

TURN IT UPSIDE DOWN

Model Behavior

After Overcoming Huge Obstacles, Tawanya Norwood Embarks on a Journey to Inspire Others

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY GABRIELLE CALISE

TAWANYA NORWOOD DRAWS ATTENTION WHEN SHE walks down the street — her muscled legs rippling under neon leggings, her braided purple hair swinging behind her back. But when she bends into a handstand, palms pressed onto the pavement and legs thrust above her head, people stop what they are doing to look at her.

With over 2,000 Instagram followers and more than 700 posts, Norwood is as much an entrepreneur as she is an athlete. Her colorful outfits and complex yoga poses are how she hopes to peacock her way into a Nike sponsorship.

But she's not doing it for free shoes and workout gear. Norwood wants to become an

icon. Using the Nike model status, she hopes to pursue her ultimate goal: becoming a motivational speaker who can change lives the way her heroes have changed hers.

Norwood spends a lot of time scrolling through Instagram and Pinterest to find inspirational quotes. She scours the pages of books and magazines, then she writes her favorite lines in a tattered purple composition book. She's opened and closed it so many times that the pages are falling out.

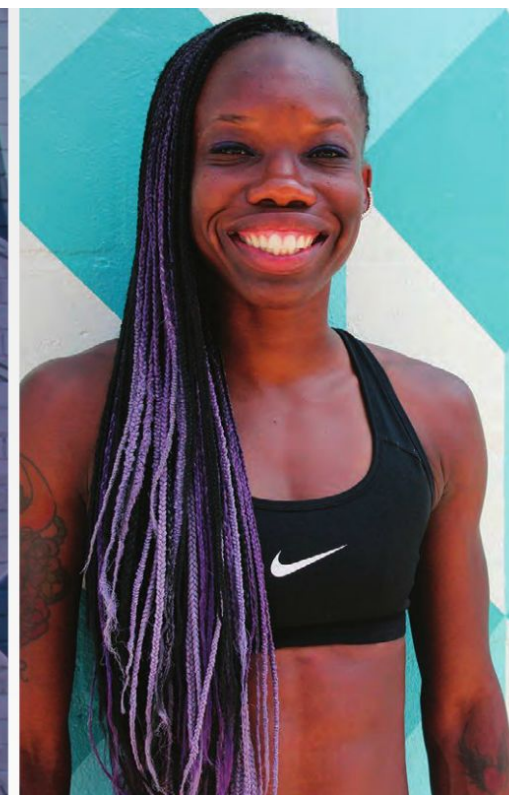
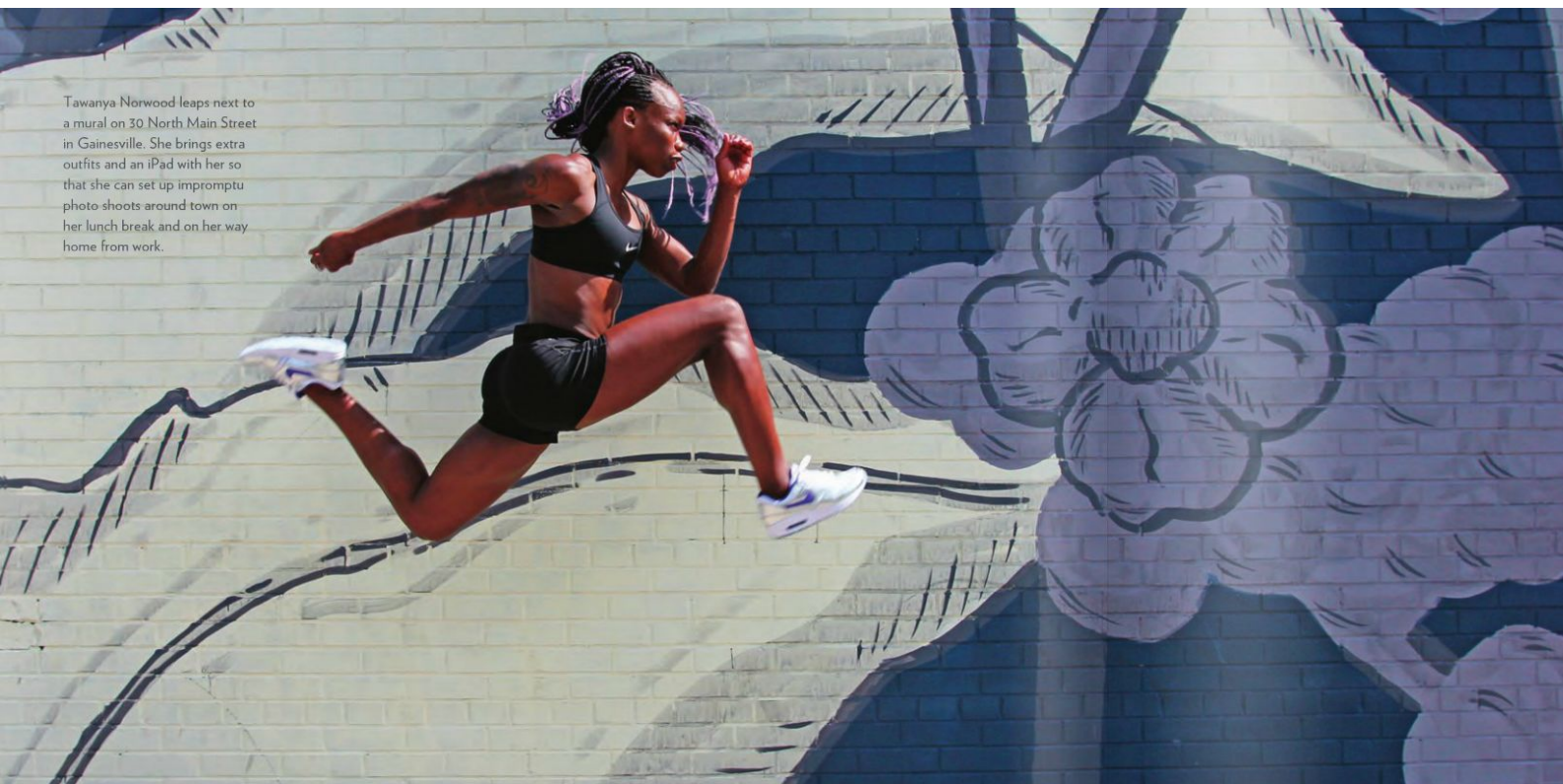
The quotes offer hope in a life that has not always been kind to her.

"Kids made fun of me for things that are my strong suit now," she said.

Her hair, her attitude, and her love of reading were all ridiculed in the halls and on the ride home.



Tawanya Norwood leaps next to a mural on 30 North Main Street in Gainesville. She brings extra outfits and an iPad with her so that she can set up impromptu photo shoots around town on her lunch break and on her way home from work.



“One time the whole bus was making fun of me,” she said. When the school bus dropped her off, Norwood’s struggle to survive continued.

“The neighborhood I come from, Liberty City, is not really safe,” she said. “There was a lot of violence.”

Norwood remembers seeing the yellow crime scene tape strung in her neighborhood. She can recall walking by a dead body on the street as she was coming home from elementary school.

She didn’t find security inside the walls of her low-income housing unit.

“We took cold showers and didn’t have a lot of food sometimes,” she said.

Her parents couldn’t offer her support. Her father used and sold drugs, and Norwood often came home to crack pipes scattered around the house.

As a little girl, she didn’t understand why her mother disappeared for long periods of time or behaved strangely, yelling at Norwood about imaginary people who were trying to break into the house. Years later, Norwood learned that her mother suffered from schizophrenia and would leave for periods of time

because she was either living in a group home or with Norwood’s aunt.

When she was in the sixth grade, the school social worker called Norwood to the office. She was excited to be summoned — until the social worker said she couldn’t live with her dad anymore. Norwood lived in a foster home briefly before moving in with her aunt.

Growing up in Liberty City gave her a fear of failure that worsened during high school. But then she discovered motivational speakers and suddenly things didn’t seem so impossible.

Norwood applied to the University of Florida and became the first person in her family to go to college.

Things were still hard.

“I’m not really a party person,” she said. “I don’t like smoking or drinking.”

Slowly, her life improved as she went to counseling and church.

“It helped me have a better mindset,” she said.

Norwood continued to listen to people such as Eric Thomas, a motivational speaker, author and minister. She began following Thomas when he was still early in his career. By the time she

graduated from college, he was delivering speeches to professional athletes.

“To see his journey play out is what really inspired me,” she said. “He went from being home-

University Athletic Association. She also decided to try fitness modeling in her spare time.

After winning an iPad during a raffle at a Gator Gymnastics meet, Norwood started taking pictures

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less to having a Ph.D.,” she said.

When she had trouble in school, she reminded herself how it took Thomas 12 years to earn a four-year degree.

“I kind of had to make a decision to put my head down and push forward,” she said.

Norwood graduated with a degree in sociology and started working in the HR department at the

of herself striking poses in workout gear. The device’s self-timer function allowed her to have spontaneous photo shoots on her lunch break or after work.

Norwood had to be her own photographer. She didn’t have the money to hire a professional, and she had gone to track meets with friends who were too bashful to ask athletes for a photo. Norwood knew that her friends would be too shy to take her

picture as she posed in public.

"I knew I couldn't depend on my friends taking pictures of me," she said.

Norwood uses her backpack as a makeshift tripod to prop up her iPad and shoot away. She's taken more than 4,000 fitness shots since starting last May. She edits the photos with free apps and then posts the images to her Instagram, @th33besticanbe, with the goal of attracting the attention of Nike.

"They were really innovative in the whole women's fitness thing," she said.

Since there's no way to directly submit photos to the company, there are few ways to get sponsored. Most of the people that Nike sponsors are top athletes first. But while Norwood has been running since high school, her times are not high enough to catch the eye of Nike.

"I was not the best runner on my track team," she said.

She decided to go another route: modeling. Nike ambassadors are usually famous people or athletes, and since she can't send photos to Nike, she is working to gain a social media presence. She is also interested in signing with a talent or modeling agency.

Her look is largely inspired by the company — after all, she is trying to sell herself to them.

"I step away from it and think, 'how can I get the look that Nike has?'" she said.

But she also tries to add her own twist on things — literally. After noticing that Nike didn't often feature yogis, Norwood searched for advanced yoga and gymnastic poses on Pinterest and Instagram. Using the flexibility and strength that came from years of running, she taught herself how to contort her body into splits, twists, bends and more.

"I think it's a gift that I attribute to being given by God," she said.

Another gift that Norwood uses is her knowledge of people — part from her sociology degree, part from her personality.

"It's good to have that understanding of society," she said. "I separate myself from the person in the pictures from the person looking at it, or Nike. You try to tap into that person."

Norwood asks herself: What tags will she add to her picture? What pictures will entice users to double-tap?

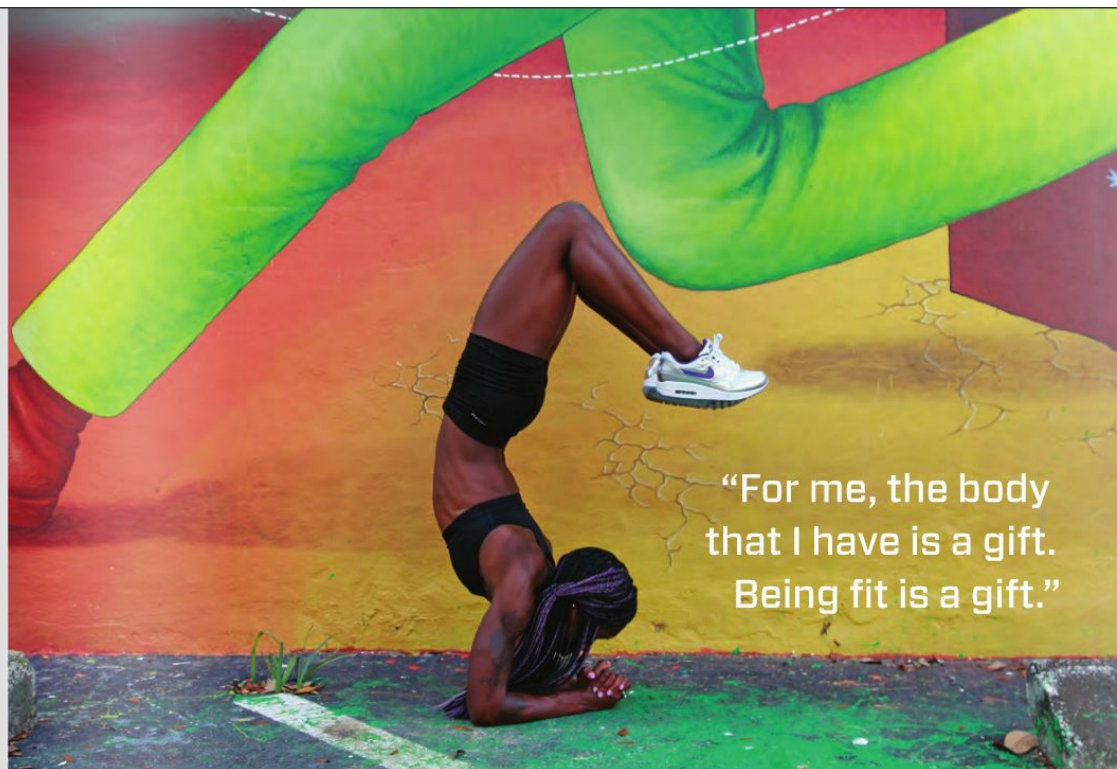
"Some of it is a natural ability, but there's a lot that I didn't know," she said.

Norwood first got the idea to post on Instagram from Sabrina Singleton, a mutual friend she met at church.

Singleton, an account planner at Frankel Media Group, was happy to pass along her knowledge of social media and personal branding.

"She's very determined with her goals," Singleton said. "I think that's cool that she's not wavering."

Norwood also contacted Bruce Floyd, the UAA social media manager, to get advice on her posts.



"For me, the body that I have is a gift. Being fit is a gift."

"It was just me using my resources," she said.

Once Norwood gets the sponsorship, she wants to travel and speak to people about her story. Since motivational speakers helped her so much, she has always had a dream to do the same for other people.

"It was never supposed to end with Nike," she said. "That's a means to an end."

Norwood sees herself as an entrepreneur more than an athlete. People in awe of her bulging muscles and flat stomach have told her to post workout videos or start a YouTube channel. But her purpose is to motivate people to achieve their dreams, not tell them how to live.

"If I can inspire people to be fit, I would love that," she said. "But in my pictures I go for power and strength."

Fitness is especially important to Norwood because she wants to care for her body.

"My mom passed away from a stroke and I don't want that to happen to me," she said. "For me, the body that I have is a gift. Being fit is a gift."

She still has to eat the foods she can afford, such as spaghetti and pizza. Instead of paying for a gym membership, she does 25 push ups every morning and 75 to 100 sit-ups during the day. She also jogs three times a week and tries new yoga poses.

Norwood has received enormous support from the community. Followers leave her positive comments and one woman even bought her a pair of brand new Nikes.

"It's really exciting to see how much her page and followers have grown," said Jasmine Quarterman, a friend of Norwood's since their freshman year of college.

Norwood studies social media strategies in her spare time and spends hours practicing new yoga poses, Quarterman said.

"I think the most inspiring thing is she's very determined and, to me, she thinks outside of the box," she said.

Quarterman believes Norwood would make a good motivational speaker someday.

"I think she'll be relatable to a lot of people because of her story," she said.

Despite the avalanche of likes and followers, Norwood is still humble, Singleton said.

"You can be haughty if you have a lot of followers on Instagram, but that's not her at all," Singleton said.

The Internet attention hasn't changed how Norwood thinks of herself.

"I'm just a regular person with a lot of determination and drive and belief in myself," she said. "I think if you have a lot of faith in yourself, you can go far." **OT**