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**Sharing her story:**

**Noraye Gardiner, 7, who survived a car crash in 2015 that took the lives of her parents, loves to read to people**

By Ralph Berrier Jr.

Noraye Gardiner, all 4-feet-2 inches and 40 pounds of her, commanded outsize attention at the Williamson Road Branch Library.

Teenagers from neighboring Breckinridge Middle School casually strolled into the children’s story area where 7-year-old Noraye waited. They arrived in pairs, cloaked in puffy winter coats, and stood and sat around the pint-sized peewee with braided hair, holding a book and clad in a sweatshirt emblazoned with the words “Raye Raye’s Reading.” The scene looked like storytime in reverse: a tiny tot was about to read to the big kids. This was a couple of months ago, before “social distancing” was a thing.

Right at 3:30 p.m., Noraye brightened up, put on a well-rehearsed smile that showed off her new teeth that were still coming in and looked directly at a friend who held up a smartphone, finger on the “record” button.

Raye Raye was going live.

“Hello, I am Noraye with Raye Raye’s reading!” exclaimed Noraye, displaying her theatrical training with an enthusiasm that would put a TV pitchman to shame. “Today I’m going to read ‘Sister Day!’ ”

And for the next 20 minutes, Noraye read three kids’ books to a group of about 20 people, which included adults and a few small children among the teenage fanclub, all of whom applauded after she finished each book.

Since late last year, Noraye — who, until the COVID-19 outbreak closed schools, had been a second-grader at Monterey Elementary School — has read publicly at the library, at banks and at Barnes and Noble. Recently, she had been reading after school at Breckinridge to encourage young people to read.

Although her appearances are on hold until life returns to normal, she is still reading occasionally for Facebook videos, which was how all this got started. Her grandmother, Doris Jordan, started posting videos of Noraye reading as a way to boost her granddaughter’s confidence and to promote reading among children.

“I love to read to people,” Noraye said one afternoon following one of her library readings.

After she finished reading at the Williamson Road Library on Jan. 31 — “Sisters First” and “A Friend Is Magical” were among the highlights that day — she posed for photos with the teenagers. Sure, some of them were there for the free pizza Grandma Doris provided, but the teens weren’t too cool to hang out with a second-grader who read to them.

Her reading that day ended with a musical twist, when Noraye stood up and sang along with a recording of Maroon 5’s hit song “Memories.”

*Toast to the ones here today*

*Toast to the ones that we lost on the way*

*‘Cause the drinks bring back all the memories*

*And the memories bring back, memories bring back you*

A few feet away, Grandma Doris wiped tears from her eyes.

“This was the day her mom passed,” she said, recalling a sad anniversary.

**Surviving a tragedy**

Noraye Camille Gardiner played rambunctiously with one of her friends in her northeast Roanoke home where she lives with her grandmother and a Shih Tzu named King. This was on a warm day in early February when children could have play dates.

By all appearances, she is a happy, bright, vivacious little girl. She’s on the honor roll, and she’s learning to write in cursive. She loves to read, even when she’s not reading to teenagers.

When she reads, she is lively, almost boisterous, a testament to the lessons she received at the Mill Mountain Theatre Conservatory. Those classes, sadly, were recently canceled, too. These days, her reading performances are posted on the Facebook page “Raye Raye’s Reading,” managed by her grandmother.

“I enjoy it,” Noraye said. “I like reading to people because I like helping them to read and teaching about stuff.”

She reads well for a second-grader, still occasionally needing help with big words. She likes “American Girl” books, and she’s a smart, well-adjusted child, which is fairly amazing considering what she has been through.

She shows no scars, visible or invisible, from the car crash she survived as a 2-year-old. That wreck on Williamson Road in the early-morning hours of Jan. 31, 2015, took the lives of her parents, Eliscia Monica-Mae Jordan and Aaron Dalontaye Gardiner. Noraye, strapped in a child restraint seat, sustained a broken leg with multiple fractures, burns, bruises and a concussion, according to a report in The Roanoke Times.

The crash happened when Noraye’s father, who was driving, turned left off Williamson Road around 3 a.m. The car was struck by another vehicle traveling 86 miles per hour in a 30-mph zone. Noraye’s parents died at the scene.

Rescuers cut Noraye out of the car. The child was badly injured, and she eventually had to learn to walk again.

Doris lost her daughter in the wreck. Approaching 50 years old, she had to raise her 2-year-old granddaughter, who had numerous injuries to overcome. Doris was scared. She channeled her fear by first making sure her granddaughter recovered physically and then by making sure she would be able to take care of herself.

She taught Noraye to read, spell and count at an early age. She wanted Noraye to be confident and driven. She wanted Noraye to be proud and self-sufficient. She saw Noraye work through physical therapy after the accident. And she encouraged Noraye’s dramatic and reading talents by posting videos of the child reading books.

Doris did all this because she worried, “What if something should happen to me?” How will Noraye get along in the world?

“That’s the only reason I am doing this,” Doris said during an interview in her living room as Noraye played in another room with a friend. “It’s me being afraid. I’m trying. A lot of it is from being afraid because of the accident that happened. You don’t know when you’re going. ... I want her to be able to speak to you without holding her head down. I want her to hold her head up.”

Doris said she has received some backlash from people who don’t approve of her posting videos of a 7-year-old on Facebook. She makes no apologies. She said many families post videos of children playing sports, dancing or singing. What’s wrong with reading?

“She’s just reading,” Doris said. “Why do you put your kid out there showing off? Why not reading? Why not positive stuff?”

**Road to recovery**

An insurance settlement helped Doris pay for Noraye’s medical expenses and provide for the child.

Noraye had a difficult road to recovery. After the cast came off her leg, it took months before her foot straightened and made walking easier. Even though she had been potty-trained before the accident, she had to relearn how to use the bathroom afterward, which meant wearing disposable diapers to preschool. Doris said Noraye was teased by other children for wearing diapers.

That’s when Doris began teaching Noraye at home. After moving away from Roanoke for a while, the two of them came back to northeast Roanoke a couple of years ago, just as Noraye was starting elementary school.

Noraye calls Doris “Mommy.” She calls Eliscia “my other mom,” and she has pictures of her parents in her room.

“When I was 2 years old, my other mom used to read to me to make me fall asleep,” Noraye said. “I look at pictures of me and her. I have a picture of mommy kissing me.”

The mommy in that picture is Eliscia.

As she recovered from her injuries, Noraye watched the movie “Akeelah and the Bee,” which is about an 11-year-old girl in Los Angeles who becomes a champion speller. Inspired by the movie, Noraye began spelling and reading words.

“All of a sudden, she could spell stuff,” Doris said. “Then we moved to reading three-letter words. She had to learn them and spell them. I told her she needed to know how to put words in sentences and to know the definitions of three new words everyday.”

A young reader was born.

**A good story**

Back at the library last month, before everything shut down, Noraye read the kids’ book, “Who Is Oprah Winfrey?”

The goal is to teach friends and others the joy of reading. Doris awards prizes to children who answer questions about the books. When she worked for Roanoke City Schools as a teaching assistant, she was struck by how little middle-schoolers were reading. If children are inspired to pick up a book — whether they were drawn to the library by free pizza or to hear words read by a 7-year-old — then Raye Raye’s Reading has succeeded.

Branch librarian Toni Vinciguerra said Noraye’s readings have been a boon to the library’s programs.

“It’s been really great because teens have become involved,” Vinciguerra said. “She’s mentoring them in a way, by saying reading is cool. It makes the library a better place.”

The library is streaming Noraye’s videos on its YouTube channel. Vinciguerra said she expects Noraye to resume her readings when the coronavirus outbreak is over.

“I’m kind of nervous when I read to eighth-graders,” Noraye admitted one day after one of her library readings. Then, brightening, she added, “Guess what one of the eighth-graders said! ‘I can’t read like you!’ ”

Then, she was off to her teenage fans, smiling and posing for selfies with them