

# A FULBRIGHT JOURNEY OF GLOBAL HEALING IN BARBADOS

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## ABSTRACT

As a Fulbright Student Scholar to Barbados, my goal was to explore the influence of paternal presence or absence in shaping emotional resilience and personal agency in adolescent daughters. Through inquiry, cultural immersion, and community collaboration via the D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) program and parent education workshops, I engaged with administrators, educators, counselors, high school girls, and parents to examine the perceived impact of the father-daughter relationship on decision-making and educational outcomes.

**Keywords:** Barbados • Fatherlessness • Trauma • Global Healing • Educational Outcomes



## INTRODUCTION

The moment my feet touched the soil of Barbados, something deep within me awakened. I could not explain it at the time, but I knew I was standing on sacred ground – the kind of knowing that bypasses logic and speaks directly to the soul. Until that moment, I had carried almost no depth of knowledge about my Caribbean heritage. Yet, the second my feet met the warm earth, I felt more at home than I ever had in the United States. It was more than familiarity, it was belonging.

What began as a Fulbright research grant became something far greater than academic inquiry. It became a pilgrimage – a spiritual reckoning that merged personal healing with global purpose. I arrived in Barbados to examine adolescent girls' experiences of identity, resilience, and empowerment, but the journey soon evolved into something deeper. As the work unfolded, I realized that the questions I was asking of these young women mirrored questions I had spent a lifetime asking myself: *Where do I truly belong? Who am I beyond my trauma? And how do we reclaim power in the spaces where history, identity, and healing intersect?*

## WHERE THE JOURNEY BEGAN

My Fulbright Statement of Grant Purpose aimed to explore the cultural, social, and emotional factors influencing adolescent girls' development and resilience in Barbados. Initially, I planned to examine adolescent reproductive health, but the Ministry of Education expressed concern, prompting me to refocus on identity, empowerment, and educational outcomes.

What began as a shift in direction became a gift. By centering broader themes of resilience and belonging, I engaged with the girls' narratives more holistically. This transition aligned seamlessly with my dissertation, *"DADS & DAUGHTERS: Understanding the African American Fathers' Perceived Influences on Their Daughters' Academic Experiences and Educational Outcomes."* While my dissertation examined US populations, the parallels in Barbados were striking; fatherlessness disrupted family systems and limited educational access mirrored realities back home.

Through workshops, one-on-one interviews, and community conversations, I began to see a much larger tapestry emerging. Barbados illuminated that healing, identity, and empowerment are not bound by geography. Whether in Salem, New Jersey, or Bridgetown, Barbados, the challenges of identity formation amid adversity are deeply human – and so is the potential for transformation.

### **DISCOVERIES ALONG THE WAY**

As I spent more time in Bajan communities, it became clear that identity is both deeply personal and profoundly collective. The adolescent girls' voices carried quiet strength, but also an unspoken longing to envision futures beyond their current circumstances.

"Fatherlessness is not a singular wound," I wrote in my dissertation, "it's a ripple touching identity, belonging, and self-worth in ways both visible and invisible." That truth echoed here. Many of the young women I met carried stories of missing fathers, fractured families, and generational pain. Others described financial barriers or systemic inequities that limited their educational opportunities.

Yet I witnessed remarkable resilience. Within classrooms and community centers, these young women drew strength from cultural pride, faith, and kinship networks. Education repeatedly emerged as the most powerful catalyst for transformation academically, emotionally, and spiritually.

From this work, three central findings emerged: Identity Formation is a Global Struggle – Whether in Salem, New Jersey, or Bridgetown, Barbados, adolescent girls are navigating layered questions of identity, belonging, and self-worth. Factors like fatherlessness, trauma, and social inequities consistently emerged as drivers shaping their internal narratives. Education is Liberation – Girls consistently expressed that education represented freedom – the chance to rewrite their stories. Yet disparities in access, resources, and representation reinforced feelings of marginalization, underscoring the need for more equitable systems globally. Healing Requires Community – While personal resilience was evident, collective healing – through family, schools, and broader cultural systems was necessary to break cycles of intergenerational trauma. This aligned closely with the framework of my dissertation, which highlighted the power of shared narratives in restoring identity and belonging.

This fusion of personal and scholarly exploration became the heartbeat of my Fulbright journey. Barbados was not just the site of research; it was the mirror through which I better understood the universality of pain and the possibility of transformation.

### **BECOMING A PART OF BARBADOS**

The moment my feet touched the warm soil of Barbados, something within me shifted. It was as though the island whispered a welcome my soul had been waiting to hear my entire life. Until that moment, I had known little about my Caribbean roots. Yet standing there surrounded by salty air, vibrant colors, and voices layered with history, I felt an inexplicable sense of homecoming.

This connection to the land shaped everything that followed. I was not just an outsider conducting research; I became part of the rhythm of Barbados – its people, its traditions, its unspoken stories. I immersed myself in Bajan culture, attending community gatherings, walking through bustling markets, sharing meals, and listening deeply to the stories of women and girls whose lives mirrored struggles I knew intimately.

But this transformation was not without its challenges. Midway through my grant period, I experienced a robbery that forced me to confront my deepest fears and traumas. In that moment, I had a choice: retreat into fear or lean fully into faith and purpose. I chose the latter. This pivotal event became a crucible for my spiritual and emotional growth. I came to understand, in a visceral way, that healing is never linear; it demands courage, surrender, and the willingness to rewrite your own narrative.

Barbados became more than a research site; it became a mirror, reflecting back truths I had carried my entire life without naming them: the generational cycles of trauma, the silent longing for belonging, and the power of reclaiming one's identity.

As I navigated these personal awakenings, I found myself deeply connected to the adolescent girls I was working with. Their stories of pain, resilience, and hope wove seamlessly into my own. Through guided workshops and conversations, I began to see how their dreams for the future and their struggles to break free from inherited patterns mirrored the very themes explored in my dissertation.

It became clear that my Fulbright journey was not just about gathering data; it was about **becoming**. I arrived seeking to contribute to global conversations about identity, fatherlessness, and healing. I left transformed, carrying with me the voices of Barbados, interwoven with my own, into a broader narrative of what it means to heal generational wounds.

## **LESSONS WITHOUT BORDERS**

In countless conversations, the girls spoke of longing for belonging, of reconciling fractured relationships, and of navigating societal pressures without clear models of support. Their voices echoed the themes central to my dissertation: the critical role of healthy identity development and relational bonds in shaping educational and emotional outcomes. These insights reaffirmed what my research revealed: when young people feel unseen, unheard, and unsupported, the consequences ripple across every dimension of their lives.

This realization reshaped my perspective on trauma-informed approaches in education and counseling. If we are to break generational cycles, interventions cannot exist in isolation. They must be culturally responsive, community-driven, and deeply rooted in the lived realities of those we serve. My work through Legacy Counseling & Life Coaching, LLC builds on these insights, creating spaces where healing, empowerment, and personal transformation intersect.

The lessons learned in Barbados extend far beyond its shores, deepening my understanding that healing begins when we are willing to listen deeply to the stories of those we serve. Identity reclamation is a powerful act of resistance against cycles of generational trauma and sustainable change requires co-creating solutions with, not for, the communities impacted.

In this way, my Fulbright experience became both research and revelation – a living, breathing extension of the work I've dedicated my life to: helping individuals and communities reclaim their wholeness and rewrite their narratives.

## **RESEARCH & REALITY**

My Fulbright experience in Barbados became the living laboratory where my scholarly work and personal healing converged. The foundation of my dissertation explored the intersection of fatherlessness, identity development, educational outcomes, and relational health within marginalized communities. What began as a theoretical framework evolved into something far more personal and deeply embodied when I arrived on the island.

I witnessed firsthand the profound ways in which intergenerational trauma and systemic inequities shape the lives of young women navigating questions of identity and belonging. My research focused on understanding how cultural heritage, familial structures, and socio-economic realities influence adolescent self-perception and educational achievement. As my dissertation argues, identity development is not a singular process, it is a layered negotiation of lived experiences, cultural expectations, and systemic barriers.

These truths became clear in Barbados. In conversations with teachers, community leaders, and young women themselves, I recognized patterns consistent with my dissertation findings including the lingering effects of historical disenfranchisement and disrupted family structures. Absent

fathers have a profound influence on self-esteem, academic motivation, and relational choices. Furthermore, the resilience of adolescent girls who, despite systemic constraints, continue to seek empowerment through education and community.

During my focus groups, several young women reported feeling disconnected from their histories and cultures. This mirrored the very estrangement I had experienced growing up – a longing for belonging without fully understanding the roots of my heritage. Standing on Bajan soil, I began to understand how this disconnection reverberates not just personally, but generationally.

### **EMPOWERMENT, IDENTITY, AND THE QUEEN WITHIN**

Barbados became the catalyst for a deeper awakening of my identity and purpose. While my Fulbright research focused on cultural identity, fatherlessness, and relational wellness, living the experience unearthed parts of my story I had long buried. Standing on that island, I felt an unspoken connection to my Caribbean heritage – a sense of “home” that transcended borders, time, and history. That connection became the heartbeat of my transformation.

During my time in Barbados, I was also completing the manuscript that would become *The Queen Within: Becoming the Woman God Intended*. This memoir began in 2003 as an act of survival and a way to confront trauma, abandonment, and generational wounds, but in Barbados, the writing became something more: a reclamation of identity and my voice.

The lived experiences of the young women I interviewed – their silent battles with shame, cultural expectations, and fractured family narratives resonated deeply with my own journey. Their stories of resilience amplified my commitment to amplifying voices that have too often been silenced. Through their courage, I found the strength to confront my own wounds, and in doing so, began to embody the very healing my scholarship advocated.

*The Queen Within* is not just a personal narrative; it is an extension of the work I began during my Fulbright year – a movement to empower others to transform pain into purpose, adversity into agency, and trauma into triumph. Barbados gave me the clarity to integrate my academic research, personal healing, and professional mission into one unified narrative that continues to guide my work today.

## LEGACY, LEADERSHIP, AND THE COLLECTIVE CALL TO HEAL

My time in Barbados was not the end of my journey it was the beginning of a greater calling. The experience clarified what had been stirring in my spirit for years: healing is never just personal; it is collective. The themes I researched – identity, family dynamics, and relational wellness extended far beyond the young women I worked with. They became the foundation for Legacy Counseling & Life Coaching, LLC, the organization I would later build to serve individuals, families, and communities worldwide.

Legacy was born from a simple yet profound belief: when we heal, we create ripple effects that transform generations. The stories I heard in Barbados mirrored those I had encountered in the US and across international borders – narratives of fractured families, silenced trauma, and the urgent need for spaces where people could reclaim their voices and agency.

*“When we heal, we create ripple effects that transform generations.”*

My scholarship gave me the language to analyze these challenges, but my lived experiences gave me the compassion and vision to lead others through them. Through Legacy, I have fused evidence-based clinical practice, cultural responsiveness, and purpose-driven leadership to dismantle barriers to wellness, equity, and belonging.

Barbados was my classroom, my sanctuary, and my catalyst. It ignited a passion to bridge personal healing with systemic change to create opportunities for people to step fully into their own “queen within,” embracing identities unburdened by shame and empowered by resilience.

## FULL CIRCLE

Standing on the shores of Barbados, I began to understand that my Fulbright journey was never just about academic research, it was about reclaiming my identity, rewriting generational narratives, and finding my purpose on a global stage. That moment when my feet first touched Bajan soil awakened something deep within me – an ancestral knowing that transcended geography, time, and circumstance.

Through my research, I sought to amplify voices too often silenced by stigma, shame, and systemic inequities. Through my healing, I learned that our traumas do not define us, they refine us. And through **Legacy Counseling & Life Coaching, LLC**, I have committed my work to help individuals, families, and communities rewrite their own stories of identity, wellness, and possibility.

Barbados was the catalyst, but the mission is global. My Fulbright experience, my dissertation, and my memoir *The Queen Within* are all threads in a tapestry of transformation – proof that when we lean into our pain, confront generational wounds, and reclaim our power, we create legacies that extend far beyond ourselves.

### FURTHER READING

1. Pitts, L. D. (2017). *DADS & DAUGHTERS: Understanding the African American fathers' perceived influences on their daughters' academic experiences and educational outcomes* [Doctoral dissertation, Drexel University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. (10635628)
2. Pitts, L. D. (2019). *The queen within: Becoming the woman God intended*. Page Publishing. <https://www.amazon.com/Queen-Within-Becoming-Woman-Intended/dp/1644625148>
3. Pitts-Bounds, L. D. (2025, June). *Black fatherhood commentary* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/KYudQSnlWc8>



Lauren with a group of parents, administrators, educators, clergy and students at Codrington College in St. John, Barbados.

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### BIOGRAPHY

Lauren D. Pitts-Bounds is a Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist and the CEO of Legacy Counseling & Life Coaching LLC in Dallas, TX. She received a Fulbright Student Scholar research award (2014-2015) to Barbados. She earned her master's and doctoral degrees from Drexel University. Dr. Lauren can be contacted at [DrLauren@Legacyclc.org](mailto:DrLauren@Legacyclc.org).

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