

INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

CFEC's Claressa Hinton overcomes adversity to help children and families

By Aïda Rogers

Claressa Hinton learned early there would always be things she couldn't control. But that's not surprising for someone who moved between 30 and 40 times between ages two and 18, who sometimes didn't go to school at all because her parents couldn't get her there. It was a turbulent childhood marked by failing grades, a dearth of dreams, a paralyzing fear she wouldn't graduate from high school, and little of the structure she craved.

And yet.

Here she is in a new home she bought herself last spring from earnings helping children growing up like she did. Here she is, sitting on the plush mint-green sofa her daughter helped her choose when they moved in. And there they are in front of her – the two framed diplomas, tassels hanging from the top edge of each – reminding her that she can do whatever she wants if she tries hard enough. Claressa Hinton, who had to repeat third grade, who was told by a teacher that she could neither read nor write well, earned bachelor's and master's degrees. That's one degree more than that teacher, she'll tell you if you ask.



Claressa Hinton, MHA, CFEC Regional Liaison

“Even when I’m sitting here, I look at these things and think about how, whatever you’re determined to do, it’s a self thing,” she said. “Whatever intrinsic motivation you have, you’re the person who will determine how your story will end. You can’t tell how it will start, but you can tell how it will end.”

As a regional family liaison for the Carolina Family Engagement Center, a grant project housed in the SC School Improvement Council at the University of South Carolina's College of Education, Hinton shares her wisdom and experience with students, parents and teachers in the Midlands and Lowcountry of the state. Her message of intrinsic motivation has strengthened students growing up without parents, in poverty, in difficult neighborhoods. As a character coach at W.A. Perry Middle School in Columbia, she guided two troubled students from In-School Suspension (ISS) to become the valedictorian and salutatorian of their graduating class at C.A. Johnson High. Thanks to her skills, W.A. Perry's ISS numbers dropped so dramatically other schools came calling.

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"I wish you could have seen her in action," said Scott Sayers, assistant principal at W.A. Perry. "You'd see her in a circle of 10 kids. She tells about her life too, that she was a foster kid. She'll let them hear and they can relate. She would talk about how to handle situations and how to set goals. We are dealing with what the community tells them to do – 'somebody hits you, you hit them back.' We have to go against the grain and tell them not to hit back. She was able to do that and be authentic with the kids."

With CFEC, Hinton's work is focused more toward helping parents learn how to support their children's learning and development. As a parent, educator, and once-neglected child, she can instruct with authority.

"I explain to people that even though we don't know all the things that we should know when it comes to parenting, we can put our children in a position to win – if we give them the opportunity," Hinton said.

Her first rule? Give them structure.

“Structure is everything for children. If you develop good routines, stay on schedule, make sure they do their homework and don’t stay up late, they’ll learn best practices.”

What else? Reasoning.

Or as Hinton puts it, “Understanding the reason of why.” When you tell your children why it’s important to read, why academics are important, and what the results can be when you work hard in school, they’ll be more likely to try, she said.

Parents need to develop relationships with their children’s schools. “Whenever you talk about real parent engagement, it’s not just showing up for Doughnuts for Dads. It’s about building relationships with teachers and other parents and knowing things like whether your child is reading at grade level and how to help them if they aren’t.”



Ms. Hinton with a student at W.A. Perry Middle School

At W.A. Perry, Hinton visited every child in their home to discern their situations outside school. That was 320 home visits annually, followed by individual behavior studies she developed for each student and gave to their teachers. After meeting with a child about problem grades or behavior, she’d call the parent to keep them informed. When students did poorly in certain subjects, she’d accompany them to those classes. She knew from painful experience that if you’re not in class, you can’t learn the lesson. And if you can’t learn the lesson, you can’t pass the test. Too much of that cycle and you won’t be promoted. That was exactly her situation in the third grade, which she failed.

“It was devastating,” she said. “Miss Jones took me aside and said, ‘I want you to understand that when you get into the classroom, you have to perform, you have to block things out.’ But it wasn’t like I didn’t know the information; I wasn’t there to *get* the information. It was my mama’s fault that I failed. It was my daddy’s fault.”

Too intoxicated at night to get their children to school the next day, Hinton's parents were forced to give her and her two brothers to a family member, who then relinquished them to the state's Department of Social Services. Bouncing from foster home to foster home, the trio eventually landed at Miracle Hill Children's Home in Pickens, and finally at Tamasee DAR School in Oconee County. Coming from Rock Hill, the Hinton children were different from the start.

"When I first walked in, I didn't see anyone who looked like me," she said. "I wondered why everybody was looking at me - I thought it was because I was new, but I realized it was because I was different from them. I wondered, 'where's all the Black people?' We didn't realize Black and White was an issue until we moved to Tamasee."



Ms. Hinton with her Tamasee Sisters

Now, with a master's degree from Webster University in human resource development and 14 years helping children and families, Hinton knows she was uprooted and put down in a place that wasn't "culturally relevant." When children are taken from their normal setting and placed where nothing is normal, adjustment and success will be harder to achieve. And that's just one reason young Claressa had no dreams of being a movie star or astronaut or millionaire. Her dream was keeping her and her brothers together.

"I was focused more on surviving," she said. "I didn't necessarily have time to think about dreams because there was so much going on at one time."

Building a dream

Hinton doesn't parent the way she was parented. As she preaches to the parents she works with, she communicates often with her daughter's teachers, she knows her daughter's grades, and she encourages her daughter to work hard for grades but to rest and enjoy life, too. She wishes she'd had that kind of committed encouragement when she was growing up. Grades weren't important to her, and no one told her they should be.

But she had a gift for basketball, and key people who helped mightily. Coach John Jansen wouldn't accept her lackadaisical comment about not wanting to go to college. He made her see that if she wanted to make a home for herself and her younger brother – by then her older brother was at Carolina Children's Home – she'd need more than an associate degree from a two-year technical college, her original intent. She'd need a bachelor's degree from a four-year college, with all the opportunities it could provide.

“He was so upset,” she said. “He said, ‘you know what your circumstances are.’ It didn't dawn on me, but he was right. He was trying to get me to understand to dream bigger.”

Tamasee provided other gifts, Hinton reflects. She joined her basketball teammates on the school's clogging team, traveling with them across the country for competitions. And certain teachers had a remarkable influence. Math teachers Mark MacLean and Adam Hopkins “cared about who I was as an individual,” she said, and science teacher Patricia Smith was so “dynamic” she found herself loving that subject. Her grades improved in those areas, and she earned an A in something besides P.E.



*Ms. Hinton and Dorian Talley,
Most Athletic Class of 2002*

Still, there was that one teacher who left her scarred about her reading and writing skills, and Hinton didn't pass the state's high school exit exam in tenth or eleventh grades. Enter Laurie Edminster.

“Claressa, you will pass, but these are things I want you to do,” the English teacher told her. In her solid year of tutoring Hinton, Edminster made sure her student understood to stay on-topic when writing. She told her she was a good writer.

She passed – with excellence – on that third try. And Hinton, an all-conference basketball player and leading scorer, accepted a full athletic scholarship to Morris College in Sumter. She took with her a lesson she’s put into practice ever since – intentionally getting to know people and understanding them, just as some of her teachers and Coach Jansen had with her.

“I’m real big on building relationships,” she said. “It changes your setup.”

Planting seeds

The teacher who told Hinton her reading and writing skills were lacking might be shocked to see the video of her holding up books she recommends for a young child’s own library. But there she is, presenting books from Dollar Tree, that children can use to improve reading and math skills, tell time, and learn financial literacy. Her goal is to establish a partnership with that store to get book donations for the children in the school districts she serves.

Hinton’s favorite book is *Where the Red Fern Grows* by Wilson Rawls. Her seventh-grade teacher, Martha LeCroy, introduced it to her.

Things change every
day, every flower
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fern would grow.

“It was as if she knew what I was going through,” Hinton recalled. “She would say, ‘I understand you’re going through a lot of things,’ and refer to things that happened in the book. From it I understood that things change every day, that every flower doesn’t bloom at first, but eventually the fern would grow. She helped me see that things weren’t always going to be that way.”

She talks to struggling children about *Where the Red Fern Grows*. And she talks to them about the deck of cards – how we can’t help the hand we’re dealt, but we can help how we play it. She has become the guide her teachers and coach were for her.

“All it takes is one person to believe in you,” she said. “But you have to remember everybody’s not Team You. If you believe in you, it will happen. That doesn’t mean the journey will be easy and there’s no timeline for getting there.”

At 15 Hinton thought she and her younger brother were leaving Tamasee to return to Rock Hill and her now-sobor mother. Plans for the transition were nearly complete when her mother got cancer. She died the next month. Soon after, Hinton got spinal meningitis. It took three months for her to recover. It was another crisis, another setback to endure.



2021 South Carolina Parent Leadership Partners Program graduation ceremony in Charleston, SC. Far left, Dr. Yasha Becton and far right, Ms. Claressa Hinton served as co-facilitators of this year's cohort

But by then, she’d absorbed the lessons from *Where the Red Fern Grows*, and her own intrinsic motivation had taken root. Her life plan was clear: “I always said when I get to a place where I can help people, I will give them my very best.”

On a desk below her framed diplomas, Hinton retrieves a banner she made. “Change Agent” it says in bright colors. That’s how she sees her role with the Carolina Family Engagement Center. She knows if she’s helping parents be better parents, she’s also helping their children.

“It’s about planting seeds,” she said, referring to her favorite book. “When you’re planting seeds, you’re being impactful, and it takes more than one person to water a plant.”

She points to herself. “A lot of people have poured into this plant,” she added, “and now it’s sowing seeds.”

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