

FALL 2025

ODYSSEY SENIOR



ORACLE



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Thanks to guests Sarah White, Erin Ceello, and Kevin Mullen for helping lead Odyssey Seniors in exercises to jog their memories. We explored branches in our lives, moments and figures that haunt us, treasured objects, historical milestones, unforgettable songs, and much more.

www.odyssey.wisc.edu

BRIAN BENFORD

Remembering Aunt Rosie's Cooking

Since birth, I have relied mostly on my senses, directed by my brain, to survive—and learn about the world around me. What I see, feel, hear, smell, taste, read, learn from others, experience, and sometimes intuition shapes what I believe to be real, or the truth. If you think about it, we are all byproducts of our own unique, and deeply personal realities. As a child and at present, at times I struggled to comprehend the world that we are living in. In my 66 years of living, I have seen, felt, heard, smelt, read about, learned from others, and experienced the intuitive interplay of joy and pain. Happiness and heartbreak, jubilant joyfulness and jagged consolations inhabit my mind, taking center stage in the story that I want to tell.

On this humid, 83-degree morning, I woke to the smell of Aunt Rosie's fried chicken wafting like a welcomed apparition into my bedroom. The oregano, basil, Lawry's seasoning salt, garlic and onion powder scented steam from the voluminous, juicy chicken breast popped and sizzled in the scalding, worn, black cast iron pot of Crisco vegetable oil (disco in the Crisco) bubbling away on the old, 1970s, lime green Hot Point electric stove. Aunt Rosie knew how to fry chicken to golden-brown perfection. Saliva, cascading from my fleshy, inner cheeks, pooled on the sides of my tongue in rapt anticipation, while my belly rumbled and groaned like our wood-sided, 1964 Ford Country Squire station wagon. I could not wait to eat!



Wait! Is that orange cake that I smell? Citrusy, sweet, five, two-inch orange-hued layers of white cake, embedded with tiny flecks of grated orange peel, topped by globs of Mandarin Orange buttercream frosting, with a baby blue "Happy Birthday Brian!" lovingly piped on top. Six candles were lit, loving family members cleared their throats for a rousing rendition of "Happy Birthday" (way before Stevie Wonder's cool version), and I was ready to make a wish. The year before, I first noticed my parents yelling (those words that us kids were forbidden to say) loudly at each other, with fluctuating, sharp, shrill, hissing responses in return.

As I closed my eyes, inhaled, and puckered to blow (ha! six candles, no sweat), I cannot remember wanting anything more than the two people that I loved most, almost more than my dogs, to stop screaming at each other because I was quite sure that the bad words coming from my parents'

mouths made my dogs, my two-year-old baby brother, and me nervous. When my parents were shouting, there were no dad's jokes, jazzy songs from mom, silly noises, soft kisses coming from their mouths, and there was too little hugging for my brother, the dogs, and me. Exhale! I wished to Jesus that my parents stop! Just stop! Blow!

Although my wish did not come true, every birthday from the time that I was six years old to presently, I take a culinary time machine trip powered by my memories of happier times. While I can now bake from scratch (no box mix for this boy) my own version of an orange cake with whatever fresh citrus fruit on hand for a smooth, fluffy buttercream frosting, nobody can cook fried chicken like Aunt

Rosie. Sadly, all the great cooks of my childhood have gone to the "great kitchen in the sky." My four adult children are "foodies," and I am sure that they are storing precious morsels of food memories in the refrigerators of their minds that will never spoil. In the vestiges of my memories, I have forgotten what I felt like physically and mentally when my parents fought, but I have never forgotten Rosie's chicken and made-from-scratch orange cake.



Turning Forty

As I waited for the yellow Badger School Bus to pull to the front doors of the Neighborhood House Neighborhood Center, I knew that in the next 20 minutes the bus would be jammed packed with beautiful children of all hues and shapes. At 8:40 a.m. it was already 80 degrees, with little humidity and a gentle, lilac-scented breeze perfuming the air; a splendid day to take 60 middle school children to Devil's Lake State Park for a day of environmental education and play. It was also a great day to celebrate my fortieth birthday. The sleepy-eyed, college-aged counselors (in reality, not much older than the campers) lined up their groups with exotic names, like the Slithering, the Goonies, and the Looney Tunes (twenty children to a group). With clipboards in hands, they began the well-rehearsed procedures to ensure that all the children would be accounted for as they boarded the bus.

With the exception of my children Maya and Jacob, who were "forced" to spend their summer with me (since they were too young to stay home alone and we couldn't afford other summer camps), none of the 12 staff or 60 campers knew it was my birthday. I rather liked it that way. Most of the racially diverse children that came to our summer camp were from historically challenged backgrounds. Out of the 60 pimpled-faced 12-, 13-, and 14-year-olds, 20 were of Mexican descent, 25 were Black or multi-racial, and 15 were white. All the campers were from poor families, except a couple of the children from the Monroe Street neighborhood. In the controlled chaos that ensues before any field trip, amongst the loud chatter, music blaring the latest Hip Hop, and the smells of Axe deodorant and fruity-smelling cheap perfumes, I was in my happy place.

Right on time! It's 9 a.m. and the bus has arrived. The college-aged counselors, like well-trained Navy SEALs, flung open the bus's backdoors and loaded three coolers (packed with sunflower seed butter sandwiches, juice boxes, ice packs, first aid kits, towels, backpacks full of art supplies, an assortment of kick balls in mesh sacks, and Josie's collapsible wheelchair, filling the two back seats with our provisions. In less than five minutes the bus was filled with kids (two staff carried Josie up the steps and gently seated her in the front seat next to the driver) and motoring down Park Street towards Highway 12 West. As was customary, the children began to join in raucous singing of songs that I am too old to know. Periodically, I or one of the college-aged counselors would stand up and yell in big daddy voices, "HEY YOU KIDS! KEEP IT DOWN! You goin' to make the driver crash!" to which the driver gave me a side-eyed glance of approval. As I sat in the front seat behind the driver, whose bald head was covered in tattoos depicting mythical Chinese dragons, and looked out the window watching the corn tasseled fields fly by, I could not (despite the off-key screeching of pop hits radiating from 60 hormonally seeped campers) think of a better way to spend my birthday.



Suddenly all goes quiet behind me, except for some rustling of candy wrappers and whispers. Just as I am turning from my seat to inspect, the bus erupts in loud, joyous singing (on key) of "Happy Birthday." Maya or Jacob must have tipped off the others. As I waved in appreciation and smiled tightly to keep the tears welling in my eyes in place, I thought of the fun that we all would have that day, as I think of it now.



Wisconsin Tattoo

On the inside of my left forearm is a tattoo of the outline of the State of Wisconsin. This needle-and-blue-inked design serves as a reminder (and call to action) that I live in a state with some of the worse racial disparities in the United States; and that I have a better than average chance of experiencing Alzheimer's disease or a form of dementia (runs in the family). As a former elected policy maker with strong socialist and Jesuit roots, my politics run so far left that I can't even make right turns at red lights. As I reach to pick up my cup and I see the coffee with cream image of Wisconsin on my arm, I am reminded that there is so much work to do before Wisconsin's insidious disparities fade. As my memory dims to the point that I am lost, I will point to my tattoo and say, "Take me there, that's where I live, right there!"

PAM BRACEY

Tiny Monster

We met my stepmother the night my father married her. She came to our home. I opened the door. There stood my father, my stepmother, and her little chihuahua dog. That dog always just barked at me and my brothers ever since they came into “our home.” My father never introduced us to her; she just moved in with her dog. She came in with a big white fur coat and the little tiny dog in her arms. My father had a big smile on his face.



Out of fear we would run from that “tiny monster,” but soon I learned a trick. I used to say wait until they leave, and then I would put its walking chain on it and swing the dog around the living room. My younger brothers would do this also. I felt so bad that they caught on to my madness. And that dog would bark at us when my stepmother came back, reclaiming its territory. We would say “wait until she leaves,” and we would do it every time; we would just laugh. Sorry, we were young and had a lot of trauma in our lives. We didn’t do it for long; as far as time went, maybe a minute because we really didn’t want to hurt the dog, and my stepmother was never really gone long. And we had to find the dog when she left.

But as soon as she got back, that dog would start barking at us again, never learning its lesson to leave us alone. When my baby brother burnt down my room, that dog ran out of that house so fast, never to be seen again.



Shattered Dream

My mind draws me back to April 4, 1968, when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. I was in my favorite store buying that candy, five cents a box, and I had a quarter. As I was making hard decisions, outside there were people running around, breaking windows, and screaming “They killed MLK!” “Kill all the white people!” I don’t remember getting or paying for candy that day. I was blocks away from home and had to get back. I also worried about my mom, who was not living with us. My dad had custody at that time. I worried for her and my grandmother because they were Black but very light skinned. I could not call or see if they were okay.

It was truly a regular day in Washington, D.C., but then it turned into a war zone. Never before had I felt the trauma of my life, my safety, my future; somehow walking over all the glass on the path that led me home, I wondered if I would get there safely all alone. I had a male babysitter, four brothers, three of which were younger, and a dad, but where were they? I didn’t feel safe. I was confused and completely out of touch with the whole world. Would I even make it home? Would I see my mom and grandma anymore?

When I finally reached home, I guess my brothers and the male babysitter were there. I truly don’t remember, but that night we were told that we had to be on the porch. When it got dark, my babysitter and my three younger brothers and I sat on the porch, eyes amazed at the big trucks and tanks that rode

down our street. Men with guns were out looking at us to make one wrong move and what? That went on every night for forever.

One night the lights went off. They called it a blackout in the neighborhood. Very dark, very exciting, very scary. Never would I have thought that that was a time in my life that history was made for us as a nation of Black people. Life changed but it went on. What a confusing time. My dad was a police officer, and the people who broke windows and raided stores were stealing everything that had value. Our house was filled with cameras, T.V.s, liquor, clothes, etc. The floor was full of stuff. I saw him much more different after that. He was not there to protect us, as I imagined he would be. Our babysitter, his name was Harvey by the way, kept us safe, kept us calm, kept us hopeful. I've been some places and I've seen some things, but nothing like the shattered dream of MLK.



You, Dad...

You were never the image of a man that I sought after in my growing up stage. I had seen better examples from my mom's brothers and dad. Thank goodness, you were not those men. You shaved with this foamy shaving cream that smelled so bad we thought the sewer backed up. I used to know the name because I always read it when I went into the bathroom after you came out. That smell was the only memory I had of you to let me know you were home. And like the bad smell, your presence was not a good thing either.

Untying the Knot

It's so funny that I was going to write about my mother's wedding ring last night, but I could not get into the actuals of what I truly wanted to say about this treasure. Now today I sit in Odyssey Senior with no choice but to tell you about it. This ring had a transformation when we moved to Madison, WI in 1971. It was November the third, wintertime for sure; things were freezing or had frozen. In the springtime of the following year when things began to thaw and starting over again was a must, my mother took her wedding ring to the jewelry store on State St. (Goodman's Jewelry) and had it transformed not into another wedding ring but into a ring from her sweat and tears from a marriage that denied her the love and comfort, compassion, trust, and hope that she put into it. The only return from that marriage was four beautiful children. She wore that ring as a sign of allegiance that she had made it through the worst of times.

Then on my twenty-first birthday she gave the ring to me. She must have seen something in me that proved me worthy. Was it because I was my father's only female child? I never knew why and for some reason never asked. I wore it because it was from her and maybe she was passing her strength or breakthrough along to me, another female warrior. I have lost this ring many times and found it in odd places each time. I wear it for courage because I believe we have suffered the same pain and happiness differently.

One day my daughter or granddaughter will have this ring and the story behind it and the message that I bring today. My uncle used to say, "The marriage didn't last but four great things came from it." And I believe that message of the ring is on the hand of the beholder.



My Mother

You gave me the gift of life. You baptized me over and over again in your womb. Then you set me free. My father wanted a girl. You pleased him. My older brother may have been pleased, too. I never thought we had an ordinary life, but I thought with what you had to work with we were good. Relatives and friends filled our house on holidays. I never saw anything out of the ordinary as far as life went. This was what I saw. This is what was given. You were strong, faithful, and kind, at least in my mind

At a young age I begged you to leave my dad. He was a very mean man and a great pretender. I married a man like him. I actually walked in your footsteps a little longer than you because I wanted to do better for my family, but actually I didn't know better so I couldn't do better. As I said before, I never saw anything out of the ordinary; that lifestyle was my only example of life.

I loved the weekends with Grandma and Grandpa and our uncles, aunts, and cousins on your side of the family. They showed much more happiness than my dad's people. There just wasn't any joy with his mom and brothers and cousins. She did not like us; rather, she did not like me. My brothers said she was good to them.



Anyway, I want to say thank you for the clean house. Thank you for the clean clothes. The fun baths on Saturdays. The good food. The structure we had. The example of love from your side of the family. The cakes on Sunday. The candy on Saturday only. The no T.V. Sundays. Going outside to play. Feeling safe with you and truly wanted and loved. You and Grandma were the best examples of love. I learned so much. To this day and beyond. I just want to say thank you for all the lessons. Good times, bad times: they were blessings.



A Letter to My Friend

There is nothing like calling you my friend. The meaning never was established, but I know you will be here to the end. We shared a lifetime of the not same but close experiences. We followed a trail from "what is this man doing for me" to "hey, what the hell." Our strength was super almighty. Our faith was intact. So, what were we lacking to get that happiness smile back?

We are older now. Our life is somewhat intact. You call me everyday to bring those memories back. I say it's been a lot. Superheroes we will never be. Imagine us now falling out of the highest tree 'cause we didn't learn the lessons life was teaching us. Let's not talk about the lost, let's not say what could have been. Let's be thankful to God that we don't have to start again. Your Friend

CHRISTINE CINA



Our Ancestors' Rosaries

In the recesses of our bedroom is a box that holds funeral cards of loved ones who have passed. We also have special rosaries from loved ones who have gone on. The beads of my great grandmother's rosary are rubbed so smooth from all the years of praying them. She had 14 children, adopted a niece, and lost four of those children before she herself died. My grandma spoke of her mother incessantly praying the rosary. My mother remembered her walking down the hallway when she lived with them. My mom said you could hear her coming with all the medals and scapular around her neck as she walked.

I grew up hearing how important the rosary was to our Irish ancestors as the English had confiscated their rosaries, and then when they resorted to using their fingers to pray the decades of the rosary, the English then cut their fingers off to prevent them from praying at all.

Whenever you lacked a rosary, when we prayed as a family, my grandmother would always say, "That is okay, just use your fingers as that is why God gave you ten of them!"

She would also assure us that if we fell asleep praying the rosary, not to worry for our guardian angel would finish it for us.

My grandmother was a hard worker, from the farm, to a single mother raising four children, to a housekeeper in a nursing home. Even when she retired, she took care of her grandchildren. All the while, if you entered her home, there would be a rosary by her recliner and a rosary by her bed. She was constantly praying the rosary. She prayed it for her children, for her grandchildren, and for peace in the world.

Now her children and grandchildren often talk about all those rosaries that were prayed for all of us, still keeping us going and helping us to move forward. We are probably still alive and well due to all the beads that were rubbed.

In addition, my mother's generation and my generation have joined the tradition of praying the rosary for our children and our children's children, as well as for peace on earth. We are paying and praying it forward as our ancestors did.

It is very common to hear someone in our family say, "I need to make a lap around the beads" for whatever the intention may be. And it is reassuring to know that the tradition will carry on as we pass these rosaries on to our children and, hopefully, our grandchildren.



My Childhood Friend and Bar Food!

The first friend that I made in kindergarten was named Sandy Panske.

We became fast friends during our morning kindergarten sessions

She was the last child in a family of seven, and I was the first-born twin.

We had never stayed overnight at somebody's house who wasn't family. So, when she invited my twin and me to stay overnight, my mother called her mother to discuss the plans.

Sandy's housing situation was fascinating to us. Her parents owned a bar or tavern on the main street in our small town. It was called Buzz's Bar, even though her father's name was Aloysius. Sandy's family lived above the bar, so all you had to do was go down the stairs and a whole new world opened up to you: pinball machines, darts, a pool table, set tables and chairs with candles on each. The bar seemed immense to me. I didn't even try to get up on one of the bar stools. They also had a juke box where you could select your favorite musical selections. I marveled at all the liquor bottles as well as the tap handles for the beer. I loved all the beer signs and neon lights that pierced the night as the sun went down.

It was then that we had to go back up to where the family resided as we could not be in the bar area when Mr. and Mrs. Panske opened up the establishment. Friday evenings were big nights as it meant one thing, fish fries! You could hear the music, the people talking and laughing; you could smell the fried fish, the cigarettes, the bewitching smell of beer and liquor.

In between making dinners for the customers, Mrs. Panske would bring up a delectable cornucopia of fried fish with flaky crust, crispy and salty fries, homemade cream-based coleslaw and tartar sauce, and freshly cut vegetables; she then topped it all off with her moist chocolate cake and a big glass of ice-cold whole milk. We would eat with Sandy's siblings and grandfather, who lived with the family. He was really interesting to listen to as he spoke a mix of German and English.



We would then go to bed and talk until we fell asleep. The Buzz's Bar light was blinking as we drifted off to Friday night fish fry heaven ...

We never heard when Sandy's parents came upstairs after a long night of cooking and serving people. Even so, we would wake up to the smell of cinnamon and bacon. Mrs. Panske would make a stack of cinnamon French toast. We would lather the butter on and eat some bacon, which was crisped to perfection. Sandy was a grand friend, her parents and siblings were very welcoming, her grandfather was a joy, and my mouth still waters and my olfactory nerve delights when I think back on those Friday fish fries and those Saturday morning breakfasts.

Sister Helene

A spirit that lingers with me is that of my Aunt Sister Helene. She was the first nun that I ever met. I remember visiting her convent in Milwaukee as she was the Mother Superior of the Salvatorian Order.

She used to take my twin and me out into their beautiful garden laden with flowers, butterflies, and birds. She used to run with us in the field of grass, with her rosary bouncing as she ran. She would feed us wonderful meals and tell us all kinds of stories.

Then things turned bad as we learned that she had bone cancer. She started to use a wheelchair, and we were told we should not touch her as we would cause her pain. Nonetheless, she let us touch her hands. I remember trying to be so careful to touch her ever so softly, checking her face so as to detect any pain.

She was our aunt who was also one of our first dear friends. We recently visited the convent for an event, and we spoke with many sisters who knew her. They spoke of her great leadership as she guided the Salvatorian Order through some very rough times. She was the first accountant of the Order, so she financially saved hospitals all over the world that her order has started.



Her spirit was there as we visited the only all girls high school, Divine Savior Holy Angels. I also see her spirit in my third child, Gianna Paula Helene, who is just as kind but fierce as Sr. Helene was. Sr. Helene's anniversary of death was August 15, the Feast of the Assumption, which was Gianna's due date, even though Gianna came on August 14.

Sr. Helene was an inspiration and a role model for us. And I am sure she is one of the many reasons that I became a historian of women religious.

I will never forget that phone call at my grandmother's home when the convent called to inform us that she died. My twin and I always associate the song "Whenever I call you friend" by Kenny Loggins and Stevie Nicks with Sr. Helene as that was the song that was playing when we heard of her passing.

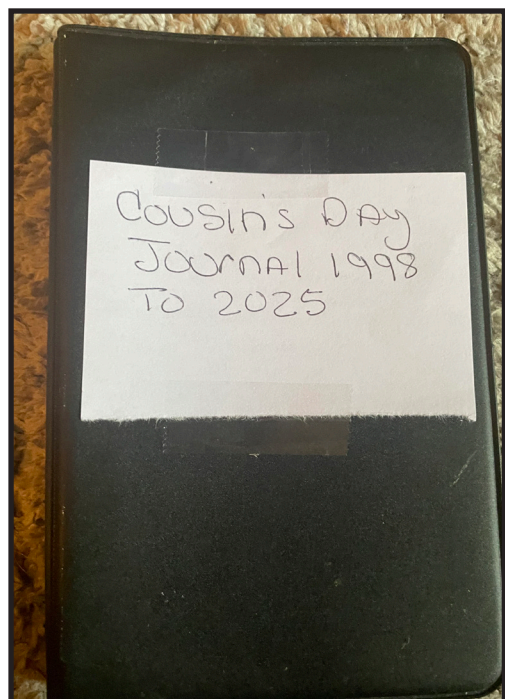
EDITH HILLIARD

Remembering Miss Turner

Miss Turner was meaner than a junkyard dog. She owned the one and only Beauty Salon for African Americans. Once a month my grandmother would announce, "It's time to go see Miss Turner." Those were the chilling words that would shake me to my core. Miss Turner would smile so pleasantly at my grandmother, and they would have a brief conversation on several community members. When Grandma left, Miss Turner's smile and pleasant demeanor would change to a scowl with a mean temper as she barked orders at me to move to the sink to wash my hair with the hard water and Castile soap.

It felt really good as the warm water penetrated my hair to my scalp. Then the rest and relaxation of the hooded hair dryer for 45 minutes; then the danger zone to sit in the hot seat. The straightening comb is on the burner getting hotter and hotter. It's ruby red now and coming toward my head for the pressing. Occasionally, Miss Turner would tap me on the head with that blazing hot comb telling me to be still. Finally, it's over two hours later and my grandmother arrives to get me. Miss Turner changed back to Miss Pleasant personality.

As we are walking home on S. Park St. to 607 Conklin Court, I'm telling my grandmother how mean Miss Turner was to me. I tell her how she hit me in the head with that steaming hot comb. Grandma stopped walking in mid step and says, "Shame on you! Miss Turner would never do anything like that." Grandma never believed me, and Miss Turner continued her dual personality.



The Cousins' Day Journal

Cousins' Day started in 1996, and two years later in 1998 we started the journal. I had nine grandchildren at the time. They were sad because they only saw their cousins, my grandchildren, on Christmas and Easter. I decided the third Saturday of each month from noon to four they would all come to my place at 3601 Elliot Lane for Cousins' Day. Over time it increased to 11 cousins.

We would first have lunch. There would be a preferred food list, Grandma approved. Then I would write in the journal starting with the oldest and down to the youngest giving their exciting news of the month.

This past Saturday, six out of the 11 cousins were in Madison, all adults now, home for a family wedding of my nephew, Kaleb, who sometimes attended Cousins' Day. They all remembered the journal. I had no idea they would remember that, but they all did.

I decided a Cousins' Day would be appropriate.

When the journal started in 1998, the youngest was three and the oldest ten; now the youngest is 23 and oldest 34. This past Sunday, all came over to Grandma's house. I made their favorites, blonde brownies, peanut butter cookies, deviled eggs, ham roll ups, spaghetti, garlic bread, and lemonade. We pulled out five photo albums depicting Cousins' Day and read excerpts from the journal. They laughed so hard they cried. Nevonte, now 27, read where he was four years old and knew his own phone number; that was quite a feat at four. We read how Harry was always the first one to know the family history. It was an amazing time reading 29 years of Cousins' Day memories in the journal.



Remembering a Turning Point

I was about 12 years old at Fitch Lawrence Sanfilippo Funeral Home. It was my grandmother's funeral [the grandmother who had raised me]. As I was walking down the stairs, I heard the conversation. "Who's gonna take her? Where is she gonna go?" Aunt Bettye said, "I don't want her," and then Aunt Grace said, "I can't take her. I live in Chicago." Then Aunt Bettye said, "Well, I guess I have to take her. Who's gonna help me financially with her? Somebody needs to help me. I already have three kids, and now to have a fourth one is gonna cost me a lot of money."

I knew they were talking about me. I felt terrible. I didn't wanna live with Aunt Bettye. She was always so mean to me, and now I was gonna have to live with her. I wasn't looking forward to that.

It was truly a turning point in my life. I went from 12 incredibly wonderful years with my grandmother always telling me what a wonderful person I was, how intelligent I was, how I would grow up to be whatever I wanted to be, and just always having positive accolades every single day. Now I knew living with Aunt Bettye it would not be the same. I remember how she didn't like me in the first place, and now she was gonna have to raise me. It was truly a turning point in my life. It would never be the same.

My African Journey of Awareness

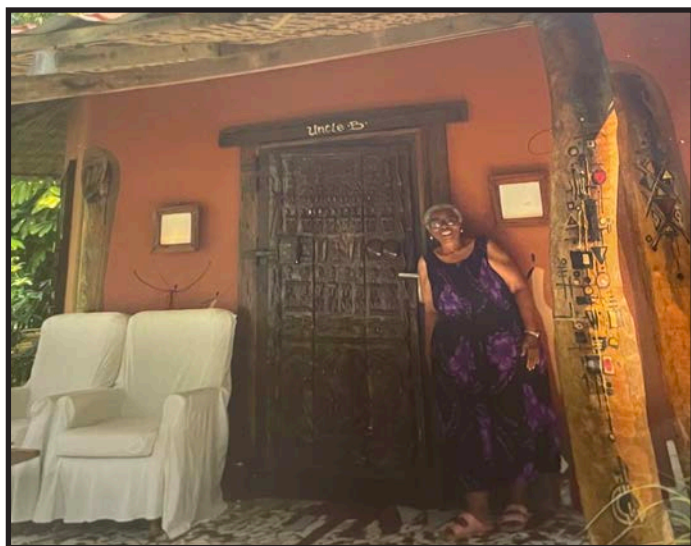
Traveling to Africa with Afro Discoveries was monumental. This travel agency is truly one in one million. I was cared for in a manner fitting a queen. Traveling was not as terrible as I had anticipated on a very roomy plane. I have the unfortunate obstacle of not being able to sleep in motion; however, the meals were exceptionally delicious, tasty, and even hot. There was a selection of movies with a vast variety. I watched with great anticipation of arriving at my destination.



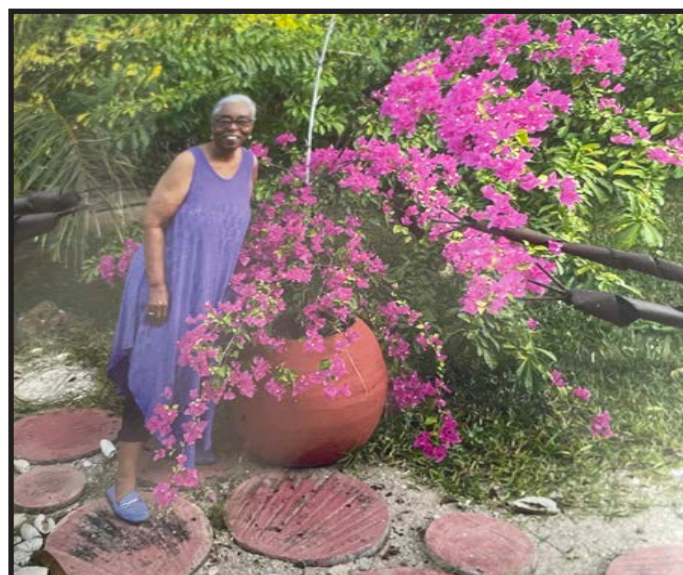
The first hotel was quite rustic; however, the view of the Atlantic Ocean in Senegal as the sun set was breathtaking. The second place we stayed was amazing: Mama Africa's. We each had our own unique housing unit. The entire space was like living in an art gallery. The owner, Isha Fofana, is an internationally known Gambian artist. She had created a beautiful, artistic BNB with an art gallery and a garden that was truly a botanical wonder located in Gambia. The roof of my living quarters was a straw weave with bamboo. As I stepped into this artistic creation, I was in awe of the detail on the floor, stucco in a marble-like stone with African design. The paintings on the walls were like being in

the Chazen Art gallery; the furniture was old world antique. There was netting overhead to be pulled down over the entire queen size bed. The bathroom and shower area were like nothing I had ever had the pleasure of seeing: beautiful stone-shaped pictures of women and African birds, amazing artifacts. Everywhere you looked, the artist's hand was there.

On the property was a public art gallery with pieces that were exceptional paintings, sculptures, furniture, even a vignette depicting the African culture. Needless to say, it was like living in a beautiful art gallery, surrounded by a botanical garden, looking like a museum. This was the beginning of my journey to Africa.

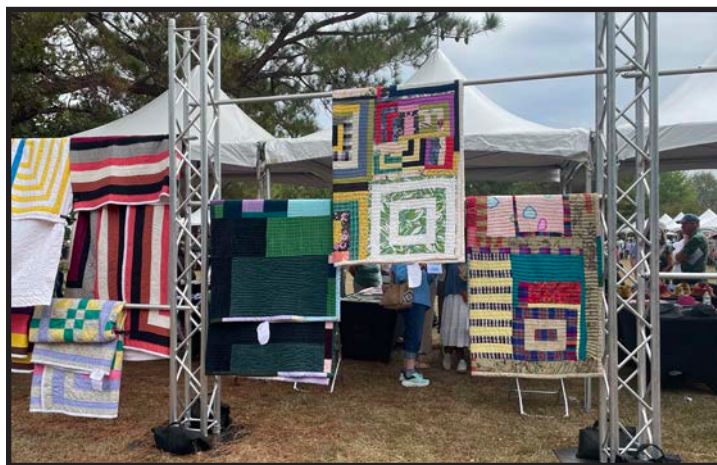


Now to see where my ancestors were kidnapped and enslaved. I stood at the "DOOR OF NO RETURN," and I wept unconditionally. Looking out into the vastness of the Atlantic Ocean, I could envision my ancestors boarding the ships in chains and turning around, knowing they would never see their homeland again and would endure a lifetime of unimaginable cruelty and torture. This view will haunt me forever.



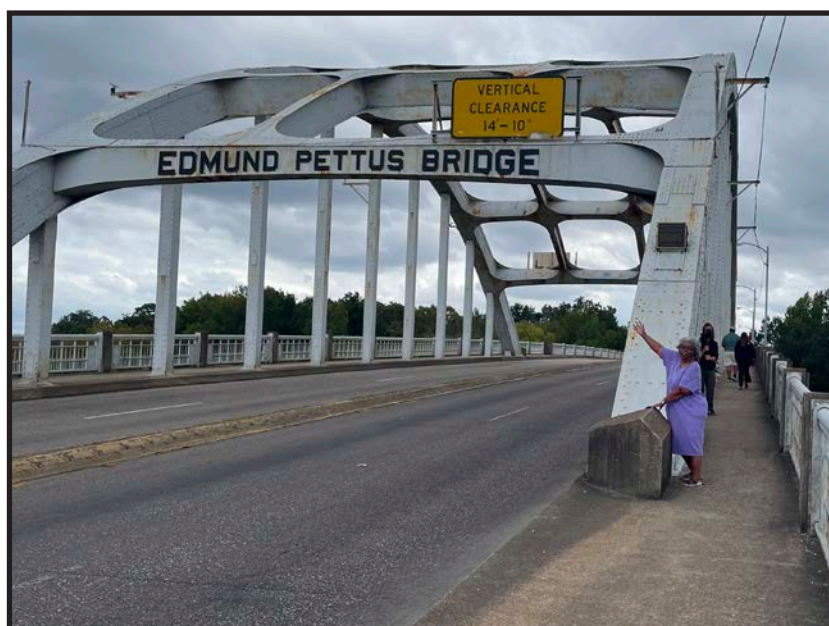
Alabama Bound

Can you picture 35 people on a brand-new chartered bus heading to Alabama? It was a beautiful sight to behold. We watched the movie "Selma," we quilted, and we played games. This was the second part of my journey with Memory Collectors, a unique quilting group devoted to the prevention of Alzheimer's. We are out of the Creator Cottage, a nonprofit art center and safe place for writers and artists. The origin of this trip was to go to Boykin, Alabama to see the Gee's Bend airing of the quilts.



It was a sight to behold as we drove into the city. Every clothesline displayed a beautiful handmade quilt. Gee's Bend quilts are internationally displayed in museums all over the world. The early quilts were made from work clothes and recycled materials. In addition to the quilting extra extravaganza, we were blessed to experience the history of Selma and Montgomery during the Civil Rights era.

For me the highlight was being able to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge. As I approached the bridge, I had a vivid picture of Bloody Sunday that day on March 7, 1965, the day Civil Rights marchers were brutally attacked by state troopers as they began a march for voting rights. As I walked, I prayed, sang freedom songs, and thought of John Lewis and his "Good Trouble." When I reached the end of the bridge, I couldn't hold my tears. I felt joy, sadness, and gratitude all at the same time. It was truly a very emotional moment. I was grateful to have had the opportunity and felt blessed by what my ancestors did for my freedom.



CECILE BROWN



My First Trip to London

I remember my first trip to London, England in August 1977 to study abroad. I was one of many students from Lawrence University in Appleton, WI to take advantage of the international studies program my first semester of my junior year. I remember how excited I was and anxious at the same time. I didn't know of anyone else from Lawrence who was going that semester, so I was very nervous as well. However, I met several other students who I had not known on campus. We stayed at the Arden Hotel in Earls Court.

It was a really nice place to live with amenities you would find on any campus. The hotel rooms were very similar to the dorm rooms where you shared with another student and shared the bathroom down the hall. We had a full kitchen where we could cook, a laundry room, and a clerk at the front desk (Winifred) who also served as our 'house-mother.' We also had classrooms there, but some classes like my art classes were held at a museum or some other artsy place. There were other guests as well, mostly vacationers who entertained us with lots of card playing and watching television (the Tally) and roaring with laughter at the crazy sitcoms that had humor I hardly even understood.



I was able to visit the beautiful city of Paris twice on the weekend traveling by ferry, which took three hours to cross. There, I went to the most famous, fascinating, and largest museum ever, the Louvre!! The massive art collection was amazing, including the Mona Lisa. To see this art piece was almost breathtaking!

I absolutely loved everything about London; the theatre district, the arts, the museums, the shops, Trafalgar Square (where you 'feed the birds'), Hyde Park Corner (the only place at that time to indulge in 'free speech'), and the night life! I even got used to people driving on the "wrong side of the street," which was quite strange. I liked riding on the red doubled-decked buses and taking the 'tube' (train) to my destination. I toured the London Bridge and saw the most fantastic gardens that surrounded the parks with the most beautiful, colorful flower gardens I had ever seen. Seeing Buckingham Palace and watching the 'changing of the guards' was great. Taking a tour to see the Queen's jewelry was

quite an amazing experience as well as the Royal Albert Hall. I adored the Londoners and the way they talked. It was fascinating to go into the most famous store in the world, Harrods. It was huge!! Anything and everything was sold there. I tried to visit all the sights in London and some outside of London including the Thames River and Big Ben.

This decision to spend three and a half months in England changed my life and inspired me to travel not only abroad but travel period. I was able to travel to London (on business) and Paris (for fun) when I was a supervisor in customer relations at Virgin Atlantic Airways during 1990-1995. This airline was international, founded by Richard Branson. I traveled with friends to London just for the weekend to see a play or just enjoy the museums. This is how much my trip to London inspired me. I will never forget my experience in London and Paris as a student because not only was it fun and exciting, it was also educational.

What I've Been Afraid of All My Life: Big Black Dogs!

Something I saw the other day when I was walking down the street reminded me of one of my fears. A man was trying to contain his big black dog but really couldn't, so I walked across the street to avoid any confrontation. I would often cross the street or go the other way when folks walking their big dogs sometimes seemed to not have a good grip on the leash.

I remember when I was quite young my siblings and I were afraid of dogs. We only grew up taking care of birds, our parakeets. My aunt had a big black Labrador retriever named Blackie. Whenever we went to visit her, the dog would want to jump on us. 'He's only being playful,' my aunt would say. But we were afraid anyway and would put our feet up on the couch so he couldn't get to us. She would fuss at us so much for 'not trying to get used to Blackie' that we were just nervous and cried all the time. Most times my aunt would put Blackie in another room, but as soon as we settled down and focused our attention on something else, she would secretly let Blackie out. If you wanted to hear five young girls and one young boy scream in terror, you should have heard us!

When I was a mail lady, I was so afraid of stray dogs, especially the black ones, that I carried a huge, long stick to ward them off when they came near me while I was delivering my mail. I often had to use the spray that the post office supplied called HALT. And did it halt!! I remember a huge black dog came charging at me as I was going up the stairs to put mail in the mailbox. The owner saw it and quickly opened her door and I rushed in. It belonged to the neighbor down the street, so I stopped all deliveries for that entire block. When I got back to the post office, I advised them of the situation. The neighbor



had to pick up their mail from the post office for a whole month. Those are the rules when you let your animal loose and running around neighborhoods attacking people. I also had to run and jump on a car while delivering mail because a black dog was chasing me; I managed to jump on the roof of the car and he/she couldn't get up there.

The irony is that when I lived in New York (NY) my roommates brought home a black Labrador retriever named Ebony. She was the sweetest, gentlest, most mild-mannered puppy at seven months old. I was afraid at first, but then I grew very fond of her and started taking her out for her walks, feeding, bathing, and playing with her. See, ya never know! I'm still a bit afraid of big dogs, though!!

CHAR BRAXTON

My Royal Chariot

My grape bicycle was my dearest companion. a shimmering chariot of royal purple that caught the wind and whispered freedom.

Its white basket, adorned with yellow flowers, cradled my secret treasures.

The roads we wandered were sometimes smooth as silk and sometimes rough with stories untold.

My lavender dresses and violet bows fluttered like wings, moving in harmony with my faithful friend.

Often, I would sit beside it in quiet reverie, confiding my dreams into its silent frame, knowing it would never betray me.

That bicycle was not just metal and wheels. It was trust, laughter, and memories bound together.

A purple echo of innocence that still lives in me today.

I miss my purple friend.



Odyssey goes to China (from Odyssey Newsletter)

"You are not college material," a high school guidance counselor told Char Braxton, and she believed it at first. Then she discovered Odyssey. Char went on to earn honors from Madison College and acceptance into the UW, where she is majoring in Chinese and Creative Writing. This summer, Char became the first Odyssey graduate accepted into UW's Study Abroad program. "I can't believe my dream is actually coming true!" Char said as she flew out of the country for the first time in her life.

In a poem a few years ago called "Crossing the Ocean," Char invited that disparaging guidance counselor to come to China with her:

Odyssey created a passion in me: learn — read — write and be strong! Humanities — I am transformed.

我正在上中文大学课 Wǒ zhèngzài shàng zhōngwén dàxué kèchéng. I am taking Chinese college courses. One day, I will travel to China!

Dear Mr. Guidance Counselor — I invite you to come with me. Set sail — release anger — the fortunes of forgiveness. Let's journey together!

CHRIS WAGNER

Emma Hill

In the strict caste system that was sixth grade at Columbia Elementary School in Peoria, Illinois, in 1964, Emma Hill (not her real name) was relegated to the lowest rung. She suddenly appeared in our school in the fall that year, her family moving into the run-down house half a block or so from my house. Sometimes, I walked to school with her, but I quickly learned that it was best not to socialize with her once we got to school unless I wanted to join her at the bottom of the heap, which I did not.

Emma often wore the same light-weight faded wrinkled pink dress to school no matter what the weather. She probably didn't have many other choices. She proudly announced she'd gotten it at the Salvation Army, something that no one else would ever admit to, even if it were true for them, which it often was.

I was a skinny kid, but Emma bordered on being emaciated. It didn't occur to me that as we walked back from school after our lunch at home, Emma probably had not eaten anything, whereas I had gobbled up warm soup and a toasted sandwich to sustain me for the afternoon.

Emma was a kind and gentle soul and told me once that her father had beaten her when he was drunk but said he was sorry later, and she forgave him. She also told me excitedly that for her birthday celebration she had a bag of potato chips and a coke, a far cry from the home-made cake and presents my family gave me.

Emma seemed to quickly accept that she was to be a loner at school. No one wanted to hold hands with her in group games and no one wanted her on their team. She smelled like she needed a bath and her pink dress needed washing. She played in a corner by herself during recess; I would think about going over to talk to her, but I rarely did. My "friends" would make fun of me if I did, and the bullies would add me to their target list. I was terrified of being on the target list, which I was far too often anyway.

Emma and her family left the neighborhood as quickly and quietly as they came. I wondered what happened to Emma then, and I still do. She never appeared in any class listing I could find, nor did I see a notice in the newspaper of her getting engaged or married. Many years later, I checked for her again after social media came into existence, but I could never find her.

I am haunted by the memory of Emma Hill, playing quietly by herself on the outskirts of the playground, sitting friendless, ghostlike, in the classroom. I wish I had been a better person, a stronger person, and less fearful of being shunned or bullied. I wish I would have been a friend to Emma Hill.



Dorothy

I remember a moment in time when I was probably about eight years old. I was rocking my baby doll, Dorothy, named after the main character in the Wizard of Oz. As I sat there in my child-sized rocker, feeding Dorothy her bottle and gently rocking her back and forth, I suddenly realized that Dorothy was not alive. I felt a deep sadness sweep over me. Dorothy would never grow up, never talk or walk; Dorothy would never feel happy or sad. I touched my arm and then touched hers. I could feel my touch. She could not. Tears came to my eyes. I strongly sensed that something had changed in me, some sort of awareness had awakened, and I felt different, older. I still played with dolls after that, but that feeling always came back to me whenever I did. It was never the same.



Vacation Bible School

The first time I decided to not believe something that an adult authority figure told me was when I was in fourth grade and attended Vacation Bible School (VBS) with my best friend, Laura, at her church, a Lutheran (Missouri Synod) Church. Her church was in our neighborhood so it was convenient for us to go together that summer. Most of the curriculum consisted of the usual Bible stories told to kids (Jonah and the Whale, Noah's Ark, etc.), songs ("This Little Gospel Light of Mine"), and related crafts to help us remember the message, but we also had about 20 minutes each day of a lecture from the very solemn and strict pastor. I was terrified of him and dreaded those 20 minutes.

One time, the pastor told us in no uncertain terms that if a person wasn't baptized, even if the person were a little baby, then that person would go to hell. Laura and I both found this extremely disturbing as we had a good friend who was not baptized. We worried about what would happen to her. What if she were in a car accident or something? We couldn't make her parents get her baptized. Besides, it just didn't seem fair. How could God be so cruel to someone whose parents didn't take her to church or to a little baby that died before it could be baptized?



So after careful consideration, we both decided to simply not believe it. We decided the pastor was wrong. I cautiously went home and told my mother what we'd learned from the pastor and what Laura and I had decided. She wholeheartedly agreed. "You're right," she said. "We don't believe that." Her affirmation sealed it for me. I did not go back to that VBS again.

Remembering Bailey

On a dusty shelf in my backyard shed, there is an old cracked orange plastic bat and baseball. They have sat there since my great nephew Bailey put them away after his last visit to my mom and me over four years ago. A few months after that visit, Bailey joined the Marines and was stationed in Japan during COVID, my mother's last year and her death.

Shortly before Bailey was supposed to return to the U.S., he was in a fatal car accident. It seemed impossible to believe this vibrant soul was gone.

Whenever I open the shed door, I picture the two of us playing our simplified version of baseball, making the trees and bushes into imaginary bases.

Bailey's favorite thing to do was to hit the ball over the roof of my house, not an easy task with a plastic ball and bat, but he did it often enough to keep his big brother busy retrieving the ball for us.

I actually watch over and over a video his mother took of one of our games, but the truth is all I need to do is look out my back windows and I can see us in the yard playing ball. And then I see him on one of the many scavenger hunts I set up for him or using the old clothesline pole as a gym bar with me screaming, "You're gonna kill yourself! Get off that!" These memories spin me around to earlier days of swing sets, slides, and snowballs; legos, hugs and sleepovers.



BOB AUERBACH

Remembering Marli

On reading Ricardo's essay "Blue Ink" in the Odyssey Beyond Bars Oracle about a letter he received in prison from his young son, my mind traveled back to when I was eight years old. (Yes, as I get older, my memories travel back to ever longer-ago times. That was 88 years ago.)

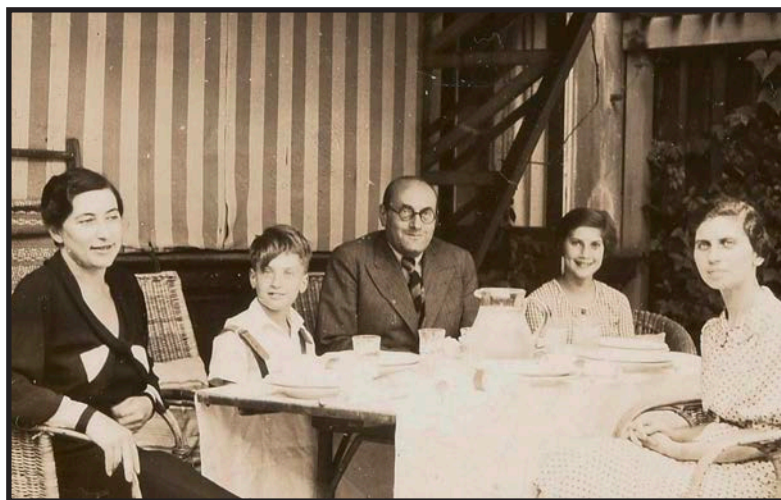
Just a few days ago I received a photo of a letter I wrote in 1937 or 1938. It was typewritten (my handwriting was then and is still illegible even to me), which I sent from my home in Berlin to Marli – the "Kindermaedchen" (Nanny). At that time, nannies typically went "into service," becoming a member of the family. Growing up with two professional parents, we had a cook, a maid, and a nanny – typical for its time in western Europe.



Marli cared for me from the day I was born in 1929 until 1936, when Hitler's Nazis forbade Arian Germans from serving Jews. Marli had moved out of our home, still lived in Berlin, but we would put her in danger if we as Jews visited her. I loved her. I missed her.

Each paragraph of Ricardo's essay brought back memories.

After the war (WW II) ended in 1945, I returned to Germany for professional reasons, and I visited her in Berlin. The first time, I had to travel by special PanAm flights over the



Russian-occupied zone to a much-destroyed Berlin. After a few years, travel was easier, and Marli came to visit my family in Madison, Wisconsin (her first overseas travel). Then my mother and I flew to Berlin to help celebrate Marli's 90th birthday. When my wife Wanda and I visited her in Berlin, she gave us this copy of my letter, along with many photographs.

Finally, I returned to Berlin by myself once more, this time to attend her funeral.

In the intervening decades my letter to Marli along with other documents and photographs were donated to the Jewish Museum in Berlin. And so just a few days ago, it came back to me in an email.

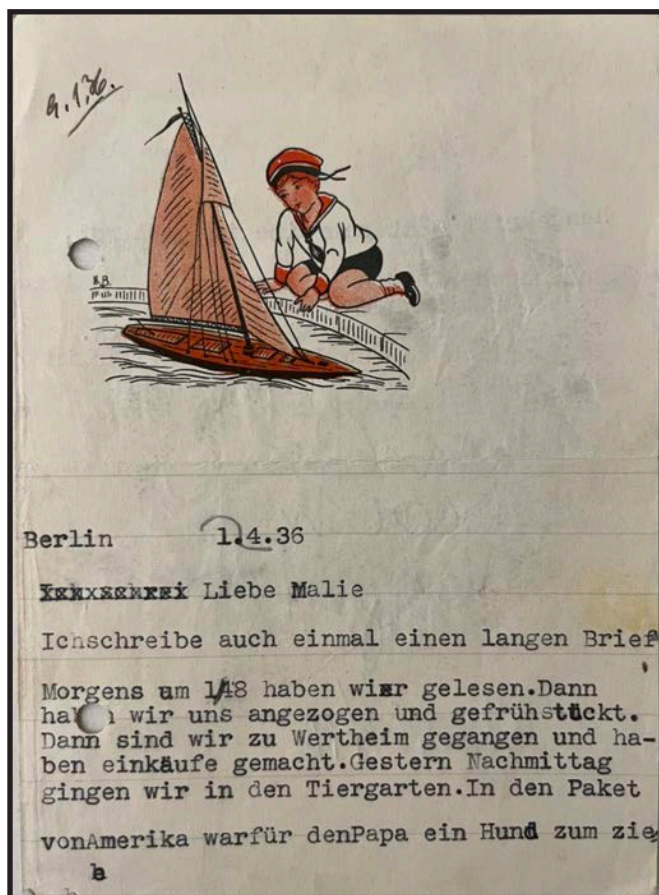
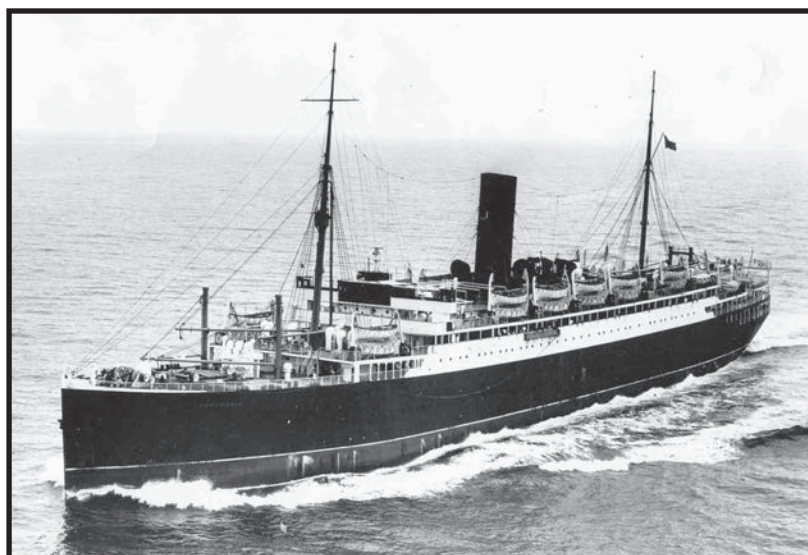
I loved Marli.

I still miss her.

An Embarrassing Moment in My Life

We were finally on the SS Cameronia between Scotland and Iceland. Four days earlier we were dodging U-boats; now we worried more about icebergs. My father, who had been interned for months on the Isle of Man off the Northwestern coast of England, had been released to that boat, and we had left the London Blitzkrieg by train to join him. Yes, we were indeed on our way to America.

We had been sternly warned not to open any portholes because it might make us visible to the Nazi bombers and submarines, but the cabin was extremely stuffy, so my father turned out all the lights and carefully opened the porthole. Alas, water rushed in, and he rapidly closed it up again.



The next morning the steward came in to clean up the stateroom and make the beds. He noticed, of course, that the upper bunkbed was wet. Sternly he asked my father how come the bed was soaked. My father, with his life-long experience as a lawyer of quick retorts at trials, said, nonchalantly, "Oh, yes – You know – my son – he's 10 years old – you know ... he slept in that bed."

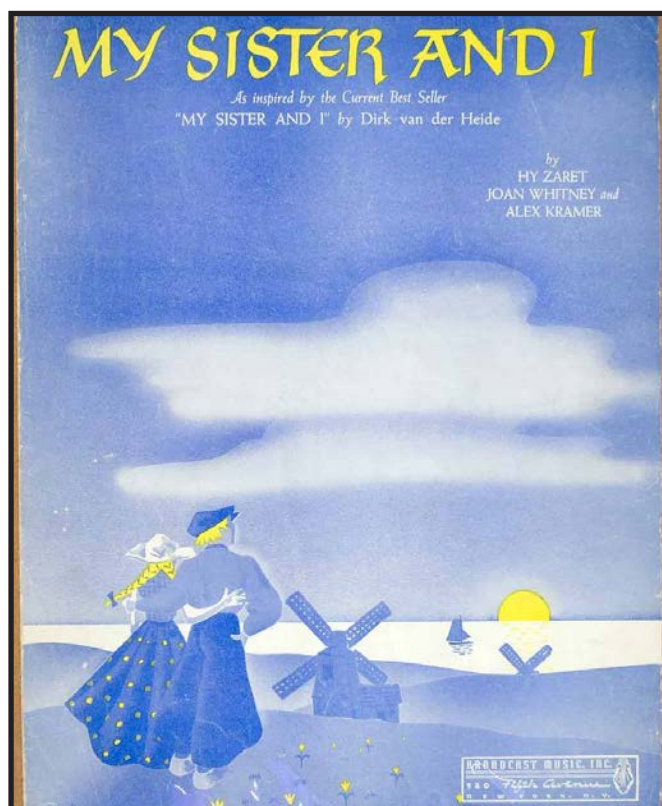
The steward nodded sympathetically — "I understand."

I was mortified.

My Sister and I

In 1945, at the end of the war (WWII). Brigitte (my older sister) and I listened to the Hit Parade, a radio program playing the top 10 hits of the week. There we heard the songs recorded by Jimmy Dorsey's band – yes, the Big Band era, on Decca Records.

The song was originally written by a 12-year-old Dutch boy who, along with his sister, had found their way to the United States, barely escaping from the invading Nazi army. Brigitte and I felt this was our song, and she frequently asked me to play it on the piano with her singing the words. Well, singing was an exaggeration – she was terribly out of tune, but yes, it was our song.



My sister died more than three decades ago, but it is still our song.

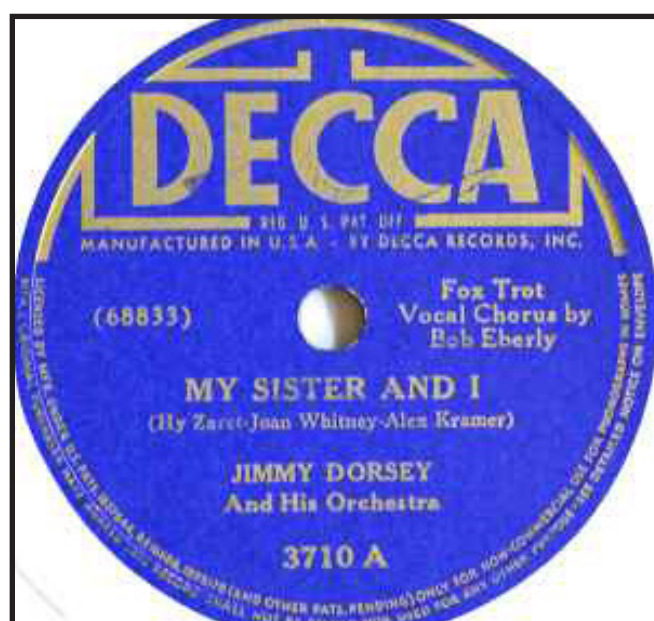
And sometimes, late at night, I wake and walk to my old German grand piano.

And play that song.

Here are some of the lyrics:

*"We're learning to forget the fear
That came from a troubled sky.
We're almost happy over here,
But sometimes we wake at night and cry.*

*My sister and I recall the day
We said goodbye, and then we sailed away.
And we think of our friends that had to stay,
But we don't talk about that."*



IVONNE RAMOS



Leaving

I am four years old standing in the airport with my mother and aunt. I am wearing a white jacket and white skirt, shiny Mary Jane shoes, and I'm carrying a small bag. This rectangle shape waterproof bag was matte navy blue with white trim. This bag held my most prize possessions. I had a very popular toy at the time called Little People, wooden toy people that would fit in a toy bus. It was not convenient to bring the bus along, but I brought my little people to carry on my first adventure.

I watch my aunt and mom placing large boxes on a dolly. They struggle to carry these extremely large boxes that overloaded the dolly. I thought why, why are they taking these large cardboard boxes? I knew my mother felt I needed those things, but as far as I'm concerned, I have my cute outfit with my shiny Mary Jane shoes with socks that reached my knees and my perfect travel bag. Why bring these large boxes as I saw them struggle?

I later found out I was leaving for an indefinite period of time. I guess I was supposed to cry when I left my mother for 13 months, but I was too excited by the adventure. I was purely present, a trait that I have long lost but crave to capture again every day as an adult.

I leave with my aunt and she begins to point out how to read the signs at the airport. I thought that was easy. Why? Why all the fuss? I could've done this myself.

Little Luxuries

She was a selfless woman that arrived with \$200 in her pocket, a bachelor's degree in liberal arts. She knew only one person when she arrived to the US. Confident and resilient, my mother possessed a strong tenacity and willingness to create a new fresh beginning. She was willing to work at a shoe factory assembling shoes, and one day her supervisor encouraged her to apply to a corporate career, where she could incorporate her degree.

She was a woman with a mission working nights to afford to pay for her two daughters' private schools and uniforms for a better education. The only indulgence was her appreciation for a tiny bottle of Chanel #5 that she wore on weekends and special occasions.

Smelling fresh and clean was a constant symbol of effort. Even if you didn't have a fortune, you can afford to clean your home, wash your hair, and splash on some baby oil. Eventually our baby oil graduated to skin so soft. That was my mother's way of supporting a friend who was selling Avon. All these layers of aromas—that scent meant you made an effort to be better for yourself and pleasing to others by just walking by them.

JAMES ELLIOTT BESTER

Say It Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud

That layered inspiration within that layered resistance of a generation's past that's been layered into that passing existence of those passing days fading upon those passing moments of passing memories worth sharing within those passing stories that were seasoned into those passing rhythms of those passing melodies just flowing through those passing songs that were always soothing and captivating to my passing soul.

That soul-searching music would always set its contents upon the mood of my day, and I would always hold onto that flow of life being expressed upon those unfolding stories being released upon that bold compassion of my soul.

I would absorb that brown influence of those spoken words being released upon that brown weight of my brown emotions which have always given value unto my brown life and as I sink into that waiting consciousness of my awakening brown soul upon that wasted music going into that waiting brown spirit of my possibilities as my brown instinct helps me balance the rise.

The best part of my brown musical intellect has reflected upon that story telling of Mr. James Brown often because he would unapologetically sing out the words "Say it loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud."

My soul still hungers within this bold existence of this Brown experience and it feels good, because it's under my skin and there will never ever be another me with my legacy in waiting to let my culture lead the way.



A Journey that Must Carry On

My love and happiness are real even if I must suffer through those consequences of my brown soul reaching for that pleasure within that joy and that pain.

I've caressed that suffering against my shield and it's real because of that faith—within that hope of my survival rages within me as I reach for more.

That love and happiness within me rises, even if I must suffer through those consequences of reaching for that pleasure of that joy beyond that pain.

There are these times when I've stumbled into glory as I've maneuvered through those obstacles of life to be free of that bondage forced upon those things that my brown hands have

touched, my brown ears have heard, and these beautiful brown eyes have seen within remnants of a past generation's soulfulness.

"I must hope for the best and prepare for the worst" within those invisible chains of a blinded ignorance because those glimmers of my hope were starting to come out of my need to imagine.

Sometimes weight of those forceful struggles would trespass against the frame of my faithfulness and confuse my confidence, but this brown soul of mine would still not lay down that will to be free.

My brown reality and I must sometimes sink and I swim our way through those puddles of this life just hoping to reach for that ocean of unknown life without that struggle of a passing resistance.

I've felt that unchained flow of blood going into those worn chambers of my heart as it pushes that warmth upon the release of sweat and through that pure freshness of falling tears into a journey that must carry on.

Dreaming

Revisiting those hopeful days of dreaming about the breath of my children upon this universe would always be real enough for me to have that limitless faith of mine lead the way.

I've closed my brown eyes upon dreaming and I've smiled with grace upon that pulsing consciousness of my brown soul, a soul that would look over those valleys of my brown doubts that would fade into those canyons of my brown hopefulness.

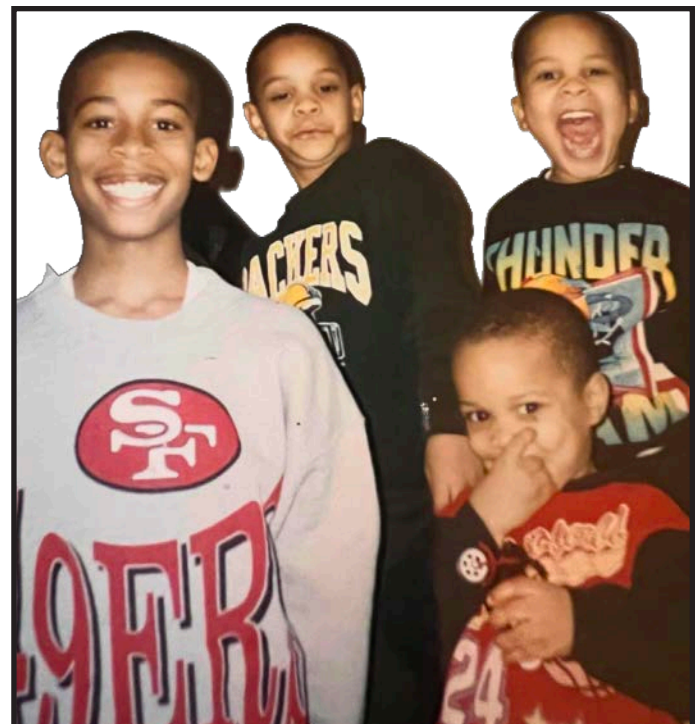
I've opened those brown eyes of mine upon the crumbling effort that is placed upon those breathtaking moments of this blackness that my children would have to breathe upon as I've struggled to reach for that bruised balance of my soul because I've always wanted those reaching expectations of mine to win.

I've looked high, and I've looked low as I reached for that raw brown elegance of recreation that I've created within my mind.

I've had needs and I've had wants as I've search for those things that would add great value unto my life and give great happiness unto my soul as I've reached for those things that were out of my reach.

I would enjoy holding onto those moments of my journey within this time that I would give promise upon as I've dreamed with hope upon this loveliness to share with that love of my children.

The strong foundation of my brown emotions would often dream upon this journey that would always have children to reflect upon this loveliness and someone to share love within our moments of our brown hopefulness.



My Father's Ring

My father's fingers reflected upon his lifestyle of being a man's man.

His ring size was 21, and he would grow out of his wedding rings often.

He would work hard at any job that he would occupy, and by the end of the day, those swollen hands had to be relieved from anything that would restrict that rushed blood flow of a hard work day.

When my father's efforts would collect enough of his savings to buy a new ring, he would always end up spending it on his twelve children without having any regrets.

My young brown eyes would grow and they would often reflect upon his willingness to work harder than what was needed for his family to survive; because of those efforts of his, those values were instilled within me.

One day I would return from a Chicago friend's hometown visit, and I would decide to meet my father at his lunch break away from the JI Case tractor factory.



He was dirty from head to toe, but upon that sight of my father's image, I noticed there was something out of place. His finger had a wedding ring that shined like it shouldn't be there amongst all that grime.

He finally got that awesome fitting wedding ring as I started my college career. It would stay on his finger until he gave this legacy to me days before his passing.

That broad spread of my smaller brown fingers couldn't ever begin to fill that waiting space of this awesome wedding ring, but often I've placed this legacy upon the blood flow of my hard-working day to thank my father for his efforts that have survived within me.

MARISOL GONZALEZ

Miss You

—after Gabriel Calvocoressi

I see you every day, and in my eyes, you are still a little child of mine.
 I miss you sitting on my lap, reading books, singing songs, laughing...
 Can't bring the time back and put you to sleep and kiss you good night.
 I miss you. In the back seat of the car, telling me all about your day.
 asking me to play on the radio your favorite song and singing it together loudly.
 Can't bring back the time when you wanted to be by my side all the time.
 I miss you. Brushing your little teeth standing on your stepstool that has a song that lasts the perfect time you need to brush your teeth.
 Can't bring back the time when you hugged me tight and kissed me goodbye before getting on the school bus.
 I miss you. At the dinner table, telling me how much you like my cooking with your face of satisfaction.
 I see your picture every day on the fridge, next to your siblings, the whole family hugging. I wish you were still here because...
 I miss you!



A Dance

On August 10, 2024, I received an email from the CCHI (Certification Commission for Healthcare Interpreters). Dear Marisol Gonzalez: Thank you for taking the CHIS -Certified Healthcare Interpreter-Spanish. Congratulations! You passed the examination.

When I read those words, a whole electrical shock invaded my body, and this sensation of happiness made me turn my face to the sky and thank God for this wonderful news. After a few weeks of telling everyone that supported me in my journey of

education, I decided, as it was suggested, to celebrate. I invited my husband to the Cardinal Bar on salsa night. Right when we got there, they made announcements telling us that the raffle tickets they were passing out will be drawn and the winners will have the opportunity to win free tickets to the dinner and salsa dance event with the opportunity to see couples who are some of the best salsa dancers in the world.

When they draw the winning tickets, they called my number! I won! I jumped up and down like crazy, and I hugged my husband. We were going to the dance event. I felt very lucky!

The day of the event, I went to JP to get myself a dress. I knew this was a fancy event, so to my surprise, all the fancy dresses were on sale, and I got my black fancy dress for 20 dollars. I'm so lucky, I said to myself, not knowing that what was coming next was going to be beyond expectations.



We got to the dance event, and everyone looked fabulous! The event was an annual fundraiser for the organization Rumba for Rainbow that provides therapy for children with trauma. We learned about the organization, and we were very happy to be there. The dance performances started. The dancers did acrobatics in the air and gave an impressive show. Then they announced an open competition, and everyone was invited to participate, so I held my husband's hand and dragged him to the dance floor. This open-to-the-public competition consisted of elimination within three full salsa songs. During the dance, the judges were walking around, and if they touched your shoulder, you would have to leave the dance floor. We passed the first round, and I was so happy! We passed the second round, and I was very tired but super excited! I was so nervous that I told my husband we have to win, we have to do something different, you are the leader, do something!



He replied to my ear while we were dancing the third song, "Just have fun and enjoy." I closed my eyes for a few seconds, I took a deep breath, and everything turned dark with the spotlight on my husband and me. We were smiling and looking into each other's eyes. We were dancing like never before, focusing on each other, turning, spinning, smiling, the energy flowing with the love and admiration we had for each other until the music stopped. I looked around, and two other partners were on the dance floor. We made it to the end of the three songs! The judges, who were the professional world winners, were

judging and looking at us. They announced the third place and it wasn't us. I closed my eyes when they announced the second place because it wasn't us either, so I knew we won the first place! We won the dance competition! We did it! I couldn't believe it! This was one of the happiest days of my life.

A week later, we met a Colombian couple who are professional dancers; they just moved to our neighborhood in Eagle Heights, so we asked them if they would like to teach a Latin dance class, and they accepted. This year, we took 24 people to the Rumba for Rainbow event, and everyone paid their ticket. My Colombian neighbors won first place in the open competition, and my husband and I won second place! Now we have a dance community; we go to dance events together, and we support each other. It's an international group. We just celebrated our first anniversary of our dance group in combination with Hispanic Heritage Month, and this is a poem I wrote for our celebration.



We Are

We are the imprint of our ancestors on indigenous lands, which we transform into trails, paths, and communities.

We are Spanish with different accents and also English with words impossible to pronounce. We are bilingual.

We are the guests of a guest who arrives at the party and sets the mood.

We are dance teachers by group decision, for the love of dance and the generosity of sharing knowledge.

We are neighbors who became friends and even relatives from different continents (What's up, Primo? cousin).

We are the ride for everyone who fits in the car, including the trunk.

We are the organizers of "la fiesta de traje" bringing food to share as soon as someone says, "Let's have a party!"

We are the unforgettable birthday celebrations with karaoke in someone's apartment or at a restaurant, celebrating everyone's birthday.

We are stories, sayings, home remedies, tales, legends, gossip, and secrets.

We are cumbia, salsa, merengue, bachata, cha, cha, cha, mambo, quebradita, rock, boleros, romantic music, etc.

We are intertwined bridges sharing traditions and cultures, never walls!

We are students, teachers, researchers, builders, engineers, doctors, interpreters, administrators, we are workers...

We are strength, we are effort, we are fortitude, we are resilience.

We are the helping hand you can trust, we are the smile on the street, we are the greeting to strangers, we are human warmth.

We are inspiration!

We are brothers from two continents, children of a mother tongue: Spanish.

We are Hispanics, we are brotherhood!

A Letter

I was sixteen when my father decided to cross the US border. The night before, he and my mom went outside to smoke like usual, but when they got inside, my mother had tears in her eyes. My dad turned off the television and delivered the news. This was the last night my dad would be in the same room as me, as us all together. We all cried. My sister was only seven years old, so she cried the most. When everyone went to bed, I tried to sleep, but I couldn't. I took my diary and started to write. I wrote a list of things I still wanted to do with my dad, I wrote anecdotes between him and me, and I wrote him a letter.

Dad,

You are my hero. I'm so sorry you were born poor. I'm so sorry you just went to third grade in school because you had to start working to support your family. I know you want a better life for us. I know you love us, and I know you will cross that border because the word "no se puede" (I can't) doesn't exist in your vocabulary. Please, Dad, take care of yourself and keep in mind that I love you so much, and I will miss you already, and this separation can't be for long; we have to reunify very soon. The time will pass very fast, and I want to see my reflection in your eyes and hug you and kiss you and tickle you.

Here is a picture of us, your children. I need this letter and picture back the next time we see each other. Te amo, papa.

My dad started his journey at 6 am. He left me a kiss that tasted like salt. He got arrested, he was deported several times, and he almost gave up, but every time he was in despair, far from us at the border, he would open his wallet and look at the letter and repeat to himself I need to continue because I made a promise to my family.

After knowing nothing about him for several weeks, he finally called, and he told us he was in the United States. In one week, he was hired for three different jobs, leaving him only four hours to sleep a day. He would call us during his breaks and between jobs. It was very nice to get the phone call when he sent money, even though it was less exciting than when he was in Mexico and we went to meet him after work on Saturday afternoons. He would only buy us a small ice cream cone, never a double scoop, because those were more expensive, but we would sit in the grass, eat our ice cream, and play in the playground. I miss those Saturdays so much!

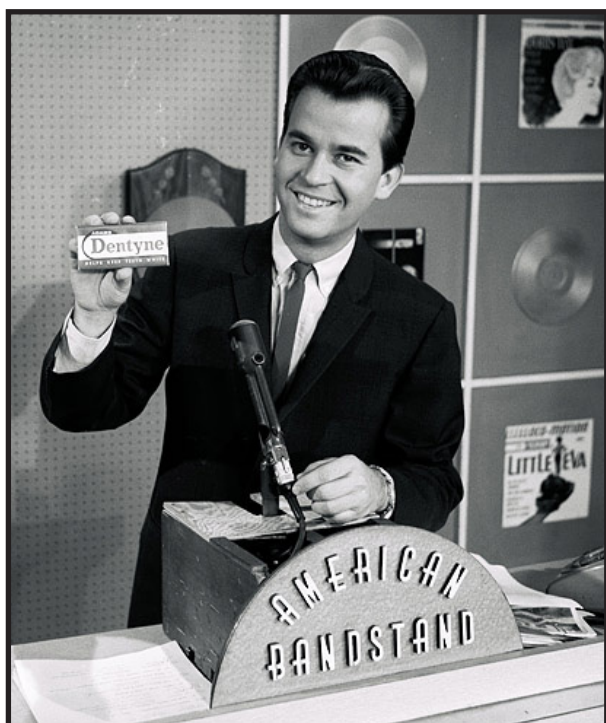


When I came to the United States after being apart for almost three years, my dad hugged me, and we hugged for a long time with tears dripping down our cheeks. My heart felt full; I was finally again with my whole family. My dad asked me for my hand. He reached into his back pocket and took out from his wallet my letter and the picture of us. It looked like a picture that survived a war. He put it in the palm of my hand and said, "As I promised, we will always be together."

PAMELA HOLMES

One Family Meal

One memorable meal for me was when Grandmother got up in the morning and cooked breakfast for the family. You smelled the aroma of bacon, eggs, grits, and biscuits cooking. We got up, washing hands and faces. You could hear the horse trotting, the man coming down the street selling fruits and vegetables on the horse carriage saying, "I got fresh fruits and vegetables, watermelon!" The sun was shining early in the brightness of morning. These are some of my memories!



I Miss You

Growing up as a child in the year 1960, my auntie was in high school. They looked at the show "Dick Clark American Band Stand." Wow! I like music and dancing till this day. But what I remember is my mama also liked the soap operas, like General Hospital and the Guiding Light. Those were her best shows, but the sad thing about what I learned today is it could confuse you from the reality and falsehood of life. Entertainment could set you back, making you not know or being confused if you are going forward. Sometime I try to read more and write more again, turn the T.V. off sometime.

Alley Dogs

Growing up in the 1960s I was about nine years old at that time. I was a loner. Some kids used to pick on me. Why? Because sometimes my hair was not combed and sometimes my clothes were a bit dirty. Why? Because my

mama wasn't there all the time because of her addiction, her gambling the racetrack and Polten's playing cards.

So I would roam the alley. I loved this dog named Spanky. He was homeless. I would save him our chicken bones from dinner. So when I went to find him to feed him, he had his other dog friend. Back then they were called alley dogs. I got bit by two dogs. A man was also in the alley. He grabbed rocks and threw them at them. But Spanky also was trying to help. I had to get shots for 9 or 10 days. I will never forget!



SHERRI BESTER



Monarch Butterfly Dance

One of my favorite childhood dance adventures and dance memories was my private “Monarch Butterfly Dance.” My wonderful “Monarch Butterfly Dance” was of mighty, innocent, joyful childhood movement and motion of mine within the heated, fiery, scorching hot yet safe, beautiful, great green grass fields of Greenville, Mississippi.

Throughout my childhood I stole away all by myself often to laugh and sing as I danced throughout the total grass park fields united together with countless monarch butterflies. I soared almost transforming into them while in powerful dance steps flying so free with such wild and wonderful endless beauty of nature surrounding me. I felt as beautiful and as free as each and every one of the floating festive flying monarch butterflies when I was spiraling and spinning in my dance of joyful childhood excitement. My beautiful and colorful delicate dance dress of rainbow colors was always blowing whirlwinds in the wind circles calmly celebrating my floating dance with nature. Triumphantly on my tiptoes, I expressed myself gently yet fiercely. I sang victoriously of nature’s stormy clouds at an almighty end. I also danced the grass fields in celebration of the rainstorm and always a mist completely finished raindrops needed to help flourish nature’s beautiful growth. I



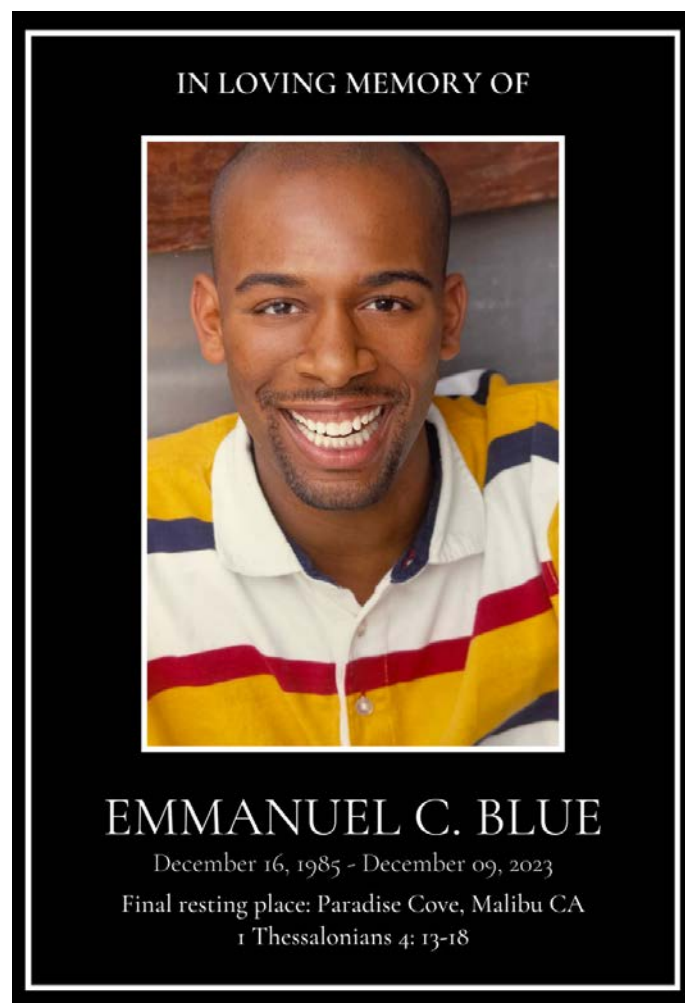
I then ended my private “Monarch Butterfly Dance” broken free of my cocoon, which started my now completely cheerful captured day. I ended my day always with picking sweet smelling and bright beautiful grass field park planted flowers. I remembered flowers to gratefully bring home sweet home for my beautiful brave beloved grandmother to gently place at the center of her deliciously blessed family meal dinner table.



Moment of Joy: UW’s Golden Gentle Giant James Elliott Bester

It was Friday afternoon, the last day of my week that I was striving as a new student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I was absolutely exhausted as I digested my spicy hot savory Mexican lunch and fought my way to walk slowly up campus’s mighty Bascom Hill to study at the library before my last class of the day. I decided to stop and rest at my favorite bench there at the top of the hill beside a beautiful and brilliant campus historical statue. Many different students also stopped to sit down to relax and rest on the campus hilltop bench that day. I enjoyed listening and talking to student after student each and every moment there right beside me on my favorite campus bench.

Right as I was lifting my body up off the bench ready to continue to walk forward on campus, I saw the face of a fellow student with the most friendly and fantastic smile appear before my very eyes. A sweetheart gentleman reached out his kind hand to help and guide me upon my feet. With my excited mouth open wide I said that I thought that I might sit down a little while longer to relax and rest. He began to talk to me and his voice sounded like Barry White singing a precious and passionate love song to me. I listened quietly as I was completely lost of any and all words to speak. When he finished talking, he stretched out his hopeful hand once again to gesture to help and guide me to my feet. Already now late for my class, I told him that I better sit a little later longer. As he walked away with his big and beautiful athletic body muscles completely marching forward like he was wildly within a football campus marching band festival celebration, I grasped and groaned for my breaths of air not to leave me lost and faint. I whispered to myself how I finally understood why the football player James Elliott Bester was called "The Golden Gentle Giant of The University of Wisconsin-Madison Football Team."



Pregnant with My First Child

I am in the early twenties of my lifetime. I am a student at the University of Wisconsin- Madison in the beginning of 1980. I am pregnant with my first child, Emmanuel Charleston Blue.

I am pregnant and the relationship that I am lost within is of great intentional fantasy and pretentious safety masks. I am a former successful University of Wisconsin-Madison student now moved away from campus life and now living within the Madison Southside Community. I am a single and a low-income parent household.

My son Emmanuel's name means God is with us. God was definitely with Emmanuel and me throughout what seemed like an early birth within my college lifetime experience. My son Emmanuel died at only the early age of 37 years old. His death seems like such an early lifetime death experience. Within the sacred few moments of time as quickly as life begins is also as quickly as in the sacred few moments of lifetime death can begin. Love and cherish each and every precious and blessed moment of your lifetime that is so beautiful and breathing all around you.

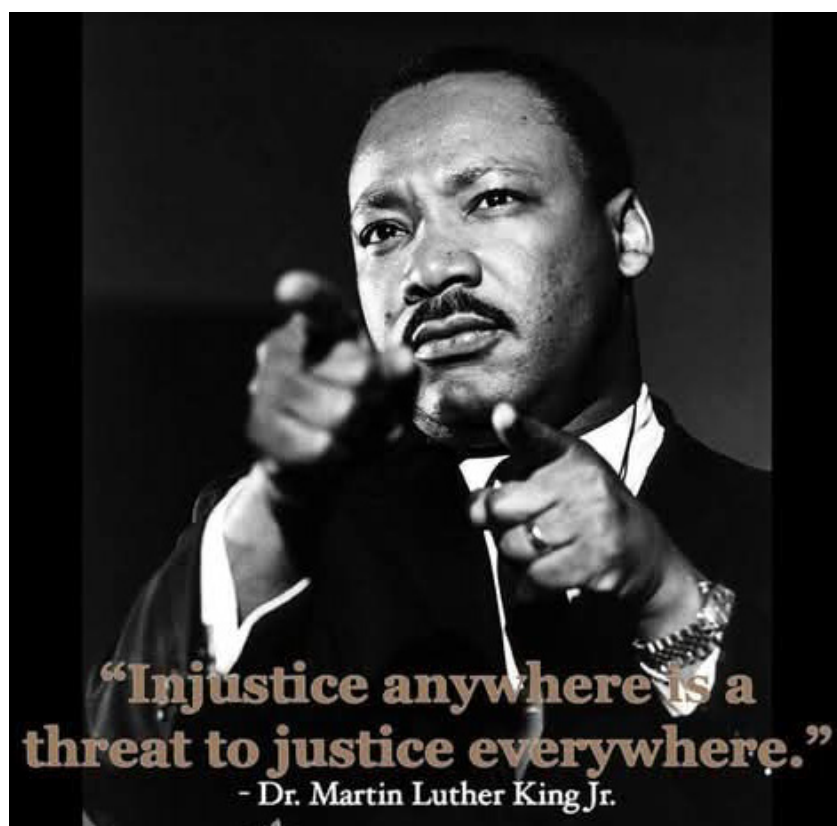
What Dr. King Left Behind After His Assassination

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was so very blessed and brave and brilliant. He was a beautiful beloved blessed man of mighty soul born on January 15, 1929, and he died on April 4, 1968. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a Baptist minister and social activist who prosperously played a pivotal and powerful role in the Civil Rights Movement in the United States of America. It is vitally important to me to always realize and recognize his freedom dream that he left in my life brightly alive and prosperously growing even after he died.

Martin Luther King Jr. is famous for his "I Have a Dream" speech, which still moves the hearts of many to seek love, peace, and unity as our human lifetime goal. The Montgomery bus boycott and his role in the March on Washington are among and amidst many of his significant accomplishments that also reign onward victoriously throughout both past and present times. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. for his great historical efforts was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, which remains today as a symbol of peaceful protest and a clarified catalyst symbol for social change. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. contributed his lifetime loyal leadership in the Civil Rights Movement, which even after his hateful heart breaking and brutal assassination still celebrates wonderful memories of his life today. He was the central figure of the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, within which wisely he was fiercely fighting against radical segregation and deathly discrimination practices. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led successfully and significantly as an advocate for nonviolent protest because he believed in nonviolent civil disobedience, like boycotts and sit-ins, as the most effective way in his beliefs to actively achieve everlasting equality and justified justice for Black Americans brutally attacked by hateful racism.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" Speech is a powerful speech, delivered during the 1963 March on Washington, and is considered a pivotal and powerful moment in the Civil Rights Movement and one of his most empowering and enduring legacies. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. organized and led significant campaigns, including the Montgomery bus boycott and the March on Washington, which both helped to bring about landmark Civil Rights legislation.

Even all these many years later after his assassination, his legacy is honored annually for his mighty magnificent movement of Lawful Civil Rights with Martin Luther King Jr. Day, a U.S. federal holiday. Through great evil he was assassinated with unnecessary hatred many yesterdays in past time on April 4, 1968. However, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s life is with great love yet presently today celebrated in a remembrance of his more powerful actions and words that speak loudest of his hopeful love longevity legacy thereof.



One of My Favorite Love Songs

One of my favorite love songs is "If I Ain't Got You Baby" by Alisha Keys:

*Some people live for the fortune
Some people live just for the fame
Some people live for the power, yeah
Some people live just to play the game
Some people think that the physical things define what's within
And I been there before but that life's a bore, so full of the superficial*

Chorus:

*Some people want it all, but I don't want nothing at all
If it ain't you baby, if I ain't got you baby
Some people want diamond rings, some just want everything
But everything means nothing if I ain't got you, yeah*

*Some people search for a fountain
The promise is forever young
(You know) Some people need three dozen roses
And that's the only way to prove you love them
Hand me the world on a silver platter
And what good would it be
With no-one to share with, no-one who truly cares for me*

Chorus:

*Some people want it all, but I don't want nothing at all
If it ain't you baby, if I ain't got you baby
Some people want diamond rings, some just want everything
But everything means nothing if I ain't got you, you, you*



Ever since I was younger and still now older, I find myself sometimes lost while searching in great wonder - somewhat perplexed yet pondering always this thing that is called LOVE. ...I was always joyful yet also quite confused about this here thing called LOVE as a little innocent girl who believed in the beauty of simple every day interesting LOVE stories of "Boy Meets Girl." I made a decision at quite a very early age that one of the most important things I desired to do within my lifetime was to find the meaning of true LOVE. This desire grew even stronger, especially after my parents divorced when I was only about six years old. Yes, from that point on, a unique desire to understand and to experience LOVE began to grow deepest depth downward inside of my innocent tender young heart, mind, body, soul, and spirit throughout my entire emotional existence of my childhood thereof. My greatest lifetime goal and desire to behold and prevail within a mighty questful journey of the

endless richest lifetime pathways of true LOVE is explained and expressed totally and truthfully by the crystal clear completeness of the words of this one of my favorite LOVE songs by the wonderfully famous singer Alisha Keys –“If I Ain’t Got You Baby.” Yes, indeed, this powerful LOVE song very passionately sparks my mighty memory from my past childhood unto my present adulthood thoughts of my desire to delight myself always within the mighty marvelous mysteries of true LOVE.

For many, many, many years I have searched fiercely down the forever endless countless crisscross lifetime pathways of LOVE. Oh, what a great glorious gathering of desires such a journey this has been. Completely within the words of this LOVE song’s final endings speaking forth to guide me gently, I can honestly and humbly explain and express myself best regarding my lifetime LOVE journey experience that I have captured so far. “NOTHING IN THIS WHOLE WIDE WORLD MEANS A THING TO ME,” Sherri Genell Bester, without “YOU,” my true LOVE, James Elliott Bester, always right here basking throughout LOVE lesson’s teachings while bathing away LOVE lesson’s learnings faithfully right by my side. There is nowhere else I, Sherri Genell Bester, would rather be than to travel with YOU, James Elliott Bester, day after day within the golden adventures up and down these seemingly forever endless lifetime pathways of all the overflowing every single day new discoveries to behold more of good old fashioned true LOVE!!!

I Miss You, Mama Annie Lou

I miss you each and every day and night of my life. As I long to see your face, I remember and reflect and relate to you, Mama Annie Lou, as the total truest title of the exact definition and meaning of love. Yes, you are the truth of love. When I open up my favorite photo album of family memories, it feels like you are still right here with me today by my side. I feel your gentle touch. I smell you cooking a delicious family dinner to celebrate our Christmas day within the brutally cold yet beautiful snowstorm of Wisconsin wild winter storm of December, my favorite time of the year. Please come sit down here by my side for just a little while so I can feel your loving arms wrapped around me in our family rocking chair as you comfort me to sleep tonight...

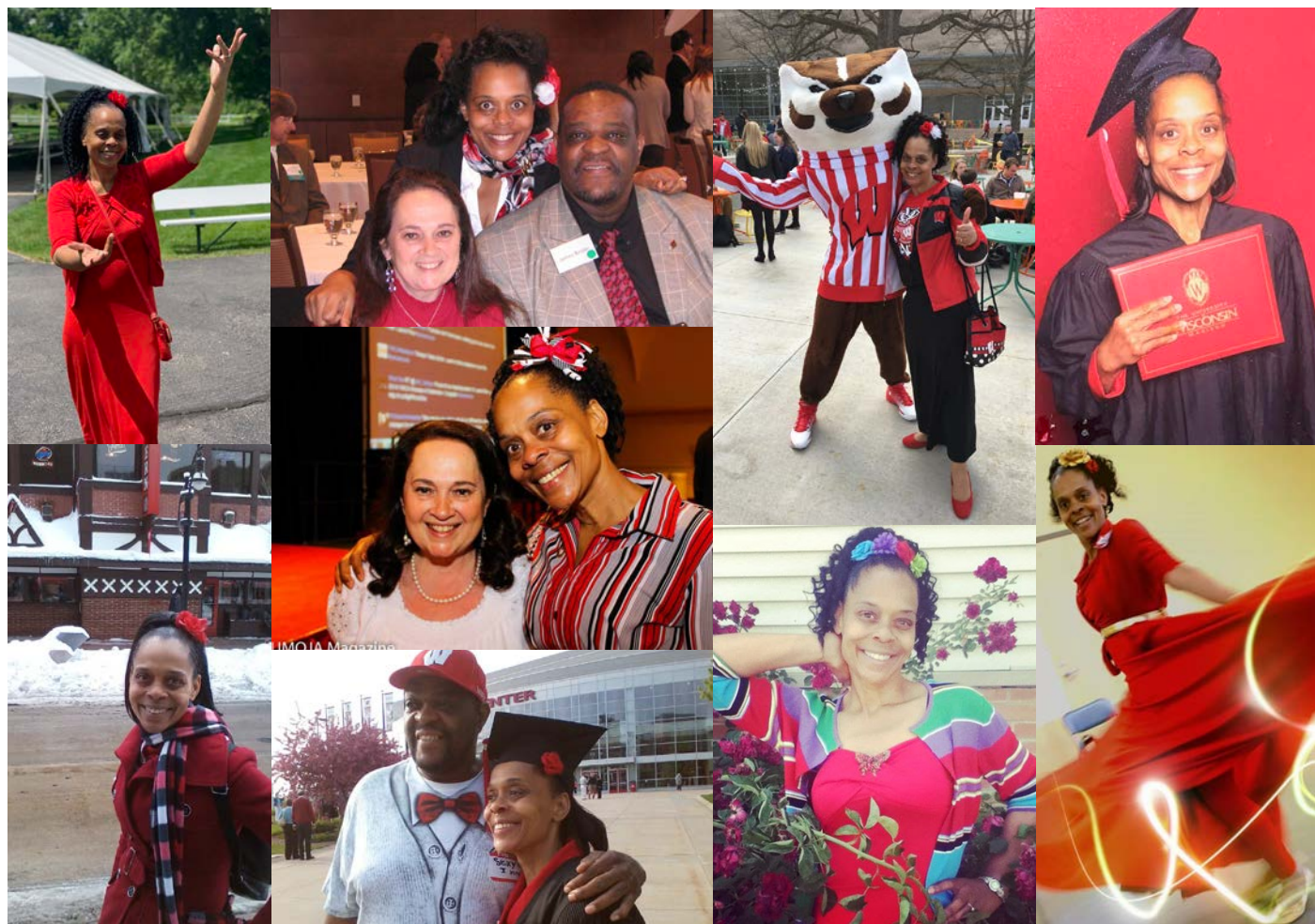


My Pictures of the Strength of Love

An object that is one key hole into my life is my beautiful red heart shaped framed picture of Professor Emily, Bucky Badger, and me standing side by side together tall with our heads held high. I have this specific memory in the center of my front living room next to my television stand because my UW-Madison Odyssey experience with Professor Emily and class speaks loudly and clearly with greatest interest past each and every television program broadcast both daily and nightly throughout my front living room within my home.



When I look over at the picture, I dance with boldly brave brilliant leaps of lingering celebrations of joy beyond the pains of arthritis that ache my knotted knees and lower legs. Whenever I sit alone in my chair searching in love for a reason to laugh out loud within my heartbeats seeking healings of happiness memories of joyful times, I simply glance over at this powerful priceless picture and the good old days of my marvelous mighty memories of the richest joys of UW-Madison Odyssey (both regular and Senior) classroom jubilee and I celebrate from the deepest depth downward an empowerment of joy throughout my entire heart, mind, body, soul, and spirit. On some of my worst painful days of seeking calm and courage with memories overflowing and echoing laughter of UW-Madison Odyssey classroom memories to reflect on, I get up out of my chair strong and steady on my feet to face a brand-new day.



SOCORRO LOPEZ



Summers

For weeks the neighborhood kids and I waited for the last day of school. The last bell announcing that school was out for the summer. Weeks of doing nothing but being lazy and enjoying no schoolwork days.

Every summer the Red Hook kids played in the many streets that made up our neighborhood. Red Hook is near the docks in New York City, where immigrants waited for family members when they got off the boats from the different countries they had traveled from.

Our summers were special. Days of sunshine and lots of outdoor play. No cares in the world.

We left out the door after breakfast. We had plans for the day. Carefree and nobody called us for chores or babysitting. We played outside all day with no worries about predators or sex offenders. We had no idea about any dangers.

The summers were filled with laughter and competition. We picked teams for baseball and other games on how well you played no matter the sex of the player.

My mother stayed home and we played outside. The only time we came in was for water (no water bottles then) and a light lunch. Our mothers had no fear about their children being outside all day without a cellphone to call. My mom's cellphone was opening the living room window and screaming our names.

In retrospect, I learned a lot while we played outside with the neighborhood kids. I learned to be a survivor. I learned social skills. I learned how to play face to face. I learned how to make friends. And the most important lesson of my childhood without a cellphone was that I had less stress and anxiety.



The Pot (Caldero)

It's made of aluminum. It has a lid and after many years of wear and tear, it has a nice sheen on the inside.

This object is my mom's caldero or pot in English. It takes me back to my childhood and teenage years of the many meals my mom made for the family. Wonderful smells came from the caldero.

I was always watching my mom cook. She cooked without recipes because everything she made was thrown in together, and she would stick a silver spoon in the pot to taste. I couldn't do that after I left home; I needed a recipe.

My mom and I didn't communicate for over 20 years. I missed her cooking. As an adult I bought the same pot, but it wasn't the same memories.

The caldero was an important part of many Hispanic pictures, parties, and family dinners.

My mom passed away and one of my sisters sent me a picture of the stuff left in the kitchen. As I looked at the picture, I saw the caldero and mentioned to my sister, "Please, put the caldero at your house. That is the only thing I want from her estate."

For weeks I was giddy for I wanted that caldero to remember a childhood and teenage years that are long gone but not forgotten. I wanted to remember the woman who sacrificed and made meals from very few ingredients and the laughter around the table.

Sadly, my sisters who are fighting for her estate broke into the house and took everything from the house. My caldero is gone and I won't be seeing the one object that I wanted as part of the bond we once had.



BEA CHATMAN



My Mother

My mother passed away in January, 2013.

You were the best mother in the world.

You were a great example of God's love.

You were strong, loving, caring, encouraging, considerate, supportive, and understanding.

One of my fondest memories was my mother's yard and garden. Her yard was immaculate and was the talk of the neighborhood. She had a large garden and several fruit trees (peach, plum, apple, cherry).

In her garden she grew green beans, mustard and collard greens, lettuce, peas, corn, tomatoes, and watermelon.

Mother truly enjoyed and loved working in her yard and garden.

I always thank God for being blessed to have a wonderful mother in my life. I miss her so much.

Remembering a Song

"Leaning on the Everlasting Arms" reminds me of my beloved mother singing with the Mt. Zion Gospel Choir at the Madison Coliseum. When people from all walks of life and all different faiths come together and sing together, it is so beautiful and unforgettable.



ROSLYN PHILLIPS

Sugar Bowl

It's a small white porcelain bowl with a simple top. The bowl is decorated, with a colorful applique on the front. This sugar bowl is over 60 years old as far as I can remember. Oh, the precious memories this bowl signifies! I first saw this bowl in my grandmother's kitchen. I remember when my family would visit my grandparents, it sat on the counter next to the tea kettle whistling on the stove. Now I remember it was tea/coffee for the adults. Granny would ask the adults one teaspoon or one lump of sugar? She never allowed the adults to get their own sugar. Now I know why.



When Granny passed on, my mom inherited the "porcelain sugar bowl." You better not stir your tea/coffee and put your spoon in that sugar bowl. That was a no no. My mom, my daughter when visiting, and I shared the same memories. When my mom passed away, guess what? I now have that precious porcelain sugar bowl. The beautiful memories are flooding my mind so simple, but soooo sweet. One day my dear daughter, Stephanie, you will inherit and keep the legacy of the porcelain sugar bowl alive for generations to come.



Memories

I remember the Fuller Brush salesman knocking on doors well-groomed and well-dressed selling their products. I remember my mom loved the crème deodorant.

I remember the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago. My two siblings and I every Saturday went with a lunch packed by mom on the CTA bus. FREE OF CHARGE. Now they charge over \$35 entry fee.

My memory of a song is my dad singing “You’re A Big Girl Now.” I sang and wrote a poem at my Odyssey graduation day, May 2007.

In August 1955 a beautiful baby girl was born, with hair so soft, wavy and curly, a body oh so plump.



My daddy nicknamed me “Lil Miss Plump,” and I know how I adored and loved him over the years. Yes, I was Daddy’s lil girl. He taught me all the things only a daddy could teach, but the love was priceless. My dad always had a smile from ear to ear.

Growing up in the Projects for some was a horror story, ugliness, shame, degradation.

But I was blessed living, learning, and following his sound advice. It’s not where you live but how you live, my dad would say, so I took all his advice and it was ever so nice. My Odyssey began without an end.

I grew up living a dream. Remembering all he taught me now is that wonderful place called heaven. I will always remember the days of sitting on his lap, singing our favorite song. It went like this:

You’re a big girl now, no Daddy’s little girl, with all the memories he has given me, I will always be Daddy’s girl

The Flute

I never learned how to play one note. I wanted to be in the high school band. Flute to me was a cute instrument. I will never forget band instructors working with me for lessons. I still couldn’t get a sound to come out of that flute. Well, I wound up being a Pom-Pom girl, dancing and performing with the high school band. My music was and is still in the form of dance. Rhythm is in my soul.

A Branching Point in My Life

On August 25th, I turned 70 wonderful years old. Seven decades. Yes! I was fearful of aging, and the years passed by so quickly.

Looking back over my years that God blessed me with, my mind goes back to when I entered kindergarten. I remember it vividly, the beautiful dress with the bow on the back, my favorite. Two thick wavy ponytails with ribbons. My black and white shoes and Bobby socks on. The admiration on my family's faces. My green sweater my grandparents brought for me. Being escorted to school with a full entourage. Oh, and an apple for my teacher, Mrs. Devault, a memory I still remember so well.

Life in 70 years has been good, despite all the trials and tribulations. I entered this world ready. I'm still smiling and happy when I get around others. Life is grand!



A Halloween Memory

It was 1985, and I was living in Chicago. I was going to school to become a Medical Assistant on Michigan Ave in downtown Chicago. I received a call and an invite to attend a Halloween party my first cousin was giving. I remember I had taken my kids trick or treating earlier that day. My ex-husband at the time said, "Go Roz, I'll stay home with the kids." It was a Friday eve! No school the next day. I'm like "Naw! Don't want to go alone," so my baby brother, who is four years younger than me, stopped by! I remembered my nursing uniforms. We had to be in costume. I said, "Oh, we got this. In the 80s we dressed like nurses in school. White dress, white stockings, nurse's hat, and white shoes for me. For my brother we also had a white pants uniform, a lab coat with a stethoscope, and the instrument to check for fever. We won first prize as Dr. Love and Nurse Feel Good. Might I add, neither my brother nor I owned vehicles at the time, so we went on Chicago Transit Authority #4 Cottage Grove on the bus and people were, "Wow! Cool costumes." I remember at the party, my brother went around with the stethoscope checking hearts asking Nurse Feel Good to take temperatures. To this day, my brother and I love our special Halloween memory.

Pet Experience

I remember how my parents didn't let us have a dog or cat. We had gerbils, parrots, and guppy fish that multiplied. It was the same thing with my kids growing up. I have a memory of hearing in my son's bedroom cries like babies in grammar school. I opened his door following the cries. It was a shoebox full of newborn kittens. My response wasn't godly! WTF! I waited for him to come home and never uttered a word!

At bedtime I caught him letting the alley cat mom get fed, never tending to the kittens. I snatched her, locked my son's window, and held that alley cat hostage, forcing her for weeks to feed those kittens. Well, my son's bedroom door faced the front. When she got the opportunity she ran, never to be seen again. We gave the kittens homes. I never had a pet after that. LOL this memory is permanently lodged in my brain.

A New Beginning: Relocating to Madison, WI

I made a choice and tried my very hardest to hold my first marriage together to my kids' dad. I was married and a mom at the tender age of 19, so young and naïve to life. We tried, but it wasn't meant to be.

So, I packed it up and moved to Madison, WI with my then 11-year-old daughter. She's 44 now. My son was seven years old and wasn't yet ready for the move. I prayed long and hard on this relocation. I only had my baby brother and his wife and family here. I needed healing and stability. I was suffering from a broken heart and depression. But my endurance kept my focus during the years residing in Madison. I met and remarried my soulmate of 16 years. I will always respect and have love for my kids' dad. We maintain a friendship and share the family, which has grown. I'm a grandmother of five, great grandmother of two. I thank God every day. Now I have a blended family with my new husband – six kids, seven grandkids, and three great grandkids. As the matriarch, I'm so blessed.

