusion matter.

At the peak of my career, I suffered several devastating injuries and began to venture into other career fields. With years of self-discovery, I knew my next venture would need to impact the lives of others while, in return, changing and fulfilling my life. Through self-education and an innate curiosity for knowledge, I began learning about the racial disparities in maternal morbidity and mortality. Upon further inquiry, I was shocked to discover that African American pregnant women are three times more likely to die in childbirth than their white counterparts. African American infants are two times more likely to die than their white counterparts. I then spoke with the women in my family about their birthing experiences. The more I listened, the angrier I became; until I realized herein lied the opportunity to channel that anger into action. I eventually trained as a doula and attended my first birth. It was there that I realized I wanted to be a midwife. In August 2019, I met Jennie Joseph, a seasoned midwife who owns two birthing centers in Central Florida and the only black-owned midwifery school in the nation. Her centers are dedicated to successfully improving birth outcomes for women of color. Immediately, I knew I wanted to carry the torch of building birth centers that model Joseph's "Easy Access" Prenatal Care Clinics around the nation. The very next week, I enrolled in Houston Community College and began my prerequisites. I've recently been accepted into the University of Houston's Second Degree Accelerated Nursing Program. Therefore, it's my goal to use my nursing degree and experience to get my Master's in Midwifery and become a skilled and competent Certified Nurse Midwife, serving those most in need.

After a year as a nurse in Labor & Delivery, I will apply for my Master's in Midwifery. I hope to build an easy-access birth center that caters to WOC who struggle to find affordable and natural maternal care. This birth center will include birthing suits, a clinic for neonatal visits, rooms for counseling and support groups for mothers struggling with breastfeeding and other issues. It's been proven that patients from marginalized populations benefit from having doctors and primary healthcare providers from marginalized populations. Now is the time for the richest country in the world to offer a more culturally responsive healthcare system. I look forward to joining the 3% of African American Midwives in America, changing the world and dismantling one unfortunate, but corrigible, statistic at a time.