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# ALASKA RENEWAL

A JOURNALIST HAS A PROFOUND AWAKENING IN ANCHORAGE  
BY JANELLE HARRIS

I was mad at God when I boarded the plane for Alaska. I was mad at Him during the three transfers and the nearly 11 hours in flight it took to get there. And I was still mad at Him when I landed and met up with the two other sisters in my party. The three of us were a trifecta of Black-girl creativity—Sabrina the videographer, Jamaica the photographer and me, the writer—contracted on assignment to explore the social and cultural needs of Native boys in Anchorage. It was the kind of meaningful and investigative journalism I'd always wanted to do, but while I was getting an opportunity to see and touch and feel a new purpose, my personal life was in upheaval.

My 16-year-old daughter, who wrestles with depression, was failing half of her classes in school. I'd unwisely fallen in love with a man who dishonored our relationship and my heart was destroyed because of it. I was also broke. My car had been repossessed and I'd traveled the more than 4,200 miles from Washington, D.C., to Anchorage with less than \$100 in my checking account, hoping they'd stretch and feed me over the next five days. Chasing my dream felt more like trying to stand upright in a windstorm. I'd been praying for direction, but felt divinely forgotten. My faith, which has always fueled my optimism, was overwhelmed by the circumstances of my reality. Travel couldn't even provide an escape. My burdens attached themselves to my luggage and rode with me across four time zones.

Though I don't typically volunteer myself to be outdoors on 35-degree days, this may be the only time I'm thankful that I did. God's majesty was apparent everywhere. Sprawling, snow-topped mountain ranges jutted up into wispy, cottony clouds. And each sunrise and sunset looked like His brushstrokes across the sky in brilliant shades of purple, orange and pink.

As we filmed in a national park, a moose sidled near our car and I didn't even flinch. I interviewed an adorable 90-year-old



man and his equally adorable 88-year-old wife, who described a deep pride in their Native heritage and reaffirmed my respect for the wisdom and stories elders have to share. Afterward I watched them perform a song and dance with feathered fans they'd handcrafted for a boys' rites of passage ceremony.

While we worked to create a polished multimedia story, I bonded with Sabrina and Jamaica. Their sisterhood and positive energy wrapped me in care. I'd been so hard on myself, but they were gentle and sweet and allowed me to emote however I needed.

On our last full day there, we drove to Seward, a sleepy seaside town two hours south of Anchorage, and stopped twice to take in the scenery. The magnificence of mountainsides covered in thousands of tall, gold-leaved trees, waterfalls pouring onto the rocks below and sunlight sparkling across the surface of huge, ice-cold lakes brought me to tears. I had found my missing-in-action God.

I didn't just see His work, I felt His hand, and a peace swept over me. He had been so silent in my prayers, but He was there—reminding me that the same power that created such an epic display of nature was the same power that created me. I had been addicted to struggle because it was familiar. But Alaska reminded me, as I stood at the foot of naturally made skyscrapers walling us in, that I was both a part of and set apart for something bigger.

Janelle Harris is a writer and entrepreneur in Washington, D.C. ▶



From top: Harris (center) laughs with her travel companions; she recalls thinking, *The same power that created such an epic display of nature was the same power that created me.*