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ODYSSEY SENIOR



ORACLE



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UNFORGETTABLE MOMENTS IN HISTORY

Seniors were asked to pick a moment in history or an artistic event they will always remember, from the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. to 9-11 to a recent Broadway show.

The Day Martin Luther King Jr. Was Shot

At 6:05 P.M. on Thursday, 4 April 1968, Martin Luther King was shot dead while standing on a balcony outside his second-floor room at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. News of King's assassination prompted major outbreaks of racial violence, resulting in more than 40 deaths nationwide and extensive property damage in over 100 American cities. James Earl Ray, a 40-year-old escaped fugitive, later confessed to the crime and was sentenced to a 99-year prison term. During King's funeral a tape recording was played in which King spoke of how he wanted to be remembered after his death: "I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others" (King, "Drum Major Instinct," 85).

In 1968 I was six years old, and I could tell something sorrowful had happened on April 1968 with the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King. There was an overflow of crying and shouting tears overflowing from the television screen unto our living room and outside our home throughout the community streets and all across the whole wide world of great sorrow that I could feel so clearly. There was an echoing cry of great pain echoing throughout. I could hear people running down the streets crying and shouting. I was old enough to know that grief was capturing the nation. There was such a feeling of devastation captivating every soul of every human being of each African American person alive and breathing. I still remember that feeling like the day it happened—something I never ever desire to experience again in my life. **(Sherri Bester)**



The day MLK was killed, I was living with my father and my three brothers in Washington, D.C. I just went down to the corner store and everything was a mess, glass everywhere. People all around were saying, "They killed MLK! Kill all the white people! They killed MLK!" So instantly I thought about my grandmother and my mother; they are so light skinned they can be mistaken for white. I panicked; I was so afraid for them, more than for myself.

I was out in the frustration and confusion, people breaking store windows and stealing, and I had no way of knowing if my mother and grandmother were safe. I was blocks away from home, but I did not feel safe. People were doing things everywhere. I didn't even know how I made it home... but of course I did. My father, the police officer, had so much stuff all over the house and in his car. I prayed that my mother and grandmother were safe because my father didn't care.

Soon we were told to be on our porch by nine at night. Big tanks and men with guns came by; you could not even be on the sidewalks by your house; you had to be on the porch. It was such a dark

and hopeless time. My father, the police officer, continued daily to bring in TVs, tape recorders, liquor, cameras, etc. The downstairs was full of stuff. The big tanks were out every night for our curfew.

I don't know how long it lasted or when it stopped, but when I got back out, D.C. was looking pretty bad, but my family was all okay. **(Pamela Bracey)**

The O.J. Simpson Verdict

I was working a day shift (6 a.m.-2 p.m.) at a mental health facility in Verona, Wisconsin. Like any other ordinary day, I was standing in line at the time clock, greeting my co-workers and engaging in small talk. There was always chatter and laughter at the time clock but not today. There was a feeling of uneasiness; people were cordial but flat. These were good people, in my opinion.

When I arrived to my assigned unit, the routine was to receive a report from the off-going shift, get an update from the RN, gather my assignment sheet, and start my day. But not today. Everyone was being standoffish, evasive, and expressionless. I've worked side by side with these people for years. I know their children's names, I've heard stories of their family vacations, and we've joked about our spouses. These good people waved and sang good morning just yesterday. But not today: today they were antsy, hesitant, and irritable.

I remember the RN in the medication room, the LPN outside the med room preparing her cart. I remember the two other CNAs milling around the TV room, which was just outside the nurse's station. I remember I was the only black person on the unit that day. I remember it was after breakfast for the residents, so we were just starting to or should have been starting to remove breakfast trays, move the residents to their rooms, and start the hustle and bustle of our day.

But not today. We were moving in slow motion and drawn to the television. I remember the senior social worker came onto the unit. It was a bit unusual to see this tall, handsome, jet-black-haired white man. He had on a grey suit that day. I remember him walking hurriedly down the corridor to the TV room. It's 9:30 a.m. or so, and we've all managed to gravitate towards the TV, no one saying a word. Arms folded across the chest, hands on hips, and some shifting their weight from side to side.



It was October 3, 1995. Today the jury will deliver a verdict in the OJ Simpson trial.

“Not Guilty!!” OMG, how could that be, I thought to myself. Before I could finish processing what was just said, the social worker stomped his feet and marched off the unit swearing, the RN closed the door to the med room, and the LPN took her med cart and went flying down the hall and disappeared into one of the residents' rooms. The other two CNAs rushed pass me pushing wheelchairs 75mph!!! I'm still trying to process the not guilty verdict and suddenly I'm dealing with personality disorders from every standpoint!!

These good people I once knew were now cold and distant. There was no small talk, no eye contact. Their faces were solemn, sour, and angry. Hell, it's not even lunch time. They were like characters from some zombie movie pissed off at the world. I won't go into what I really thought they were angry about. I'll save that for another paper.

I'll end with a quote from Maya Angelou:

*People will forget what you said
People will forget what you did
But people will never forget how you
made them feel (Yulanda Williams-Jones)*

Nine-Eleven

9-11-2001. The day the world stood still. I remember it like it was yesterday. It was a Tuesday morning. My shift at General Motors in Janesville, WI, started at 6:30 a.m. We were assembling vehicles as usual. The televisions that are located along the aisles and the break areas were tuned to the morning news. Sometime around 10 a.m. people started talking about a plane crashing into the World Trade Center. Everyone was asking and trying to find out what happened, but no one was sure. Then word came down the line about the second tower being hit. At that time, the world changed.

The assembly line stopped running. Everyone started crowding around the TVs. The news was hectic, with everyone trying to find out what happened. Then word about the third plane crashing. Now everyone was frantic. We tried to get the assembly line restarted, but everyone had lost focus.

People were talking about us going to war, even before we knew who or what was responsible. I don't ever remember feeling like that before. Everyone knew it was bad but really had no idea how bad it was about to be. Many, many people lost their lives that day. Many more were lost and injured.



The worst thing we could imagine, the towers collapsed, rescuers, first responders, workers, bystanders all lost in the rubble and devastation. One of the saddest days of our lives, and then the war. More lost lives, more devastation. We got the people responsible eventually, but there were no winners. Only loss, loss of lives, sadness. Military people that never got to see their loved ones again. 9-11 is a day that will always be remembered with sadness and never a definitive answer as to why. **(Sanford Jones)**

Those Bastards Ruined My Birthday!

On September 11th, 2001, I woke like any typical school day morning. My morning routine consisted of waking up at 5:30 a.m. to allow myself time to reflect and meditate before the ensuing chaos of getting my four children ready for the school day. As I made pancakes, I was listening to Wisconsin Public Radio news where I heard that an airplane had presumably "accidentally" flown into one of the World Trade Center Towers. Thinking to myself, I wondered what stupid, rich clown could be so distracted that he hit a building. Not thinking of the potential for lives lost, as I plated breakfast, I wondered if the pilot survived. Once the kids were safely at their respective schools, I drove to work at the Harambee Center with all my car windows open to soak in that unseasonably warm September day.

Working for the now defunct Family Enhancement as a Parent Educator, when I arrived that morning, I immediately turned on the big television on the rolling cart to prepare for my upcoming class with Teen Parents. As the T.V. warmed up, and the black and grey scraggly lines gave way to live video, I saw the second plane crash into the Tower. Frozen in front of the glowing, pixelated scene unfolding before my eyes, I felt this sense of impending dread swell throughout my body. It has started! The war that for years my father had warned me about. Since my childhood, my father had often insisted that it was just a matter of time before we Americans who had lived lives of relative security would get attacked on our own soil. It was my father's voice playing out in my head when I told my

boss, Betty Banks, that I had to leave immediately to get my kids.

Speeding down Park Street on my way to my children's schools, my mind went into survivalist mode. My first impulse was to gather all my children and to go home to plan next steps. When I arrived at Emerson



Elementary School to pick up my youngest two, the principal was surprised by my command to have Maya and Jacob Benford come immediately to the office. As I heard their names over the intercom, I began to script out in my mind why I was pulling them out of school unexpectedly. "We have to go home right now" is all I could say when they walked into the office. This scene repeated itself when I went to Lucas and Annie's school. At East High School, the principal initially questioned my motives for abruptly wanting to take my child out of classes. Perhaps it was the look on my face, or me uncharacteristically raising my voice when I said "none of your goddamn business, just get my child" that within a couple of minutes, I had four confused kids in a car, racing home.

"Imagine that some unbelievably bad people had hurt and killed me, your mother, your aunts, uncles, cousins, and those you loved. These horrible people put us in jail, stole our land and resources. These people hate us for our religion because it might be different than their own. People that hate us so much, they send jets, drones and missiles that have killed whole families that we know. Kids, can you imagine how you would feel if you grew up witnessing all of this? The people who flew into the Towers experienced all these awful things. They are not mad at us as the Benford family but at the bad people that are part of the United States government. The people that felt the need to attack this country are not mad at us, but at all the horrible things that this country had done to millions of people with brown skin like us." I stumbled in trying to make sense of the day as I

heard about the other planes and watched the Towers come crashing down.

I called an emergency meeting of the Madison Fatherhood Alliance that I had founded the year before. Diverse fathers and male caregivers gathered that evening at the old Jolly Bob's to process the day's events and to find collective language that we could use to try to help our children make

sense of the world. On my way to the meeting, I began to concoct plans in my head if I needed to move my family out of the city. Surely there will be a catastrophic economic meltdown. Anticipating a run on the banks, I stopped at the ATM to withdraw the maximum amount of money possible, as Anchor Bank closed early that day. When I showed up at Jolly Bob's, there were ten men of the Fatherhood Alliance, sitting at a big table, speaking in muted tones, and looking deeply concerned. That night, we checked in with each other, reassured each other that we could count on one another, and, most importantly, we offered love to Mohammed, the only Muslim member of our group.

My younger brother Tony, who was part of the Fatherhood Alliance and in attendance that night, muttered as we were all hugging each other, "Those bastards ruined my birthday." In the confusion of the day, I forgot that it was my brother's birthday and that we were to celebrate that night. Tony, with true consternation, proclaimed that his birthdate was forever "f..cked up." The next morning, I went to Steve's Tattoo shop and had the words "to remember, peace, and freedom" in ancient Arabic tattooed on my right arm. Al Qaeda was not my enemy, but rather the succession of terrorists that have led our government since the founding of this country. The United States fostered and fueled the hatred that killed over three thousand on Tony's special day. In the aftermath of 9/11, I do not need to look at my tattoos to remind me of this day. Instead, I chose to reassign that day back to my now departed brother and the love that I have for him. Love will always trump hate! **(Brian Benford)**

The Day My Mind, My Body, and My Heart Were Changed

It was just another day as usual. I had awoken to my grandchildren's loud screams about breakfast and the cats meowing because they were also hungry. While barely awake, I scuffled to find my house shoes in the dark of my room. "Damn, I need a drink and a puff." Then I remembered that I don't do either. Any who, getting back to the day that my mind, my body, and my heart was changed . . .

I headed out to work that day and all was good, but little did I know that this would be the day that would change my very being and view of America and the rest of the world and the people in it. You see, it was on this day that I came to separate us Americans from the rest of the world. This was also the day that it sunk in my heart and mind how much we were envied, hated, and wished dead and that we were not invincible.

On that infamously clear sunny day on September 11, 2001, at 8:46 am EST – 7:46 am CST, yes, that day the earth stood still. I was standing behind the desk at Sam's Club where I worked in the marketing department, my eyes glued to the many TVs that were all on. Yes, along with others, I watched as the earth stood still. Everything had stopped, the cashiers along with the customers. It was so quiet even the mice and the birds in the rafters of the warehouse seemed to know that something was afoot. Then it happened: that loud crash shook me and the rest of the world's whole being, and I just busted out and cried.

It was at this time that I realized that we were in trouble, and that we had been lackadaisical in our endeavors to keep our safety first. WOW! We had failed to keep the enemy out, and I thought to myself not us, not the Great Americans, not the notorious United States of America. What is this world coming to? What does this mean to our reputation in the eyes of other countries? As I gazed into the eyes of the other workers who stood



there just as shocked as we were, even though they were from the same country that had committed this heinous crime, I could see in their eyes the question, do you hate us? And I also was able to see out of my peripheral vision the looks that the customers were giving them—that look of hate and wanting to attack them. We had to send them to the back offices for their safety.

September 11, 2001, better known as 9/11, was the day that my mind, my body, and my heart were forever changed. **(Lenora Rodin)**

On 9-11 I recall I was waiting on hold to schedule a clinic visit. I had gotten injured in an accident at work, so I was waiting to speak to someone from the clinic. At the same time, I was watching Good Morning America. They showed the first plane hitting. I said, "Oh no, someone had an accident and hit one of the towers." When the second plane hit, I knew that wasn't an accident. It seemed that everything just stopped. It was a beautiful, sunny day, and it seemed like time stood still for a bit. I remember the shock of everything as things unfolded.

The day just got heavier and heavier, even at the clinic I went to. My injury seemed so little compared to the big tragedy. Our country had been attacked. There was a sense of sadness and confusion and wondering how somebody had gotten hold of two planes to do such a thing. It made me think, if that could happen, what else could happen? When something tragic like that

happens, you wonder what will come next. You have to stay calm and prayerful.

Another building (Pentagon) got hit, and then on another plane headed for a building, passengers took it down, sacrificing their lives. Still even thinking about it, I remember that feeling. It affected people from all over the world since so many people were in the towers from other countries. The tragedy connected us—it gave us a sense of humanity as we thought of all the lives lost, people jumping out of windows, firefighters and first responders trying to rescue them, ongoing health issues. There were children who were born who never will get to have both parents with them because of that day. It affected immediate and extended families, friendships, and the world, with so many feeling the impact and sadness and loss. All those lives lost—people who meant so much to others. Such a tragic, sad, and heavy day. I notice every year around that time, something strange happens. In remembrance, no one should forget about it but just grow to be kinder and to treat each other better. **(Alice McDaniel)**

Broadway in 2002

It was Thursday, January 25, 2002, five inches of snow on the ground in Madison. My direct flight on Delta Airlines out of Madison to New York LaGuardia was two hours and 29 minutes, 814 miles. I arrived in New York at 2:30 PM. My Jewish friend Mark Finkle was right there to meet me as I exited the plane. Mark is a talent agent for Broadway Production; he finds talent youth and trains them in dance and lyrics.

We walked about one and a half miles to the underground parking lot to Mark's car, off to his apartment in Riverdale, NY, a Jewish subdivision, to relax and refresh before heading to Broadway. We walked to the Metro station about two blocks from his home to board the L-Train for a 30-minute ride with a variety of colorful folks on the train. We exited the train for a 10-minute scenic walk of massive buildings, looking like they touched the sky as they floated into the clouds. We stopped at a street vendor for a Napoleon hot dog topped

with yellow mustard, green relish, white raw onions, green pickle spear, red pepper, and tomatoes on a poppy seed bun, tasty and flavorful.

We arrived at the Amsterdam Theater on West 42nd Street to see The Lion King with our tickets in hand for a seat in the third-row orchestra section. Mark had two kids in the play, Ann Jules playing the role of Nala, and Maleek Leggett as Simba. It was amazing how well the actors resembled the Lions in their costumes. It truly felt as if you were sitting in the middle of the jungle. The music and lyrics were phenomenal as you heard the roaring of lions as they strolled through the jungle to the crunching of leaves and birds chirping. I sat in sheer amazement of the jungle coming alive for two and a half hours.

Afterwards, Mark said, "Would you like to meet the actors?" With almost a shrill sound in my voice, I said, "YES!" What an honor to meet Ann and Maleek, with a hug because I was Mark's friend. To see and touch the lion's costumes on the actual backstage set was life changing. I put my hand in the arm of the sleeve of Nala, and I was immediately a part of the action. Here I was on a backstage set of The Lion King on Broadway in New York City. This is something I will cherish and remember forever.

This artistic event was recorded in album number 89 out of my 135 indexed photo albums. **(Edith L. Hilliard)**



PIVOTAL YEARS

Seniors read Lucille Clifton's poem "The Thirty-Eighth Year" and discussed it with guest Erin Celello. Then they chose a year from their own lives and wrote a response either as poetry or prose.

The Thirty-Eighth Year by Lucille Clifton

the thirty eighth year
of my life,
plain as bread
round as a cake
an ordinary woman.

an ordinary woman.

i had expected to be
smaller than this,
more beautiful,
wiser in afrikan ways,
more confident,
i had expected
more than this.

i will be forty soon.
my mother once was forty.

my mother died at forty four,
a woman of sad countenance
leaving behind a girl
awkward as a stork.
my mother was thick,
her hair was a jungle and
she was very wise
and beautiful
and sad.

i have dreamed dreams
for you mama
more than once.

i have wrapped me in your skin
and made you live again
more than once.



i have taken the bones you hardened
and built daughters
and they blossom and promise fruit
like afrikan trees.
i am a woman now.
an ordinary woman.

in the thirty eighth
year of my life,
surrounded by life,
a perfect picture of
blackness blessed,
i had not expected this
loneliness.

if it is western,
if it is the final
europe in my mind,
if in the middle of my life
i am turning the final turn
into the shining dark
let me come to it whole
and holy
not afraid
not lonely
out of mother's life
into my own.
into my own.

i had expected more than this.
i had not expected to be
an ordinary woman.



My Fiftieth Year

I am fifty years old, and I am as joyful and excited as an innocent and believing child on a bright, beautiful, brilliant Christmas morning, ready to unwrap each gift of life with the pleasure of surprise and newness of daytime that life brings.

Fifty years old and wise from years of both many failures and many successes that have come and gone, excited with so much time past of reached goals and time for new goals to set and seek after patiently waiting down pathways ahead for wisdom to prevail.

Fifty years old and my weight under perfect control with my body shaped perfect like an hourglass bottle after years and years of weight struggles from birthing six children who are now all grown and on their own pathways of life journeys of clearly sweet success.

Fifty years old with new journeys to take from six children out of the home now as striving adults and growing under their own new roofs of their own new homes of peaceful promises of new beginnings of new battles of life successes and failures of learning life lessons completely challenging and character building.

Fifty years old with my heart, mind, body, and soul as wild and free as a bird flying towards the skies of hopeful heavenly heights of happy hopeful heightened mountain tops of new life journeys of joyful and new beginnings down the pathways of life's greatest golden gatherings.

Fifty years old and marching through the festivals and parades of life, ready for newness and anticipating new successes galore of so many good changes that come from life's new beginnings past so many stepping stones now stepped out clearly and confidently both wisely and unwisely with great lessons learned loudly.

Yes, I am fifty years old and as joyful as a festival or parade celebration of life, a colorful golden pot of golden blessings at the end of the new days of bright sunshine flowing throughout the presence of beauty blooming boldly toward future faithful fullness of life promises presently passing towards mighty marching miracles flowing freely forward down life pathways.

I picked fifty years old because I had greatly feared turning fifty years old, yet when I reflected back over what I wrote about in this assignment, I felt very, very, very blessed. **(Sherri Bester)**





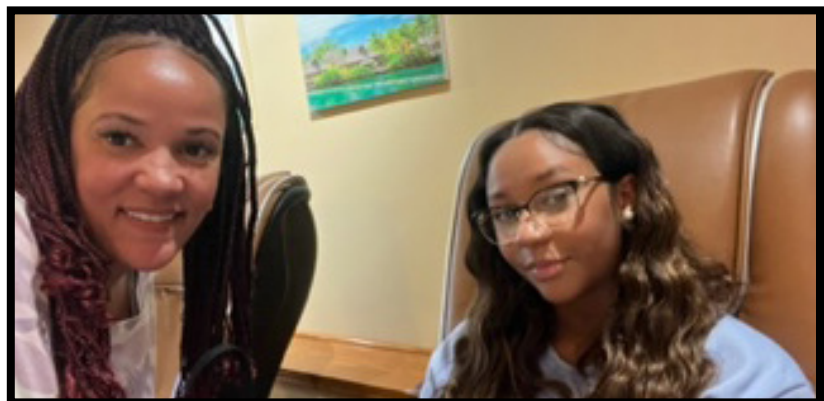
The Day Was Coming

I knew this day was coming
I've been haunted by this coming
I sense the presence of its arrival
I'm nervous, I'm irritable
the feeling you get when you drink
too many Mountain Dew's

I have no control, I feel powerless
I'm paralyzed with the unknowing
I have no say so, I cannot turn back the
hands of time...



There is nothing new under the sun
This has been happening to people for eons
I am not the first, but this will be my first time
Time waits on no one
I want to embrace this like I embraced the
birth of my children and grandchildren
I want this to be a celebratory occasion
I want the Fourth of July fireworks extravaganza celebration!!
When it came, it came quietly like the sunrise
unnoticed like the face on the clock and painless
like "I love you"
The time has come and gone, like the four seasons of the year
Like the four seasons, it will be with me for the duration of my life
I am forever a senior citizen,
A sexagenarian . . . **(Yulanda Williams-Jones)**





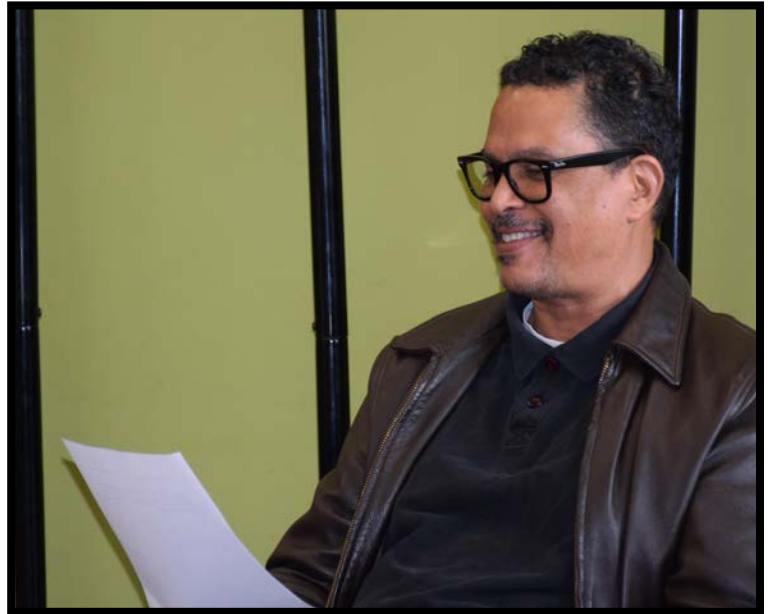
The Sixty-Third Year

in the sixty-third year of my life,
I am indifferent, like a casual Buddhist monk
whose mantra is, “it’s only a problem if you let it be a problem.”

this chant reverberates
around my soul,

as I allow myself to embrace my not-made-for-television human experience.
hunting happiness like a dog chasing its tail,
past regrets and future dreams are lost in
present, circular moments
when I take the time to smell the sometimes-putrid roses.

throughout my life, I have never feared death
but pain,
not physical, excruciating agony—but the
anguish brought on by loss.
icy, throbbing, empty heart, missing you,
choke back tears type of hurting,
pending the next lover or time.



believing in reincarnation at an early age,
I am fashioned by a succession of countless
past lives.
my life ignited by ancestors, who in their
times,
might have found me ancient in the sixty-third
year of my life,
as most died early as second-class citizens with
world class burdens.

I had expected to be happily married, with a
household full of beautiful, brown children,
a brown riding mare in the stable, and
variegated brown and white dogs fetching
downed birds, on crisp Wisconsin fall
mornings.

in my sixty-third year of life—toxic masculinity
has robbed me of a lifelong romantic
partnership—but “doggone it” I have the
rest—if minus the steed
horses cost too much; I am an indifferent man.

(Brian Benford)



My 21st Year

In my 21st year
 full of hope
 full of fears
 thought I was grown
 but felt all alone.

I wanted to be more,
 I wanted to see more,
 but overall, my life was
 just a bore.

You see, my life was not
 supposed to be this way.

But I didn't plan,
 so my purpose went away.

I remember that year,
 I remember that day,
 walking out into the world
 where I didn't think I'd stay.

I had family and friends
 that left way too soon.
 I didn't understand, my world was
 full of gloom.

I traveled through that time
 and space,
 trying hard to make it a hopeful
 place.



I remember that old tune
 swirling in my head . . .

“Those schoolgirl days
 of telling tales and
 biting nails are gone, but in
 my mind . . . they still live on and on.

But how do you thank someone
 who has taken you from crayons
 to perfume?

It isn't easy but I'll try.”. . .
 “To Sir with Love” Man, I've been
 blessed. The journey got better, and
 yeah, I failed some tests.

Perfection: had to lay that thought
 to rest.

Finally, I got myself on track.
 That age 21, I have to look back.

It was a lesson I had to learn.
 What I went through . . . I earned.

Getting to this point
 may not seem fair,
 but it was wonderful,
 and it taught me to care.

(Pamela Bracey)





Looking Back at My Twelfth Year

At the age of 75 I never thought I would live this long. When I was 12 my world fell completely apart like a house being demolished in a hurricane. My grandmother raised me from 9 months to age 12. She passed away at 55 years old. I truly thought she was old as Methuselah.

My next seven years of life were a calamity of errors with no comparison to the first 12 years. I had to go from unconditional love, like that of two parents rejoicing over their new baby, with Grandmother's daily praise and acknowledgement of a child that could and would be a benefit to every generation and this world, to now wondering where life would take me on this journey of unknowing. I felt like a homeless teen who has aged out of the system and is now on her own. Age 12: one year that changed my entire young life. **(Edith Hilliard)**



Black Girl, Black Girl, So Wild and So Free

The 14th year of my life skinny as a string bean clueless as a young baby, I was a wild innocent creature roaming free, not knowing me or who I wanted to be. Black girl, Black girl, so wild and so free but afraid of reality often wondering who she should be, Bumbling, stumbling, tumbling through life thinking should she be mother or wife, cooking cleaning doing all chores, Black girl your life is such a bore.

In May of 1969 I was pregnant not really knowing how I got this way because nothing was ever really explained to me by my mom and in my mind, I never really had sex not really, or had I? Well evidently, I did because on Feb 22, 1970, my daughter was born. Black girl, Black girl, so wild and so free but afraid of reality often wondering who she should be, Bumbling, stumbling, tumbling through life thinking should she be mother or wife, cooking cleaning doing all chores Black girl your life is such a bore.

Time flew by so fast next thing I looked up my daughter was pregnant, and she had my first grandson, and my mother was on her death bed, and I was in full blown drug addiction and taking care of the mother that never took care of me. Black girl, Black girl so wild and so free but afraid of reality often wondering who she should be, Bumbling, stumbling, tumbling through life thinking should she be mother or wife, cooking cleaning doing all chores Black girl your life is such a bore.



Now that I am 67 soon to be 68 this month, I understand my mother and her struggles at least some of them because for whatever reason, I had some of them too. I have forgiven her over and over again in my mind and in my heart. It took me years to develop from that little Black Girl that I was in some ways still am. Black girl, Black girl, so wild and so free but afraid of reality often wondering who she should be, Bumbling, stumbling, tumbling through life thinking should she be mother or wife, cooking cleaning doing all chores Black girl your life is such a bore. **(Lenora Rodin)**

MEMORIES OF CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE

Seniors shared childhood and adolescent memories of encountering racism, experiencing religion, enjoying nature, holding jobs, and traveling to be with relatives.



I recall as a 10-year-old one summer my best friend, her brother, and I took the Greyhound bus to visit their family in Blytheville, Arkansas. It was my first time going outside of Wisconsin without my parents, so I was hesitant but thrilled at

the opportunity to go and see another part of the country. I remember the park shelter on Friday nights where the teens would gather for parties. We had the best time dancing. One thing I recall in particular is experiencing a real “party line” where you picked up the telephone and you could hear others’ conversations. **(Mary Wells)**



As I grew, I did become aware of a lot of events in our lives that sometimes were hard for my mom to explain. She always did say, “It will get better.” When we were faced with no food in the home, she said, “It will get better.” She would place peanut

butter on bread for us, or sometimes bread and peach slices. She would tell us, “It’s all right, it will get better.” When there were no funds to pay for a roof over our heads and we would have to move,



there was always a bright side to it. We would see her sister or her mom, more time to spend with the ones we loved. The transportation was down? OK, now we can get a better one. **(Abigail Israel)**



One night after dark when I was about nine or ten and my brother William (we called him Bill) was in his teens, we were in bed. Suddenly we heard this squealing, squealing, squealing sound. My two siblings and I ran to the window and saw that my brother

Bill had stolen a pig and strapped it to a tree. Bill had a sledgehammer and was hitting the poor pig in the head, trying to kill it.

His mother woke up and yelled, “Get in the house, William!” She took the strap to him and made him take the pig back. My father was already dead. Luckily, the folks he stole the pig from never knew he’d actually stolen it. They appreciated that my mom made sure he took that pig back.

(Ms. Sarah Wells)





I will never forget the summer of 1971. We had moved to the Midwest and I felt out of place. I was attending a new school in a different state. The kids looked at me different, and my accent was different than

theirs. Different was a word that followed me in my new neighborhood and my new life.

Across the street from our apartment lived a white couple who had church services for the neighborhood kids. We embraced this couple and what they offered. My family had never befriended a white person before because in New York we lived in a Hispanic part of the city where the kids and families were all Hispanics.

As the couple took us out for outings, I realized that white people had different ways of having fun. Who knew? We were exposed to roller skating, camping in Michigan for a week, and kite flying. It was a world we didn't know. **(Socorro Lopez)**



When I was coming up on my 16th birthday, which was June 4th, my mom was pregnant with her sixth and last child. She gave birth on June 1st. My sixteenth birthday was the big one, and I was expecting a big day planned exclusively around me. That was



In the summer of 1978, I was liberated from high school and my adolescence. Having spent the last ten years as

the first Black child to attend Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin's schools in 100 years, I was eager to shed the yoke of racism and to explore the world as a newly minted adult. Not knowing how to "adult," I spent the summer of '78 in an altered state, fueled on Hendrix, Columbian Gold Bud, and Auber Bock Beer.

Freedom of self-determination came at a cost, as my immature mind or brain kept me in that fun loving state of mind for the next ten years. **(Brian Benford)**

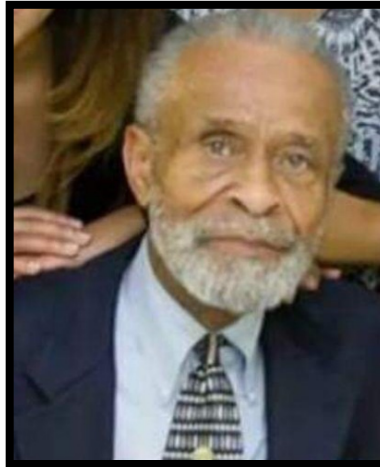


the day I found out that life has a way of throwing us a curve ball. My baby sister came home from the hospital on my birthday, my sweet sixteenth. My mom said, "Sanford, here is your birthday present. Isn't she beautiful?" That was not the present I wanted or expected, but I smiled and held her. It took a while for me to get used to her birthday being three days before mine, but now we always celebrate our days together. **(Sanford Jones)**



When I was 13 years old, I rode the Greyhound bus from Milwaukee, Wisconsin to Greenville, Mississippi to visit my father for the summer. I was in Greenville, Mississippi, visiting

my father for the summer many years after my parents were divorced. I was so very happy to be visiting my father for that summer. It was a very hot and super sunny summer that year. I went to visit my relatives each and every day. I visited my aunts, uncles, and cousins every day. I also visited my grandfather. My grandmother had passed away. My father desired me to spend time with my family members every day with quality time together. My two sisters were there too. I was the youngest. My middle sister was named Cecelia. My oldest sister was named Sondra. We were all so happy and excited to be there that summer visiting with our family members those summer days of heat



and sunshine. My favorite aunt was Aunt KB, my favorite uncle was Uncle Fred, and my favorite cousins were Fredrick Jr., Adriann, and Rene.

They lived in Jackson, Mississippi. It was a very humid summer with crispy blue skies there in Jackson, Mississippi when we went to visit that summer. The rest of my family members lived in

Greenville, Mississippi. **(Sherri Bester)**



At age 13 I got my first job for the State of Wisconsin, GEF I building. Mary, Ann, and I—three friends since I set foot in Lincoln School (Winter 1971)—sat at the desk with nice comfortable chairs that you saw when you entered the building. We did not

know a thing about the building. Just knowing that we had a job with the state was enough. People came in looking for meetings and things, and I can't remember how we directed them, but they never came back. We laughed and talked most of the day.

One day we decided we were going to ride our bikes to work from the Southside Park St. area to our State Office Building job. I believe we did that once. We worked all summer. It was so hot, but the building had air conditioning, which was great. We made \$1.60 an hour. **(Pamela Bracey)**





When I was a child in grade school we went to camp. It was my first camping trip, my first time ever leaving the city of Milwaukee without

my family. I was about ten. I was a student at 20th Street School. It was an overnight camp for about three days and two nights. It was called Upham Woods.

I had to row a canoe. I had never been out on the water like that and wasn't a swimmer. I had to face my fears. There were three other girls on the boat with me, and one was a bully at school. It was a long canoe. We had to exchange positions so we could all get a turn at rowing the boat. The guide with us would tell us what to do. We were wearing life jackets. I stood up, and the boat was shaking. I was trying to think about positive things. "I can do this, I can do this." When I sat down, I got the oars in my hand and started rowing. There was no land you could see. We were out on the water. It was a beautiful day. I was feeling pretty good, but I was still afraid. Inside, I wanted to scream. I kept saying, "I can do this, I can do this." My mom instilled that in us. I was thinking of her words and overcame my fear. Then when it was the next person's turn, I had to move so she could get in that position.

When we got back to land, I saw that I had earned the bully's respect. She treated me nicer than she did when we were at school. We had a shared experience, with each of us learning about the other individual.

At camp we had three days of learning archery, canoeing, and other skills. We sat around the campfire telling scary stories. There was something going on in Milwaukee then about someone with a head as big as a light bulb. That was a story shared around the campfire. Everybody screamed! At night, I was scared. We had to walk out of our cabin to reach a bathroom in another cabin. I thought about



the woods and the bears, and the fears hit me that night. I woke up a teacher to take me. She wasn't too happy to have to wake up.

When we went back to school that following week, I was the hall monitor. We would have to tell people not to skip stairs when going up the staircase. A friend of the bully who had been on the camping trip skipped a stair. I told her she had to start the stairs over, but she didn't want to do it. The bully told her to do it. She did. So that showed me you can win over someone that you had nothing in common with by your actions. I learned that we were not as different as we thought we were. That's what I took from that trip. **(Alice McDaniel)**



I loved going to Chi Phi Fraternity house and being with my grandmother in the kitchen watching her cook and helping her. Many times, I would go into the large dining room and sit at the table, and the guys would come and help me with

my homework. I remember I wanted to be class president at school. And the guys helped me write campaign slogans and a promise for the kids if they voted for me, there would be chocolate milk in the lunch room. The slogan was "Edie Weedy Sure is Speedy, Vote for Edie, Yes Indeedie!" My grandma told me even though I wanted to be president, it might not happen. **(Edith Hilliard)**



I will never forget a hot summer day when I was walking home from Foster Elementary School in Evanston, IL. When I got to the corner of Foster



and Dodge and turned the corner, to my surprise there was my mother riding down the street on a bike. Oh boy! The excitement in my eyes and in my heart was overwhelming, so overwhelming that I still remember it to this day, 60 years later. I even remember what she had on. She had on some Bermuda shorts with a nice shirt sleeve blouse with a scarf tied nicely around her head with the bow tied in the front.

The reason this day stuck in my mind so clearly is because it was not often that I got to see my mom. She had left me with my grandmother to care for me. The few and in-between times that I got to see her were great. So, this one time in my adolescence is a time that I will never forget. It will be forever sketched in my mind. **(Lenora Rodin)**



My father was a police officer, but he used his privilege for his benefit. He got away with so much. He abused our family and presented himself as “the nice guy.” It was a relief to go to my mom’s family home on weekends and get loving and smiles and fun for me as well as my mother. I did not like my father’s mother. She was just as mean as he was.

Like some, my household was violent, and it disturbed my peace as a child. I had to step up because my father chose to chase women. They hated me as the only girl. Religion was whatever woman was in his life at the time. I remember many Sundays sitting for hours and hours at the Catholic church, just watching the beauty of the building. Life was no crystal stair, but I do stop and smell the roses. **(Pamela Bracey)**



Religion played a very important role in my life. My family was Southern Baptist. We attended church every Sunday. We went to Bible study, vacation Bible school, and out of town conferences. We also sang in the choir and

worshipped God in plays. I am very proud of my religion and very grateful to God for how he has blessed me and my family all these years of our lives. God has been so good to us and has helped us overcome many hardships in our lives. We live a life of victory because of God’s holy, gracious, outgoing love. **(Sherri Bester)**





I walked through the garden, feeling calm and relaxed. The warm, welcoming wind and the breeze from the great Lake Michigan brushed gently across my face. The smell of the flowers

was like a sweet cinnamon honey. I softly stepped through the warm sand, feeling a rock here and there. Some rocks were huge like mighty boulders with scars of erosion from the lake. Others were small, smooth as can be, as if they were airbrushed by Mother Nature herself. Peacefully strolling along the beach, I was happy as could be, thinking about the children that came from me.

Whilst enjoying my walk, to my awareness at the corner of my vision, "Oh no!" there was this scary wiggly thing, with a



thousand legs, headed straight for me! "Oh, it's the silverfish I've heard people talking about" With that realization, in a leap and a bounce, I ran to the other side of the garden away from it. Later, I realized I had scared it, just like it had scared me. So, then I just figured, I'd go on back with my happy thoughts and my kindness because I didn't see it anymore. **(Abigail Israel)**



When I was young, a child, at night when I laid in bed, I would hear celestial choirs singing. At first, I wondered if I was merely hearing a radio that was left on somewhere in the house. As I listened more closely, the singing would get louder and louder until it sounded as if one thousand people were singing as loudly as they could. Initially, I was troubled by these nightly concerts, but as time went on, I found solace in them. Perhaps my experiences were a spiritual sign. I stopped hearing the singing in my teen years. What used to cause me concern I now miss. **(Brian Benford)**



I have many memories of race. Our neighborhood in Milwaukee was so diverse. We had families that were German, Italian, Jewish, blacks, and whites. Eventually people started moving in and others moved out. Milwaukee became so segregated.

I remember one time a friend and I were riding a bus. Suddenly I noticed we were going in an area we didn't recognize. Did we miss our stop? It was known you just didn't go to a certain part of town at a certain time of night. I knew the northside as a child and downtown but not those other areas. It was just a sense that you didn't do certain things because you weren't white. It wouldn't be a good thing to go further than your spot. We had our own grocery stores, our own churches, our own neighborhood, self-sufficient and contained. As I grew up, I realized that it was designed that way to keep us in this area. But when you do that, you are segregating people, making them feel they can't be in other areas and interact with others.

I also have a memory from grade school at 20th Street School. It was predominantly a black school. We only had one white student in our class. One day we were playing on a playground, four square with a ball. We had to do a little running. I accidentally stepped on the white girl's tennis shoe.



One of my classmates got mad at me, as if I had done it on purpose. The white girl was treated really special.

I learned that people of my own race could be prejudiced against me because of the darker color of my skin. The darker you were, the worse you would be treated. My mom would encourage me to feel beautiful, saying "the Lord made you that way, don't be ashamed of wearing certain colors." It was just before Black Power and Black and Beautiful started. If you were darker complexion, you got treated differently by peers and even by teachers. I faced discrimination from people of my own race. It was very sad.

In third grade, a white teacher accused me of cheating on a test. I was quite a studier. I knew I had done what I needed to do to prepare for the test. We had to do a sentence about vocabulary words. I caught a classmate looking at my paper. The classmate was lighter skinned ("paper bag complexion," we would say). The teacher took my hand and held it, slapped it with a ruler. That was the first time I got hit by a teacher. I told my mom when I got home, and that teacher didn't do that to anyone else. My mom knew how to straighten people out without having to cuss them out. Whenever this girl sat by me after that, I would turn my body at an angle and put my hand over my paper. I told her she was not going to do that again.

In junior high we would get substitute teachers. In seventh grade, a friend handed me a little piece of orange. "Somebody's eating something," the teacher said. "You're not supposed to be eating anything. I'm talking to the one with the face like me that only a mother could love." I couldn't believe he was talking to me. He was a man with big thick glasses, a heavysset guy. He pointed at me and said, "I'm talking to you." I put my head on my desk. What a thing to say. I started to cry.

Outside, I got in a fight with a classmate who had said things about me. I was angry at the teacher but couldn't hit him. People crowded around to see the fight at school. We put little twigs on our shoulders. First blow. I'm a nervous type person as a child, not

a fighter. I knocked it off and now we're boxing, we're fighting, I have my eyes closed, arms moving in the air like crazy. Next thing I know, the fight was over. I felt a pulling in my hair. When I opened my eyes, she had a bloody nose. I don't even remember hitting her. Some older girls broke us up.

Older girls who were bullies had good advice. They told me, "You can't fight everything somebody says with your fist. You show them in other ways." I wasn't mad at the girl I fought. I was mad at the teacher who insulted me that I couldn't do anything about. We had to go to the principal's office. "You two girls out there fighting—why?" I told him what the teacher said. The principal agreed it was a terrible thing. I don't think that substitute teacher ever taught there again—he was a white person subbing who made me feel so bad, insulting me in that way.

People are going to judge you by the color of your skin. At Robert Fulton Junior High, I remember we had a walkout. The Black Panthers said if we didn't walk out they were going to bomb the school. I was in seventh grade. We learned later that it had only been a rumor about the Black Panthers, but we walked out because we thought it was true.

(Alice McDaniel)



Walking to School

One childhood memory I have growing up on the Southside of Madison is having to walk to Franklin Elementary School two miles every day. My mother made me walk

with my older sister, Alice, and her friends. It only took us maybe 30-40 minutes each way. Looking back at it, I laugh remembering how I used to think, "I don't know how we are going to survive walking all that way." We walked on cool rainy days, cold snowy days, and every kind of weather condition Mother Nature would throw our way. I didn't mind the weather; we knew how to dress accordingly. One block from school was the candy store, where we would all pile in and grab our

favorite candy. Most days were fun. Sometimes we would go under a stone bridge that had a small river flowing underneath it with a very narrow ledge to walk on. We had to walk very slowly.

Another route was not fun at all. I never got used to it, and it was scary . . . and I hated it: THE WATER TRACKS! The infamous water tracks were roughly 10 feet long and suspended over a small river. All you could see below your feet was the water with a few fish, snakes, and sometimes turtles swimming around. What if a train came? What if I fell while the train was coming? Could I run fast enough to get across without falling in? I certainly didn't know how to swim! The thought of being in the water with those slimy snakes and smelly fish—Lord Jesus!

E-V-E-R-Y D-A-Y I would dread the thought of possibly taking the route over "the water tracks." E-V-E-R-Y D-A-Y I hoped the school district would offer bus service to our neighborhood. That didn't happen because we lived "too close to the school." I think if our parents knew these crazy routes we took, they would have been pretty upset.

The water tracks are still there today. But now, I feel safe as I drive my car at a safe distance and LOOK at the water tracks as I reminisce on those times. Overall, I had fun walking to school with my big sister and her friends. We never thought about how important walking is to overall health.

(Mary Wells)



MEET OUR ELDERS

Odyssey Seniors reached back into the past and wrote about an older relative.

When I think of my Aunt Grace, my father Alexander's older sister, I think of her pencil thin body and her elegant demeanor. (A side note here: my grandparents who raised me, Alexander and Grace Lawrence, named their children after themselves.) My Aunt Grace always wore high heeled shoes, a tailored suit or dress, nylon stockings, and white linen gloves daily. She was a beautiful woman and a functioning alcoholic.

At the age of 18 I went to live with her in the big metropolis of Chicago, the Windy City. The daily ritual was up at 6 am dressed in her finery with a light breakfast and off to the L-Station for a 30-minute ride to go to work. After a full 8-9 hours of work, she arrived home to prepare dinner and then to numerous drinks of vodka and orange juice. Most times she would pass out and I would help her to bed.

Aunt Grace was the Senior Accountant for Goldblatt's Department Store in downtown Chicago, and I was her assistant for an entire year. She was a hard taskmaster; however, I learned a great deal about finance from her and the VP at the flagship store at the corner of State and Van Buren. My job was to calculate the receipts from



each department with an adding machine that used tape. I would put the receipts in a brown manila envelope with the department number on the outside and the tape attached with the running tape total. I am sure Aunt Grace would check my work for several months to ensure the accuracy.

Aunt Grace and I were the only African Americans in the office. She had proven herself as a CPA (certified public accountant) and I her trusted trainee. I loved sitting at the small yellow laminated oval kitchen table hearing her stories. She was a Cigarette girl in a Speakeasy during Prohibition. She regaled us with stories of her encounters with the likes of Al Capone and Associates. She talked of how there were underground tunnels for a quick exit, how the gangsters always had an unobstructed view of all doorways, and numerous eyes on everything and everyone. As she strolled the establishment with her trays of assorted cigarettes, it was a common practice for the gangsters to toss \$20 and \$50 on her tray. Aunt Grace said it was profitable work, but it could be extremely dangerous. **(Edith Hilliard)**

My Uncle Rhoadia Paul Vincent

My mother's brother, fifth child, natural birth for my grandmother, he weighed over 13 pounds. My very handsome uncle taught me to wiggle my ears. He paid me a quarter to clean his room. He always had a smile on his face until his only daughter was killed by her husband and his only grandchild died in infancy from a blood transfusion that carried the AIDS virus. Although that pained his life, hard, he continued to smile through the heartache. He told many jokes and stories, and he told them well. We all laughed until we cried.

My grandfather made sure that his sons never had to work for anyone, so he taught them all how to build and fix houses and businesses. They were known very well in the Washington D.C. area. My uncle never moved far from my grandmother. On the property where my grandfather built a four-unit apartment building, my uncle Rhoadia Paul Vincent lived there and paid rent. He helped with the upkeep and walked across the lawn to Grandma and Grandpa's house for a meal often.

He loved us and we knew it. His favorite gum was Juicy Fruit gum. I didn't care too much for it because it was really sweet. But if he liked it, I loved it. He loved to travel. He never had a wife but had lots



of lady friends. He was the best example of a man. He enjoyed life. Being in the carpenter business took a toll on him later in his life. He died of lung cancer. My mother took care of him to the end. Even at the end, his last day, a family friend asked him to tell a joke, and everyone there just laughed. The next morning, he died. I miss all my uncles, but that special love, unconditionally . . . I miss him the most. Born in Washington D.C., he died in my grandfather's birth place, Westlake, LA.

(Pamela Bracey)

Peggy Ann Gillus, my big sister, is like a guide to me in life. Our dad had two wives. Peggy was the third born to our dad and his wife Ethel. With our dad, Judah, and my mom, Sheba, there are two older siblings, then me (Abigail). We have a total of 13 siblings. My big sister Peggy always wanted to be helpful and tried to be the go-to person if one needed a helping hand. She will not tell us her age. She says she remembers when people thought getting older was no good for anybody. So I must just say a different age. She also remembers when milk cost three cents, and the milkman would deliver daily glass bottles of milk at your front door. He would knock two or three times and leave. She told me of a time when she was a girl of nine.

They were in Detroit, Michigan, and you could go outside to play. You could even go down the street or with friends to a home to play with all the neighborhood children. When the street lights began to come on, you had to be at your own home, in the living room. If not, you would receive reprimands. **(Abigail Israel)**

My Uncle Harry Elvord was my favorite uncle. He was mother's oldest brother, and he lived in Salem, Ohio. He was a very good-looking man. Most times you would see him in tailor-made suits, spats, and of course a nice hat, along with a cane. He was a proud man. He was the only black man who worked at Ohio Edison Company as a maintenance worker. He was always on time with an excellent attendance record. Uncle Harry also kept an immaculate house. He had the most beautiful fish aquarium I had ever seen. The bottom half of the aquarium was a wooden bookcase, and the top of the aquarium glass was crystal clear, with a variety of colorful tropical fish, bluish green lights along with varied shapes of pebbles and stones. Then the top had a light covering the entire aquarium.



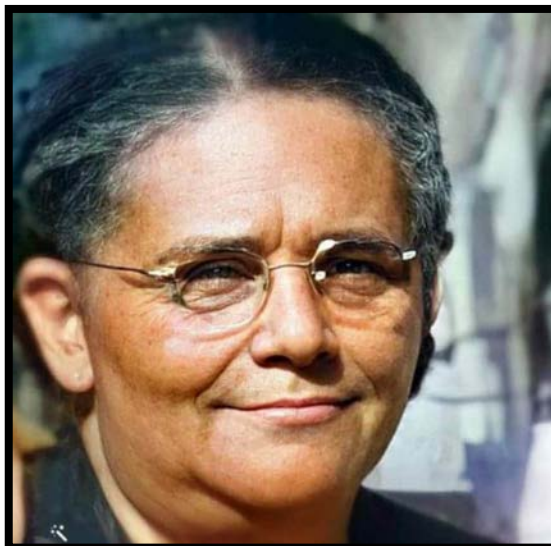
children all born in DeKalb, Mississippi: Lowell, Guydell, Jarvis, and Ann Lou McMullin.

At that time, Uncle Harry was the only person in our neighborhood to own a black two-door Packard Coupe. He kept it immaculate as well. As Uncle Harry got older, he got cancer. I recall vividly how my brother and sister Bertha and Bill fussed with each other as to who was going to get his car after he passed away. His wife Vivian had children and grandchildren from a previous marriage who all came after the funeral, and they wound up taking everything he had, including the car.

(Ms. Sarah Wells)

These are the words of my mother, remembering her mother.

My name is Ann Lou Harper. My maiden name was Ann Lou Mc Mullin. I was born in DeKalb, Mississippi. My first husband's name was Sam Waller, and he was born in Greenville, Mississippi. We had four children all born in Greenville, Mississippi: Sondra, Cecelia, Sherri, and Micheal Waller. My parents were named William McMullin and Dovie Lampley. My father was born in Ackmen, Mississippi, and my mother was born in Dekalb, Mississippi. They had four



My parents were sharecroppers who owned their own land. My grandmother Loda Lampley died when my mother was 12 years old, so she took over her responsibilities as a sharecropper and as a mother of her siblings. She raised fifteen children. She raised three generations of children. She raised her seven siblings, her four children, and my four children (her grandchildren). She worked extremely hard as a mother and as a sharecropper.

After she finished raising her siblings, my mother moved to DeKalb, Mississippi. She bought her own land with the money that she had saved from working, and she began to sharecrop the land on her own. She was married to William McMullin. He was lazy and did not help her with working or raising the children. She eventually packed up her children and her possessions, and she left him and moved to Greenville, Mississippi. She bought a house with the money that she had saved, and she started working by taking care of children of rich doctors. She was a beautiful, wise, gentle, sweet, noble, humble, Christian, hard-working woman of great character, and she lived a great life of victory. **(Sherri Bester)**

I See the Ghosts of My Grandmothers

I see the ghosts of my grandmothers every day. Not in spooky apparitions, but in the faces of my children and the many people that I have served over the last thirty years. I have often wondered if my grandmothers had ever reflected on how their actions (what may seem like daily mundane activities to them) might impact generations to come. I wish that I could tell them both how much I loved them and appreciated their remarkable life journeys. Because of them, I am a father of five beautiful children (four adults) and part of an extensive, diverse, amazing family. This is a story about the life of one of my grandmothers, Lela French (née Matthews), my father's mother. While I could write about my other "remarkable" grandmother, Una Colin, Lela and her journey most impacted my life.

I was born on July 18th, 1959, which meant that I was conceived in October of 1958. Perhaps that is why I love Halloween so much! At the time of my birth there were three billion folks living on this planet. On my birthday, William Wright became the first African American to win a tournament conducted by the United States Golf Association (founded in 1894) as he captured the U.S. Amateur Public Links Championships held at the Wellshire Golf Course near Denver, Colorado. Ray Charles released "What'd I Say," and I came into the world at 10:48 in the morning.

On my official Wisconsin State Board of Health Certificate of Live Births, both of my parents are listed as Negro under the color or race category. At the time

of my birth, my father was a police detective for the City of Milwaukee, WI. He was 36 and had two children from a previous marriage—my sister Charlene and my brother Chako. My mother was 33, and I was her first child. Funny, my mother's occupation was not listed or recorded. I guess that goes with the times. I was loved by women with soft, scented hands and men who wore too much cologne and had powerful arms. Yet, my grandmothers played the most significant roles in my life. They provided me with memories, mostly great, many good, and some that were profoundly sad. Both helped me to formulate thoughts, left lasting impressions, and offered treasured experiences. My grandmothers allowed me, vis-à-vis my parents, this physical life, while society slowly molded me to what I have become today.

Because of my grandmothers, I was introduced to farmers, sun baked brown, and completely beaten down soiled, disheveled winos. Generations of institutionalized love was passed down to me so that I might share it with my children and others. If not for Lela, I would not have my kids. I am not saying that I would not have been a father, but

because Lela bought a house on Blackhawk Island Road, outside of Fort Atkinson (Fort), Wisconsin, in the early 1950s and turned it into a fishing resort, I have my beautiful, multi-racial children. I will explain more later. I find it noteworthy that a small, Black woman from the inner city of Milwaukee decided to open a fishing resort in an all-white rural farm community during the 1950s.

Lela was an entrepreneur who escaped a life reminiscent of the "Color Purple" to become a successful business owner in the 1940s, 50s, and up until her death in 1965. Her accomplishments were unheard of at this time, as



Black women were (and presently are) the most marginalized people on this planet. Escaping domestic violence, infidelity, poverty, and the lack of educational opportunities, Lela fled Arkansas like millions of other Black people fleeing the south, to search for a better life “up north.” Within ten years of arriving to Milwaukee, Lela owned a popular tavern, a thriving restaurant, apartment buildings, a Clark “filling station,” and a fishing resort in Fort that she had created from a home she bought from Henry Niedecker, the father of the acclaimed poet Lorine Niedecker. There are guesses to how she was able to buy and own these properties. An older relative once told me that my grandmother had started what some could describe as a cooperative brothel. A group of women engaged in sex work without any interference or control from men that allowed them all to save money to purchase “legitimate” businesses.

Frenchy’s Resort was named after one of the many husbands that Lela had. She appeared, at least to my youthful observations, to have men in her life for convenience. Although she was only four feet, eleven inches, she was the undisputed boss in any relationship. She wore bib overalls, smoked a pipe, and cussed like a sailor with every opportunity. Frenchy’s Resort was extremely popular with Black people living in Milwaukee and Chicago, as it offered respite from the trials of city living and gave many Black people their closest version of any pristine wilderness. From May until the first frost,

Lela’s resort stayed busy, making her financially secure in addition to the revenues she made on her other businesses. For all her success, it only took my “playboy” father a few years to lose all that Lela worked for—after her death in 1965.

Upon Lela’s passing, my father inherited all his mother’s assets. In 1965, Milwaukee, like many big urban areas, was in the throes of civil unrest. The impending riots and destruction that would take place in Milwaukee during the 1960s forced business owners to flee the inner-city areas of Milwaukee only to fuel the growth of Milwaukee’s suburbs. My father, not being a savvy business person, ended up selling all of the properties that his mother had acquired for pennies on the dollar except for the fishing resort in Fort Atkinson. Fearing violence and the destruction taking place in Milwaukee, my father made the craziest decision of his and consequently my life when he moved his family to Fort.

There is so much that I could say about growing up in Fort. My younger brother and I were the two first Black children to graduate from Fort schools in over one hundred years. While I still carry the yoke of the racism that I experienced living in Fort to this day, I also was blessed to learn at a young age that despite external things like skin color that separate us at times, the commonalities that bind us as humans, like love for family and a desire to be free and treated with respect, were universal despite our backgrounds. Because Lela bought that damn fishing resort on the Rock River, I might now be the only Black man in Wisconsin that can dance the polka, while listening to hip hop music, while baling hay to feed the dairy cows. Because of the ramifications of her actions, unbeknownst to Lela, her grandson would shatter conventional taboos and have children with white women. I am sure that in Lela’s wildest dreams, she never could have imagined that decisions she made in the 1940s might have her grandson writing about her in 2023 for a class project. I hope that she would be proud. **(Brian Benford)**

