

**My Life Story**



**Gwendolyn Marshall**

**Vilma Thompson, Storykeeper**

## Acknowledgement

As we near the consummation of the Ethnic Life Stories Project, there is a flood of memories going back to the concept of the endeavor. The awareness was there that the project would lead to golden treasures. But I never imagined the treasures would overflow the storehouse. With every Story Teller, every Story Keeper, every visionary, every contributor, every reader, the influence and impact of the project has multiplied in riches. The growth continues to spill onward. As its outreach progresses, "boundaries" will continue to move forward into the lives of countless witnesses.

Very few of us are "Native Americans." People from around the world, who came seeking freedom and a new life for themselves and their families, have built up our country and communities. We are all individuals, the product of both our genetic makeup and our environment. We are indeed a nation of diversity.

Many of us are far removed from our ancestors who left behind the familiar to learn a new language, new customs, new political and social relationships. We take our status as Americans for granted. We sometimes forget to welcome the newcomer. We bypass the opportunity to ask about their origins and their own journey of courage.

But, wouldn't it be sad if we all spoke the same language, ate the same food, and there was no cultural diversity.

This project has left me with a tremendous debt of gratitude for so many. The almost overwhelming task the Story Keeper has, and the many hours of work and frustration to bring forth a story to be printed. I salute you.

To the Story Tellers, thank you for letting us share in your heart and soul. It is my prayer that some or many of the stories will influence many young persons to another level, to be enmeshed in the pursuit of learning of other cultures that make up our community and the world.

This has, indeed, been a project of "Many" for the Community. Thanks to the following who have played a role in helping to achieve the goal. The list is practically endless, first names only. You know who you are and what you did . . . sincere thanks to each of you:

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Jim Mauldin  
Coordinator  
Ethnic Life Stories  
'01 '02 '03

**The Ethnic Life Stories Project....**

*...giving the Springfield community a window to its diversity through the life stories of ethnic elders.*

Liewe Se Storie Afrikaanse	Afrikaanse (2)
ŌSŌ GAY HĀY WŌ TAN	Apache
قصص من الحياة	Arabic (2)
Ga-no-du Ka-ne-he-lv-s-gi	Cherokee
自傳	Chinese (2)
Life Stories	English (5)
Histoires De Ma Vie	French (2)
Lebensgeschichten	German
סיפור חיים	Hebrew
Mayer rah-Khaan Knee-Hindi	Hindi
生きてきた道	Japanese
나의 살아온 이야기	Korean
DZĪVES STĀSTS	Latvian
ജീവിത കഥകൾ	Malayalam
OPOWIESC z ŻYCIA	Polish
Imanawangtanan Wawanaycasjas	Quechua
Povestea Vie Ţii Mele	Romanian
Жизненные истории	Russian
Historia De La Vida	Spanish (8)
പുഴയിലെ ജീവിത	Thai
Kuwento Ng Aking Buhay	Tagalog
CHUY-N [©  Tjĩ	Vietnamese
געשיחטע פון מאיין לעבען	Yiddish





**Gwendolyn (Gwen) Marshall**  
**Jackson, Mississippi**

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

First I want to give praise and honor to God for his guidance and direction, and for giving me the ability to bring back so many fond memories of my past.

To the Mahaffey family for such beautiful memories and wonderfully good times.

To my mother who has always encouraged me in all my endeavors.

To my children and grandchildren, of whom I am very proud, and who continue to be my joy and inspiration.

To my cousin Celestine Ellison and family for their willingness to help when I needed them for this project.

To Vilma Thompson my Story Keeper. Thank you for your untiring devotion and patience.

Sincere thanks to Jim Mauldin for being the visionary and a dedicated leader of the Ethnic Life Stories Project of Springfield.



## CHAPTER ONE: FAMILY HISTORY

My birthday is September 11, a date that will live in infamy, and one I will never forget. It changed lives forever in our nation and the world at large. The year of my birth was 1948. Israel, once exiled, became a nation that same year. Since my birth I have been a living witness of many historical events. The bible says in that day knowledge will abound. We are now a part of a remarkable age.

Gwendolyn Jean Lockett Marshall is my legal name. I was born in Jackson Mississippi, to Mae Ella Mahaffey Lockett and Robert Lockett. They met in Jackson and were married 10 years. My mother graduated from Lanier High School in Jackson, Mississippi. She attended nursing school and was one of the first black nurses to graduate from Mississippi State Charity Hospital School of Nursing. My father was a chef and he and my mother both worked for the VA Hospital. After their divorce, my mother moved to Memphis Tennessee, where she continued to work for the Veterans Administration. Both my mother and father remarried.

My mother is a beautiful woman of great strength and character. She taught me by example the value of hard work, integrity and perseverance. She has always inspired me to be my best. You will be all right. You are going to make it were her frequent words of encouragement. She has been a driving force in my life. I am who I am today because of her guidance. My children call her Dear and that she is.

My mother met and married Earl Graham when I was 8 years old. He was very handsome-my mom would agree. He was a US Navy veteran and a Tailor by profession. He made many of my formals for high school events. He loved and pampered my mother. She never owned a raincoat or umbrella because he always dropped her off at the door. He was the father of my youth and a beloved grand dad for my children. They remained married until his death.

My mothers parents were Joe and Bertha Mahaffey. My grandmother, Bertha, was raised by her father, because her mother died during childbirth, or shortly thereafter. My grandfather, Joe, was part Indian and black, and his mother, Grandma Nancy, was a very short tenacious little lady with a lot of energy. I'm told that she lived to be very near 100 years old. My great grandfather was a very prominent man in Pinola who owned a



*September 11, 2002*



*Mae Ella Mahaffey-Moore*

general store that served the whole community. He was the first black man in their community to have a surrey with the fringe on top, in which his son, Joe, courted my grandmother, Bertha. When my grandparents were married, they were given a set of china, of which only one cup is left. Before she died, my grandmother gave that china cup to me, along with a note, asking that I share it with one of my cousins. I remember spending a lot of time with my maternal grandparents in Pinola, Mississippi, where my mother was raised. My father was raised in Piney Woods, Mississippi, and I just remember having wonderful times with both my maternal and paternal grandparents.

My maternal grandparents had 15 children and eventually were the owners of over 300 acres of land. They raised cotton and peanuts, among other things, which they took to market to sell. They also hired share croppers to help cultivate the land and harvest the crops. They were not rich people, but my grandfather, somehow, knew how to save his money. Neither he nor his wife attended school after the third grade, however, they could read and write to a certain extent. Because they didn't believe in insurance, they had saved enough money for each to be buried in a vault, which was fairly expensive at that time.

As a child, I can remember picking green beans in the summer, and cotton in the fall. I was assigned to feed the chickens in the hen house, until a chicken took my pacifier. I was about 6 years old and was standing on the back porch when my pacifier fell out of my mouth and through a crack in the porch floor. A chicken ran off with the pacifier, and I was terrified. Even today, I have a deep dislike for live chickens.

The land my grandparents owned is still there in Mississippi, and my great Aunt Aletha Mahaffey still lives near by and oversees the property. It's my dream that some day the remaining heirs will go back and redevelop the land, and build homes.

I had an aunt named Aletha Parker, who was one of my grandparents 15 children. She taught high school Mathematics, had her masters degree, was an insurance agent, an excellent cook, and an immaculate homemaker. She even made her own matching curtains and bedspreads. My Aunt Aletha Parker called her husband Mr. Henry, which we thought very interesting. She taught in a rural community where the school and church were on the same property. They never had children of their own, but paid for several of her former students to attend college. Mr. Gray, the principal of my aunt's school, was black and his wife taught in the same school. They were very generous people also. They set up a free school lunch program for the under privileged children and bore all the expenses. Mrs. Gray would go into the cafeteria at the end of each month, and personally pay for the lunches of those children, whose names she kept on a list. This is just a couple examples of how the rural



*Aletha Mahaffey 90+ years old*

communities worked together to take care of their own.

In the South, there were a lot of predominately black communities, and even in my early childhood, when I spent a lot of time with my grandparents on their farm in Mississippi, the whole community was predominantly black. It was really ironic, because there was a white man and his wife who lived on my grandfather's property. They were very reclusive people, and we only saw the man when he came up to get their mail. Neither he nor his wife could read or write, so my grandmother read their mail for them.

My grandparents owned two homes, in Mississippi, at different times. The first house was a big white house with no grass. My mother always talked of how they had to keep the yard swept clean and the broom marks had to be going in the same direction. She also said they could see underneath the house because it stood on cement blocks. My Grandmother insisted that area always be kept clean as well. When she went to town, on the weekend, all 15 children were responsible for cleaning the yard and underneath the house. She was also very particular about the wooden floors inside the house, which had to be scrubbed, with lye soap, until they looked white. Everything in the house had to be very neat and clean, including the beautiful white curtains and hand made quilted bedspreads.

*Maternal grandparents home in background in Pinola, Mississippi.*

That house eventually

burned down and they built a second house, which was never as beautiful as the big white house on cement blocks. My mother was just a little girl when the first house burned, but I can remember the second house, which had a front porch that stretched all the way across the front of the house. There were two front doors, which entered into two separate living rooms, with beds. My grandparent's living room/bedroom had a fire place, a sofa, a bed, and a wardrobe. The other combination living room/ bedroom was called the front room, and in that room there was a big bed, a sofa, a piano and a chest of drawers. It was also used to entertain guest. I don't really know the purpose for having combination living rooms and bedrooms, except to provide sleeping arrangements for the 15 children. Lots of things had a dual purpose in those days. The living rooms were always very neat and clean, and the beds always made. The rooms were very beautiful to look at, and having a sofa and a bed in the same room didn't seem strange or out of place.

The whole house consisted of four bedrooms, a dining room, and a kitchen. We spent lots of time in the kitchen where my Grandmother made her huge biscuits that were light as air. Originally, there was no bathroom, only an outhouse, and no running water. Eventually they got both a bathroom and running water, when I was about 13 years old. My grandfather built the bathroom. He had no concept of the normal size of bathrooms so he built a very large room, which often became the gathering place for the family. Inside the bathroom, in addition to the regular bathroom fixtures, was a chest of drawers, a sofa, a coffee table, a television and a washer. There was also a door which led to the outside.

My grandfather Joe (Papa) died in 1978 and my grandmother Bertha (Big Mama) passed away in 1985. The death of my grandparents marked the end of many wonderful years of



my life. They were dynamic role models who had excellent work ethics. They were the best grandparents any child could have wanted. I am the only child born to the union of Robert and Mae Lockett. However, when my father remarried, he had other children, who I

never got to know. The first time I became acquainted with them was at my father's funeral. His other children and I have not kept in contact.

I don't remember much about my paternal grandparents, except they lived in Piney Woods, Mississippi in an area which was very wooded and secluded. At that time, my father's two aunts, his mother's sisters, also lived there. In the summers after the divorce of my parents, I spent a lot of time with my father and his parents in Jackson Mississippi. When I was 16 years old these visits came to an abrupt end which drastically changed my life. I began to travel to other places and visit with various family members. After they moved to Jackson my father's family lived as neighbors on the same street until they died, the last of which passed away 10 or 15 years ago.

## CHAPTER TWO: EARLIEST MEMORIES AND CHILDHOOD

I spent lots of fun times with my mother in her flower garden. She loved flowers and worked diligently to keep them beautiful. Mother, Daddy (stepfather Earl) and I enjoyed picnics and other memorable outings at Fuller Park. They both loved to take me there to play. To enhance my talents, my mother had me take piano lessons. The lessons continued until the night of my first recital. I forgot my piece and was unable to perform. My mother told me I didn't have to take lessons any more!



*Mom and me at age 7*

Our family was always very close and there were lots of happy times with family during my childhood years. Once my mother left her parents farm in Mississippi and finished nursing school, her home became the way off the farm for her younger siblings and cousins. I always looked forward to their coming, because they read wonderful stories to me, and were my babysitters when they were not at school or working. They took me to the fair and the zoo where we had wonderful times, but they also played tricks on me. They told me if I stuck my finger in the clothespin it wouldn't hurt or that hot sauce didn't burn. I was too young to get it at first, but I eventually learned.

We had a family reunion every year, which was the highlight of my summers. Family members came from all over the United States, and we celebrated for a whole week. On Sunday, each family brought a dish and after the Sunday morning services we ate on the church grounds.

There was always lots of delightful food and church lasted all day. I wished those days had never ended. Everything seemed perfect. The weather was hot, and the country roads were dusty, but I would not have traded that life experience for anything.



*Me and childhood friend and neighbor Nancy Wallace.*

When our relatives came to visit we had wonderful times together. We put up tents in the yard, had fish fries and took long walks through the woods. During those walks, I often thought how it must have been for the slaves, and how afraid I would have been in such dense wooded areas. I imagined I could hear the hound dogs barking somewhere in the distance.

I was often lonely growing up as an only child, so I invited all the children in the neighborhood to play with me. I hated when evening came and the street lights came on, because they all had to go home. I would do anything to have a friend, even give away my lunch money, and say I'd lost it. I had to learn that one could not buy friendship or love. It was a hard lesson at the time, but I have since learned the value of true friends. I still maintain a close bond with some of my childhood friends, and even some of our children have gone on to



*Me at 11 years old.*

college together and share the same kind of relationship.

I like to think a child's play, in many cases, becomes their occupation, and as a child I always enjoyed church, which was as big a part of my life as it is today. Growing up, my favorite toy was my bicycle. I had roller skates, but never learned to skate. Skating was not one of the things I was really interested in. However, my greatest love was playing with my dolls and paper dolls. I cut beautiful houses from the Good Housekeeping magazine and pretended they belonged to my paper dolls. The floor was covered with scenes of homes, and I dreamed that someday I would own a home like the ones depicted in the magazines. But most of all, I loved my dolls. They took the place of actual playmates. I remember playing school and church with them. I lined them up in chairs and talked to them, even preached to them. At one time I thought I wanted to be a beautician, and my dolls became my customers. I pressed and curled their hair, which eventually came out, and sometimes their eyes also disappeared. This disappointed my mother very much, because she thought the dolls were playthings that should be treated very gently. We often were in conflict over the dolls, which were quite expensive.

My favorite holidays were May Day and Christmas. Christmas always meant two celebrations, because I traveled between Memphis and Jackson to be with both parents. I had Christmas with my mother and stepfather, then went to Jackson to be with my father and his family. What child wouldn't like to celebrate Christmas twice?

May Day was a big event at school. We wrapped the May pole and there were lots of activities on the playground. I always looked forward to the May Day celebration.

During a part of my elementary years in Jackson, Mississippi, I attended a private Catholic school. In the segregated South, this was really interesting, because I think I was one of maybe two or three little black children running around on that school campus with white kids and white nuns and white priest. It seems that they were very open to anyone that had the money to pay the tuition.

In the Catholic school I was taught the way of the Catholic Church, but on Sundays I attended the Methodist church with my mother. I had the Methodist and Catholic experience at an early age. When we moved to Memphis and my mother remarried, she wasn't able to take me to church so she decided to just send me. On Sunday mornings the pastor of the Presbyterian Church would stop at the corner and wait for me. I knew exactly what time he would be there and we would walk on to Sunday school together. At an early age, I was Catholic, Methodist, and Presbyterian, which kind of gave me a wide spectrum of religion, and a pretty good overview of what all three were about.

I'm very proud of my educational experience in the South, both spiritually and academically. I came up through a time of segregation and my teachers were some of the very best. As African Americans they were in tune with what we needed to succeed in the world today. They were very hard on us and very strict. They did not allow us to not perform. They were very clear about what our learning abilities were, and they pushed us to achieve to the best of our ability.

Their focus was always “you” as an individual. They spent time with us and if they saw that we weren’t giving our best effort, they make sure we did, or they called our parents. It wasn’t anything for them to even take us home if we were misbehaving. I remember one incident, in elementary school, where I had been doing some things on the playground that I really shouldn’t have been doing. Mr. Diggs, my teacher, found out what we were doing, and he brought us all in and gave us a lecture. He looked at me and said “Miss Lockett, I just know if your Mother knew you were carrying on like this she would be totally upset, so don’t you rush out when it’s time to go home because I’m going to take you myself, and I’m going to talk to your Mother.” That was the kind of involvement we had with those educators. We saw them in our churches and we also saw them at social activities. They were a part of the community and we couldn’t get away from them. We were not only associated with them just at school, but socially as well, and saw them continually through out the community. We had to watch what we did and said, even at school, because it was really true that our bad behavior or fresh mouth would follow us home.

### CHAPTER THREE: TEEN YEARS

I attended an all black high school in Memphis, so coming to Springfield was a culture shock. I graduated from high school in 1966, which was before desegregation. Our high school, the middle school, and the elementary school were all right there on the same campus, and we went from one building to the next, each time we reached another plateau. It was a very nice school, and the teachers were very well versed in what they did. I never had a white teacher. In sports, we always played other black schools. We never saw white culture. Our whole world was predominately just the black community.

Music was one of my favorite subjects in high school, and the Glee Club, in particular, stands out as one of my favorite activities. I spent lots of time in the music room, because I was second soprano and sang in the Glee Club. We performed a lot, and we once sang the musical score of “Gypsy”. We traveled all over the mid Southern area to sing and even went to Washington, DC. I remember some of our graduates served in Viet Nam, and just as the war was getting started, one young man was killed. Our Glee Club sang for that particular funeral, so we were also taught patriotism. Being a member of the Glee Club was an outstanding experience during my high school years.



*Hamilton High School Glee Club (I'm 8 from left)*

In order to pay for our expenses when we traveled to other cities and towns, we had fund raisers. We also sponsored talent contests. Rufus Thomas, a local DJ, judged some of the talent shows. Rufus's daughter Carla, had graduated from our high school and had a record on the charts, called “Gee Whiz”. Because James Brown was a very popular entertainer at that time, he was often imitated by some of the contestants.

My best girlfriend was Claudia Merriweather. Even though she wasn't a member, she sometimes traveled with us when the Glee Club went out of town. Students who were not members of the Glee Club could travel with us, if there was extra money. Claudia's grandmother lived in a small town in Mississippi, and Claudia and I sometimes went to visit her on her farm. She always prepared delicious meals for us from her vegetable garden.

Once Claudia and I tried to sneak across the state line into Mississippi to a Dr. King march. We wanted to be a part of the march, however, as we got closer and closer to the activities, we noticed that some of the marchers were being crop dusted by white farmers. Policemen were lining the roadway with guns at the ready position. Needless to say, we turned and headed back to Memphis. I don't think our parents have ever heard of this incident. It has been one major secret between Claudia and me. This was only one of our little escapades where we were not at the place we should have been, at the time we should have been.

Because my mother worked for the government, I was not able to participate fully in any of the Civil Rights movement. Dr. King often came to Memphis or just to the border where the state line met Mississippi. There were marches and other activities, but my mother did not permit me to participate. She thought it might jeopardize her job. If I was involved and got arrested or something it would be a reflection on her and she wouldn't be able to continue her employment. So I was never able to be physically involved. However the members of the Presbyterian Church where I attended, were very much involved in the Civil Rights Movement. The local NAACP president was a member of our church, so we did a lot of background kind of activities. She was abreast of what was going on and she talked to us. Attending these kinds of activities gave me exposure to a semi political arena. I really think these experiences helped me when I came to Springfield and attended the 1984 Presidential convention as a delegate for Jesse Jackson.

History was my other favorite subject. I'm still interested in history and even now I am involved with summer Black History Academies, which I have helped to organize for the past 10 years. A small group of us formed these academies, because the Springfield public schools have not designed an effective black history program. Being involved in programs like this comes from my love of history, and my eagerness to know about the world and the people who occupy this planet.



*Hamilton High 35<sup>th</sup> reunion. Me second row 8<sup>th</sup> from left.*



We were all very proud of our new auditorium, which was built during my high school years. When I recently attended my thirty-fifth High school reunion, we toured the auditorium and it was amazing to see that it was in excellent condition, and as clean and

*Hamilton High 35<sup>th</sup> reunion. Me third row 8<sup>th</sup> from right.*

beautiful as if it were still brand new. Upon its completion, I remember our principal said to us, “look around this auditorium. Isn’t it a beautiful auditorium”? It was a state of the art building, at that time. He said “look at our seats. Nobody has written or carved names on the backs”. We were taught a sense of pride in the things we possessed. Once we were blessed to have them, we should take very, very good care of them.

The football season was a very busy time in the school year. I was never the homecoming queen, but in my junior year I was an attendant. Getting ready for the parade, and dance that followed that night, was similar to preparing for the Debutante Ball, because again, we had to purchase ball gowns. In order to be an attendant, we had to campaign and promote ourselves among our fellow students. We won by the number of votes we were able to attain from the student body. It was like being in a popularity contest. I was rather surprised when I won, because I was never super popular. I thought I was known by only a few students, and I did not date a lot in high school, so to be voted an attendant was a really exciting experience for me.

I always attended our school proms, and I served on the decoration and year book committees several times. The prom was always a fun time for the students.

There was one young man, with whom I fell in love, on one of my many trips to Mississippi. We were 10 years old when we first met and our friendship continued through high school. I thought my heart skipped a beat each time I was in his presence. Every summer we spent time together, horse back riding and riding his motorcycle. When I came home from vacation on the farm, we corresponded and I still have some of those letters today, even though they are a little faded. After graduation, we went our

separate ways, but our paths have frequently crossed, over the years, when I've gone back to Mississippi. I appreciate our bond of love and friendship because we have always been there for each other in times of despair. Even though we are miles apart, we are just a phone call away. Having someone, with whom I can share the bad times, is truly a blessing. My step dad used to say, "a friend is not always at your house, or in your face, but is there when you need them, anytime or anywhere".

The other activity that sticks out in my mind was my participation in the Cotillion. Each year there was a debutante ball, which was sponsored by the Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity. I had really looked forward to that Ball all four years during high school. Because I had met all their criteria, I was eligible to be considered as a candidate after graduation. We had to pay an entry fee, and after we had been accepted, we had to come up with the money to participate. To get ready for the debutante ball, among other things, we learned how to waltz. There was a month of activities where we did all kind of things, one of which was bowling. We participated in lots of things during the months proceeding the ball. We were taken to the black county club, where we were introduced to the game of golf. When we were on the golf course, some men who were regular golfers drove us in their golf carts. After the golf game, we went to one of the leading attorney's home for a group picture, which was later printed in the local newspaper. We were all wearing our beautiful white dresses.

My mother and I were really excited about me being presented at such a prestigious affair. It was a big event in the Southern states, among blacks, and it was also a big event at the country club, among whites. However, the two never mixed. When I came to Springfield, I found it quite odd that there were no black debutante balls. Young black women were not being presented to society, but there is the Snow Flake Ball here in Springfield, and there used to be pictures in the newspaper.

But to go back to the Cotillion, the night I was presented was one of the proudest times of my life. Approximately 14 girls were presented, all of whom were from black high schools, from all over the city. I remember buying the beautiful dress. All the girls went to Goldsmith's department store to purchase the most beautiful wedding dress they could find, which they had modified into a ball gown. Since my step dad was a tailor, he altered my dress. I remember the young man that took me to the ball. His name was Naaman Johnson. The whole evening was just a joy. My stepfather was dressed in his tuxedo and my mother in her beautiful sequin gown. During the activities we got to talk about all our aspirations, and it caused us to have such a sense of pride about ourselves and our accomplishments. I don't think I will ever



*Me and my escort at debutante ball.*

forget it. My mother still has the photographs of me and my escort.

The Cotillion is still a tradition and an ongoing event. Girls are still being presented every year. It has not been discontinued, and I think it is just as much a prestigious event now as it was then.

The Debutante Presentation was instituted by the Memphis Alumni Chapter as a social project which had as its main purpose the encouragement of high moral, academic and social accomplishments on the part of youth in the Memphis area. We all had high aspirations, had already finished high school, and we were looking forward to a bright future. We wanted to impact the world and make a difference. That was the whole overview of that evening, presenting us to the city of Memphis as a future prospect and a future active citizen. It was just everything all rolled into one. At that time it was considered an accomplishment to be a debutante and be presented to society.

The neighborhood in Memphis, where I grew up, was totally black. There were no white neighbors. There was a white man that ran the corner store, but even the service station, next to the corner store, was black owned and operated. In our local community, mostly everything from our auto mechanics to our laundromats were owned by blacks. There may have been a front guy, which meant a white man owned the business, but we never saw him, we only saw the black man who ran the business.

Our neighbors, on one side were school teachers, and the husband taught at Lemoyne Owens College in Memphis. The neighbor on the other side was a lady named Evelyn who eventually bought her jewelry business from the owner, Mr. Bagley, who taught her everything. Evelyn is my children's god mother. She went to work for Mr. Bagley right out of high school, learned the business, and is now the owner. She doesn't just clean jewelry anymore, but sets mounts and anything else that needs to be done. However, most of our neighbors were common laborers, decent hard working people. Not many of them owned their own business.

There was a cross sectioning of occupations. A lot of the women worked as maids, nurses' aides, or nannies in the homes of white people. One of my closest friend's Mother kept house for a white doctor. She made sure the dinner was cooked everyday that God sent, cleaned their house, raised every one of their children, and I'm sure, acted as confidante to the doctor's wife. In an earlier time, there were lots of contractors, who in a slang term, might have been called "bootleggers". They did house repairs and plumbing and some even did electrical work. They were not licensed, but had learned their craft as, maybe, apprentices under white people.

It's interesting to note that a lot of people on my street owned their homes. However, I want to digress a bit and talk about land ownership in the South and how far we really have come from all perspectives, except for the past couple generations, including my own. My grandfather was very, very fortunate to be able to amass a great deal of land in Mississippi, which was really unheard of. We knew there were a lot of disparities, and I remember how my Grandparents often talked about the white people in their community

who wanted their land, and how their lives had even been threatened. They were told what would be done to them if they wouldn't allow the whites to have the land. I really think we have come a long way. The South, for some, has been very cruel and my parents never chose to go back to Piney Woods or Pinola, Mississippi, and neither did most of my mother's siblings.

The church was the hub of social life for many African Americans. A lot of things were going on in our community that whites would not have believed were going on. One of my very, very best friends, Larry Woodard, has gone on to be a concert pianist. He currently tours with Fopera singers and spends time grooming them and getting them ready for performances. He was only 16 years old when he played for our church, however, classical music was always his first love. He graduated from Christian Brothers College, in Memphis, and is known nationally for his accomplishments.

I remember when Larry played, for a local group, the musical rendition of Porgy and Bess, a popular musical drama featuring black actors. The audience was astounded by his performance, and even at 16 they recognized him as a very much up and coming musician. I had other friends who were also very much involved in the Southern social life, and have gone on to be professionals in all kinds of occupations.

Most white people didn't think things like this were going on in the sub-social atmosphere in Southern states. Even today, black social life is still very much alive. The arts are present and there are many middle class blacks, the more affluent blacks, who are very much involved in society. There are attorneys, doctors, and other professionals who live in very nice homes, and expose their children to the very best. Ballet, classical music, opera, and other forms of art are all a part of their education. I think this kind of exposure is seen, perhaps, even more in the South than it is in the Northern states.

It's just sad that the South of yesterday, for many blacks, had been so cruel that they were forced to move away. They went North to look for a better life, and I can't really say whether they found the better life or not. Nevertheless, there are many blacks in the South who have become affluent, and have made their property work for them.

This all reminds me that when I came to Springfield, there were two men who were fairly prominent businessmen. Mr. Ships, an electrician, who is 80 plus years old, is still working and his business is well known all over the city. The plumber was called Be-Bop Brown who also owned a night club that was a very interesting place, to say the least. Mr. Brown has since died. That's how things were when I came to Springfield, not many blacks doing very many things. Most of us know of the lynching of 1906, after which lots of blacks left the city. I would also like to note that some blacks were hidden by whites and stayed in Springfield, despite the danger. However, many of the more affluent politicians and people of influence left, never to return. It seems that Springfield has never recovered from that incident.

During my teen years, I never interacted with whites, and when we went out in Memphis, we had our own restaurants. I remember one that was called the Gay Hawk, where we went to eat bar-be-cue. It was down on Vance Street in Memphis. They would bring ice

buckets to the car, and I guess, anyone could bring their own bottle, if they were into drinking. We went there to just sit and mix and mingle and enjoy the outdoors. There was a small restaurant on the inside that we could go into, but basically, all socializing was done in a segregated atmosphere.

During that time, blacks were not allowed to go into the white establishments, like Shoney's Big Boy, for any purpose. Beale Street, where most black business establishments were located, was and is, a big thing in Memphis. It has been renovated, but about the time I was 13, it began to run down, and kind of went down for many years. Right now, Beale Street is very prosperous and has been turned into a beautiful sight. The New Daisy, which was a black movie theater, was down on Beale Street, and the Marco Theater was downtown where most whites went. We could go to the Marco, if we went into the balcony. I've heard my ex-husband talk about the movie theaters, even here in Springfield, which were the same way. Blacks could sit in the balcony, but could not mix with whites. Everything we did in Memphis, was within our black community. We even had our own parks. I remember the zoo was segregated, and we could only go on Thursdays. When the state fair came to town we were allowed to go only two days. It wasn't so bad for me, because I didn't understand what was happening. We were just going on the days we were supposed to be there. Since we had been taught to always socialize with our own race, it didn't seem strange that we didn't see any whites. We were all right there, which was our whole world, and we never really thought about it.

Then there was the Cotton Carnival. There were two in Memphis, one on Beale Street, for blacks, and one for whites, up on Main, down on the river front. I lived a very segregated life, but until I got older I didn't even understand what segregation was all about. My mother did not talk about it because it was totally accepted as a way of life, and we didn't push the issue. When we went out to the shopping areas, my mother was very careful not to offend the white people or the white clerks. I don't remember ever trying on clothes in the shops, but I was sheltered from a lot of things that were going on. I'm sure we could not try on the clothes and because my mother knew, we never even tried. She was never a person, even to this day, who would take anything back. This could have been because of how things were. She buys it, and if it's not right she just keeps it. She doesn't return it. I'm thinking it might have something to do with that time of segregation. There were some boutiques in our neighborhoods, but nothing extensive. Basically, our money was spent in white America. We just weren't allowed the privileges other people had.

We talk about the towns that were willingly predominately black owned and operated. I know there was a bank down on Beale Street that was black owned and operated, and of course, it made us more independent. Now we are very dependent, and I would say, it seems as if our young blacks really don't have a sense of ownership, or pride. We had our own corner stores and restaurants, and were more self sufficient because we had to be in order to survive. In the South, there were dry cleaners, insurance companies, and mortuaries everywhere. In Memphis, there was Maceo Walker, who passed his million dollar insurance business on to his children.

As a girl, interacting with whites was pretty much unheard of. Mr. Golf, the man that my

mother and Father were buying their house from, was a very wonderful white man. Originally, my parents were renting that house and he allowed them to buy it. He and my step daddy were very close, and they would go into little ventures together, like opening a service station. Mr. Golf owned it and my father ran it. Mr. Golf, I guess, was an exceptional white man in the South. He didn't seem to see color, and he was very fair in dealing with my parents. When we went to visit him, we actually went through the front door, and sat in the living room. He was one white man that I could actually say was not prejudiced, and neither was his wife. They had one child who was very liberal as well.

Associating with Mr. Golf and his family was about the only interaction I had with whites, other than with some of the nurses who worked with my mother at the VA. When she took me to their Christmas dinners, and other events, I would interact with some of the nurses. There were one or two nurses who really liked my mother, and they sometimes visited and did things together, but it was not the accepted practice. I really had a fear of whites. I didn't know how to receive them. I'd never interacted with them, and I felt I wouldn't fit in. I wouldn't know what to do if I were to eat dinner with them. I wouldn't know how to carry on a conversation. I think segregation really generates a lot of fear. I'm sure whites feared us, as much as we feared them, and then it was a double whammy, because we knew that we had come from slavery. We understood the logistics of slavery and we had a feeling about whites never wanting to do anything that was just or right for blacks. When I came to Springfield, every white person I saw looked the same, and I was almost in a state of fear and panic all the time.

I came to Springfield on the tail end of segregation. Even though the schools were desegregated, and there seemed to be a lot of interracial marriages and relationships, and a lot of little biracial children running around, Springfield still had its own personal segregation problems, and probably still does. To compare the two places, yes, in Memphis, we never mixed, but in Springfield, there seemed to be a lot of sexual mixing, however, when it came to the good jobs and better housing, there were the same disparities that were going on in the Southern states. Blacks were still suffering from the same problems, whether it be Midwest or deep South.

## CHAPTER FOUR: ADULTHOOD

I arrived in Springfield by train, which no longer is in existence, with my mother, my best friend, Claudia, and her Mother. The first thing I noticed was there were no black Red Caps handling the bags. Everybody was white. I didn't say anything to my mother but I thought, "my God, this does not look good". The cab drivers were all there, lined up, and not a black one in the bunch. And again I thought, "my goodness, this really isn't looking good". However, it was 1966 and we eventually got a cab driver to take us to the campus.

We finally got to SMS, and got our paper work done. But on thing I really want you to know, and make note of, is that segregation was still strong. They put every black student in the same dorm. At that time they had just built a new building, and they put us all in one suite. The other girls were from New Jersey, St. Louis, and Kansas City. There were 4 girls in our particular suite, and they put the other 4 girls in another suite, but made sure all the black students were together. They didn't put any of us in suites with the white students, which we found very interesting.

When there was a lot of noise or a disturbance in the dorm, the first place the RA came was to us, but it was never us, it was the girls around us. Sometimes they came to school from little towns like Ava and Licking, Missouri, and had never, never, never interacted with blacks. They came in our rooms to listen to the music we were playing or to sit and see how we combed our hair. They would ask what we were doing and make comments like "my family doesn't like blacks". We heard all the comments in the world, in those dorms in that little space of time. Some were polite and some were not, but sometimes our room was full of white girls, just trying to figure out who we were. Some of the black athletes, during that time, dated white girls, but most stayed pretty close to the black females. That has totally changed all over the world, but particularly in Springfield.

There were no recreational facilities, off campus, for black students, so when Claudia and I didn't have dates, we would dress up and just sit in the lobby. After a few hours, we would return to our room and go to bed. We both attended SMS for one year. I returned to Springfield for the second year, but got married instead of returning to school, and Claudia never returned.

There were very lucrative businesses in the South, but in Springfield, in 1966, there was a black owned bar-be-cue place, one elderly black doctor, Dr. Brown, and no black attorneys. There were Moss and Dempsey barbershops, the only two black shops in Springfield. However, there were several beauty shops which were located in the back of the women's homes. There was not one affluent nightclub that we felt good about going to. There were places like Half-A-Hill that could be rented, but it wasn't the norm. There was not one nice place that we could go with a date and just sit and enjoy an evening in beautiful surroundings. Most clubs were just little "holes in the wall" or "dives" back across the tracks or over in the holler.

I remember there was a strip of old row houses, in Springfield, which have since been

torn down. They are now homes that have been rebuilt and mostly occupied by whites. The blacks were given a nominal amount of money for their property, and when they finished building the new homes on that same property, the blacks were not financially able to afford them. They were older people, who were retired and weren't working. So you see, we saw the same disparity, whether it was in Springfield, Missouri or Memphis, Tennessee.

I have found very little black leadership in Springfield which I believe, stems from the lack of trust among most blacks. The church has been a source of strength, however, not all blacks belong to church. In the past few years we have seen young men and women take their place in local government but there is still room for improvement. Councilman Denny Whyne for example has been a valuable asset to the community.



*Senator Kit Bond, Councilman Denny Whyne, Bob Dixon and me.*

I like the saying from the movie *Color Purple* “the more things change the more they stay the same”. This could apply to Springfield. In some ways we have made great strides but in other ways we have not. The black community is still struggling, but we are making progress. I am grateful to Samuel Knox, President and Managing Editor of *Unite of Southwest Missouri*, and Mark Dixon of 3AC, African American Agenda Collaborators, for their efforts to inform the black community of educational opportunities, jobs and health services that are available for the asking.

I thank God for Calvin Allen and the Springfield Community Center for exposing black youth to the arts, theater, personal development programs that increase their self esteem and growth, and valuable educational tutoring. Over the years Mr. Allen has opened doors for many children of Springfield who have gone on to bigger and better things. We need more concerned citizens like those mentioned to encourage our young black

children.

The Civic League, the NAACP, and other organizations have awarded scholarships to deserving minorities. It really does take the entire village to raise a child and Springfield, Missouri is beginning to rise to the occasion.

I feel the family is the beginning of change. As we began to see strong family values in Springfield, we began to see real change. As the city grows racially we must learn to be tolerant. "The more you are around me the more you will get to know me". Springfield is going to have to get-to know the people that make up its population. I have seen the racial changes and I welcome them.

Springfield is a college town and has some of the best schools in the nation. SMS is the reason I came to this town. I am currently attending Drury College and love the diversity of the students. Springfield is attracting people from all over the world. At one time Springfield was thought to be a town for retirees, but now we are seeing young families moving into the area. I am looking forward to the time when the black citizens of Springfield who are born and raised here, will be afforded the same opportunities as those who have moved into the city. Our young black people generally move away to find success. I have four children who have grown up here and only one has chosen to stay in Springfield. The other three feel there are no real opportunities for them in this city.

I had lived in Memphis from the time, I guess, I was 9 until I was about 17 or 18. I went to Hamilton High school in Memphis Tennessee, and after graduation, came to Springfield, Missouri to attend SMS, which, at that time, was not a university, but was actually a college. I had attended SMS one year when I met and married Mike Marshall. This really changed the direction of my life. I never forgot about my dream to teach, however my marriage made everything just a little more difficult.



*Me and Earl Graham (Stepfather) at my wedding.*



*Family: Daughter Elisa, Daughter-in-law Felicia, Husband Mike, Son Mike, Me, and Son Chris.*



*Mike, Chris, Me, Lisa, Octavia  
(my children Easter Sunday 2003)*

Mike and I had 4 children, two daughters and two sons. Our marriage lasted approximately 27 years, with a lot of ups and downs. During our marriage, I had this thought that I needed to finish college, so I'd go back and forth. I'd have a child and go back to school, and between work and the child and keeping house, it would be too much and I'd have to drop my classes. Then I'd have another child, and I'd go back to school. Being a wife, a working mother, and trying to go to school became so overwhelming that there did not seem to be enough hours in the day to accomplish my goals. This on and off process of trying to attend school, went on and on and on, until I got a scholarship, in education from Springfield public schools and Drury College. It's now been 5 years that I've been in that program and I'm looking at maybe 17 credits from graduation. I have gotten an Associate Degree from Drury, and hopefully before this whole adventure is over, I'll go on to get my Bachelors.

As I've said, my marriage had lots of ups and downs, but the best thing that has come from that marriage are our four children. We have a daughter Elisa who lives in St. Louis, Missouri and attends St. Louis University. Her majors are sociology and psychology. She is working on her Masters degree. She is also the director of the Day Care Hope House and a single mother raising a wonderful compassionate son.



*Sydney, Chris (back row), Stepfather Earnest Moore, Lisa, Me and Octavia.*

Our son Chris who because of, I guess, my longing to always be in Memphis, went back to Memphis. He's a barber, his wife is a cosmetologist, and they work together in the same shop. Their step grandfather, my mother's current husband, is a master barber. He owned one shop, but since Chris has come on board they now have two barber shops. Chris manages one shop and his grandfather manages the other. Chris really doesn't own the shop, but since grand dad doesn't have children that can carry on his lineage, I think he is looking to Chris to do that for him. They work well together and run a very lucrative business.

The third child is a son who lives with me here, in Springfield. Education is his main interest and he likes working with children. He currently works for the Springfield Community Center in a program for young boys called Men in Demand. He has also started his own line of tee shirts, called New Kingdom Clothing.



*Me and Mike age 7 in Memphis*



*Octavia, Tennessee State University*

Octavia Jeanice Evelyn Marshall, our 20 year old daughter, the baby of the family, is named in honor of her god mother Evelyn Richardson Thomas. She is a Sophomore at Tennessee State University, in Nashville. She seems to be very much interested in education. She is the only child that has chosen to attend a historically black college. Springfield did not prepare Octavia for the experience of attending a school where the student body was over 50% black, but she has come to appreciate the efforts of the mostly black faculty to give her the best education possible.

Octavia was very active in high school and left her legacy at Central High School. She was in the choir, played soccer and was a member of the first team, was a Kiltie, home coming attendant in her sophomore year, a member of the cabinet and governing body of Central, and vice president of the senior class.



*Me with grandchildren Sydney and Chris  
2002*

I have two grandchildren. Chris Thompson, who will soon be thirteen, and my granddaughter, who lives in Memphis, and will be two in November. She is the joy of my life, but I think all grandmothers feel that way about their grandchildren. They are both wonderful, young people. We call my grandson the Governor, because he seems to have some political aspirations. One of our funny stories is that the school he attends needed some new playground equipment. Chris formed a little group who picketed around the

playground on their lunch hour. They made signs saying “We need new equipment” and “This equipment is dangerous”. After this experience, we named him the Governor. We pray that he will stick to his convictions and accomplish great things. He is very articulate for a 12 year old, and we hope he has a bright future and makes us all proud, no matter what he decides to do.

Recently, a few doors have opened up for me. For instance, as a member of the Ministers Coalition, I was given the privilege of working as a HIV/AIDS Youth Education Specialist. The position allowed me to travel to conferences and trainings to glean information which I share with the community. This information will help young people learn how to stop the spread of a disease which is completely preventable. Although my appointment was the year 2002-2003, I have gained a lifetime of knowledge that can be used to continue the fight against HIV/AIDS.



*Granddaughter Sydney 2002*

I am currently a Special Education Aide for the Springfield Schools. It seems the children today have a harder time coping with the everyday complexities of life. The classrooms of America have had to adapt to the total needs of the student. The many rewards for my labor in the classroom cannot be measured or purchased with money. I have worked with students who, in their early years, were not very attentive, but later matured and developed into wonderful young people. I believe their strength and determination helped them to reach their goals.

God is always faithful to his word. Isaiah 40:31 says: “But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength”. I feel my strength and dreams are being renewed as I press toward my goals to teach, and one day, maybe, run for public office. I guess I could say life is like a river, it just keeps rolling along.

## CHAPTER FIVE: LIFE MISSION

My love for people caused me to look for ways to be of help in the community. I attended Deliverance Temple Church and was active as Youth Director. I was also a member of Women Aglow International, a Christian women's organization, and a member of the NAACP.

As I began to be more involved in the church, I felt drawn to the ministry. I was very hesitant about my feelings because I had been taught that God did not call women to become preachers. I was very concerned about what people would think, however I was greatly encouraged by my mother when she said she would come to hear me preach. Her encouragement gave me what I needed to carry on.

I began to study the Bible to find out what God had to say. I found my answer and began to study the word of God, under the leadership of the Senior Pastor of Mt. Olive Baptist Church. The most important part of this portion of my life was noticing how my steps had been ordered by God. The process had begun in 1968, when I was being taught by Elder David Knox of Deliverance Temple, followed by the teachings of Reverend Tony Robinson who also attended Mount Olive Baptist Church.

Finally, the weight of the call of God became so great, I had to make a choice. My answer was yes. In 1995 I was licensed to preach and one year later ordained as a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Since that time I have had many opportunities to be of service to this community.

My life mission has always included women and youth. When my children were in school they brought friends home, who, many times, would stay for months. Our home was an extension of my ministry. Several young women have lived with us as they tried to work through problems in their lives. Learning to share whatever we had was a way of life in our family. I never knew from day to day who would be a part of our household. There was one young man, a friend of my son, who came one evening for dinner and stayed a year. When he had been with us for about a week, I asked him where he lived, and he said, "I live here". After hearing about his family situation, I realized that he would have to live with us, or go into foster care. He is now an adult and has children of his own. Even today, we still have house guests who need a helping hand. I think of my home as a temporary sanctuary for people in need, because when one leaves another comes. The church does a great deal to help needy people, however, if each Christian took it upon him/herself to help just one person, the gospel would be realized on a more personal level.

I have recently found myself surrounded by young people, and wonder why they want to be around someone twice their age. I don't have an answer, but they keep coming. Maybe they realize how much I appreciate and respect their honesty and willingness to share their thoughts and opinions. They express their ideas about current events and how many of today's problems could be solved. Many of them have great insight and are looking for someone who will listen. When they come to me with a problem, I may not have the solution, but I am willing to listen. The most exciting thing for me is to see

these young people work through their problems and go on with their lives. From their own experiences they are often able to help others.

The young people in my neighborhood know that my doors are always open to them. It does not matter how late or how early, I try to always be available. I have been with them when they have lost friends in death or when an unexpected child was born, and I've been in the court room with them. One thing is sure: God is with them always. I am just a stand in.

Since I am in contact with so many young people, through the Springfield school system, I tell stories as a learning tool. I have also shared my stories at school assemblies, churches, other events, and have even been asked to do a day of storytelling. Many of my stories come from African American folklore books I have read. I also use my



Grandparents and their farm in Mississippi in my stories. The children seem to love best the stories of my childhood on the farm, and sometimes write letters to tell me how much they enjoyed them. All my stories have a moral. They are designed to teach goodness and correctness of character and behavior. One of my favorite stories is called “Spreading

*Story time, “Spreading our Fingers”*

Your Fingers”. It tells about sharing, and the moral is if we share, it will come back to us. In this particular story, food was shared and at the end, the person who had shared, received. Many other lessons are conveyed by the stories I tell.

I have had opportunities to minister on my front porch. My most memorable Thanksgiving was when two Native Americans came to my front door and asked for food. I immediately thought of their struggles as natives of this country, and how they shared their farming techniques and food with those first immigrants. I was more than delighted to invite them into our home to share our Thanksgiving dinner. After dinner we listened to Anita Baker, and they said

how much they loved her music. Later in the evening, we took them back to where they were staying. I think of them almost every Thanksgiving,



*Me and grandson leading Choir at church*

and how blessed we were to have shared our meal with them. Some of my husband's ancestors were Native Americans, as well as my own, so we were happy they had chosen to stop at our house. There have been many people who have taught me many things. We need to be careful how we entertain strangers, for they could be angels of whom we are unaware. I feel blessed to have been called to serve Him and to minister to others, as my life mission.

Raising my children was also a life mission for me. Since I was an only child, having children of my own was an adventure. My first child, Elisa, was born a day before my first wedding anniversary, which meant, to my surprise, that I was pregnant three months after I got married. When I called my mother to tell her the news, I was in tears. I guess I didn't expect to be having a baby so soon after our marriage, however, with the birth of each child, I realized that I had been given an awesome responsibility.

I knew that raising my children would be a life long commitment, and I wanted to be the best Mom ever, even if, as the saying goes, "they did not come with instructions".

My second child was born in Oseola, Missouri, on the way home to Springfield from Kansas City. Even though my mother said I should stay home, I was determined to attend my friend's wedding because my doctor had assured me I would be fine. Chris was actually born in the back seat of the car and was my first experience with natural childbirth. I actually had a very easy time when the other two children were born. However, after the delivery of Michael, our third child, I had said to God I didn't want to come through those delivery room doors again.

I know that God has a sense of humor, because our fourth child was born in the labor room, after the nurses told me I was not going to have a baby that night, and they were going to send me home the next morning. But Octavia came suddenly that night as an older nurse had predicted. The joy of being the Mother of our four children is ongoing. Even though we have disagreements, we always remember our love for one another.

The divorce was the one thing that really hurt us all. In some cases, it may be the best for every one involved, but it doesn't mean there isn't hurt, especially when there are children who don't realize the severity of the problems between the parents. Divorce made life very difficult for our children, so it was important that I try to provide them security and lots of love. We are still recovering, and going on with our lives.

After the divorce, I needed a reason to keep living, because many times I felt life was not worthwhile. The children were finding their own way, and I felt alone. Suddenly my dream to continue my education came true, when I was awarded a scholarship. I finally had renewed hope and direction again. I sometimes now feel there isn't enough time to do all the things going on in my life, but I thank God for his intervention. I am also thankful for the people that have helped me get started again, many of whom no longer live in Springfield, but who changed my life with their inspiration and encouragement. My mission to work with children was in place as I was working at York Elementary School. Carol McDonald was the first Special Education teacher I had worked with. She understood what I was going through, as she was recently divorced, and had two

children. As we talked at lunch and break, we realized how similar our lives were, and we became the best of friends.

Carol has been there for me and helped me to regain my self confidence by allowing me to share my ideas in her classroom. She and I talked about remarrying, but she felt her students were all she needed. One day while we were at recess with the students, the secretary brought out a dozen roses. I thought the roses were for me but they were actually for Carol. A few months later she married and moved away.

I feel my life mission is ongoing and continually evolving. I have learned not to be surprised by anything and to realize that each day is truly a new day, full of new opportunities to serve. Like the story of “Spreading Your Fingers”, the scripture says “not to be weary in well doing for we shall reap if we faint not”. I am human and sometimes feel like fainting or stopping, but there is work yet to be done, so I tell myself to keep going.

I think about what success really is as I go about my life mission. At one time I thought success meant a high paying job, a beautiful house, and living happily ever after with my husband and children. I’ve since learned that success means different things to different people. For me, success is loving God with all my heart and loving my neighbors, and it cannot be measured by what a person possesses, but how and with what quality he/she has lived their lives. We are writing our eulogy everyday that we live. A gospel song that I really like is titled “Let The Works I Have Done Speak For Me”. I would like to be judged by the things I’ve done rather than the things I’ve possessed.

A grass roots woman of the people seems to be my station in life. I love fighting for the under dog. I gain gratification from seeing people succeed, when others have given up on them. I have worked in a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center and many of those women are still a part of my life. I see them on the streets of Springfield, and some have been able to sustain a life free from drugs and alcohol, but others have not. I try to



encourage them all, and I pray and minister to them wherever we meet, whether it’s in the grocery store, the mall, or on the street. We should take every opportunity to encourage a sister or brother, when they are striving to overcome an obstacle which has stood in the way of their progress, toward their personal goals. Everyone has dreams and goals, but when times get hard, we all need a helping hand.

*Me, Col. Rick and Charlotte Cosby, and Regina Rogers*

In January 2002 the Gwen Marshall Ministries was born. I call it the Church Without Walls. Joel and Regina Rogers were the real inspiration behind this project. They lived with us for a year and were the ones who actually did the work required to have my ministry legally incorporated. I can never thank them enough for their encouragement and hard work. This ministry is geared toward women and youth, but men are welcome. Three months after the ministry conception, we hosted the first women's conference. We called on women in Springfield and surrounding areas to come together in unity to pray. The following Fall we hosted a conference called "God's Mighty Women of Valor", the theme of which was taken from Isaiah 32:9-11. The scripture tells the women to rise up and to throw off their attitude of indifference. Jewel Tankard of Nashville, Tennessee and Reverend Bernadine Tellman from Birmingham, Alabama have been to Springfield to speak to our women. Both their messages encourages women to raise their standards. Pastor Tankard owns a jet plane and several successful businesses. We had other women who operated small businesses to set up tables to show their talents. My aim was to show women that all things are possible through Christ.

We have honored some of the Women of Valor in our community with a luncheon, and we plan to honor as many single mothers as we can in our next conference for the Fall 2003. There are many women all around me, who are hurting and feel discouraged. I know I cannot help them all, but if I can help one, and if that one will help someone else, our ministry could reach hundreds of women across this country.

I enjoy the church without walls concept, because it increases my ability to minister. I call Springfield the village, and it takes the entire village to accomplish our goals. "Yet the journey of a thousand miles begins with one step".



## CHAPTER SIX: LIFE IN SPRINGFIELD

I was 19 years old when I came to Springfield. It has been a place of growth and maturing for me. It has been a place where some of my dreams have been deferred and others have come to pass. When I came to this city there were no residential neighborhoods south of Battlefield Street, just cornfields, and the Battlefield Mall was only a dream. The train station is gone forever and the City Square has been redeveloped. Springfield has changed in many ways and so has my life. I had so many dreams upon my arrival and as I saw the death of Dr. King and many others, I became aware of the passing of time and my hopes.

The segregated south had not prepared me for life in Springfield. The racial climate was different. It was hard to determine if I was accepted by the white population or just being tolerated. There were several interracial marriages, yet they were not totally accepted. The surface seemed calm but there was an under current. Housing was an issue for the black community in some areas. The interracial couples had problems as well. In certain communities the white wife had to present the rental application alone, without mentioning the ethnic background of her black husband and biracial children.

Having no immediate relatives who lived near by during my first few years in Springfield was a problem for me. Because my husband is a native of Springfield he was near his family and knew lots of people. In the South our neighborhoods were family orientated even if they were segregated, so I had to learn to develop friendships which included getting to know people of other nationalities. I don't think I hated these people, I just had not been exposed to them. A quote that I often use is "To know me is to love me, to love me is to spend time with me and after you have spent time with me, then you will know why you love me". I had to learn the meaning of this saying and Springfield has been the perfect place.

My world in Springfield was on the North side of town, which at the time had the largest concentration of blacks. I was happy with the situation until my children began to grow up and bring their friends home. I had to rethink my segregated live style. My husband and children played a large part in the reconstruction of my life. I began to meet more christian women, most of whom were white. We spent lots of time together and I began to notice we were more alike than different. I came to understand that we all cry, hurt, rejoice, and love. Gradually I began to see a change in my attitude. There have been some set backs on this journey to love regardless of race but I am making progress.

I know God does not make mistakes, but I have often wondered why my destination was Springfield, Missouri. I believe the answer is the realization of my potential to gradually develop a fuller and more productive life. The ambitions that I had for myself were not the ones God had for me. When I first came to Springfield I thought I would get an education and settle into a life of comfort and riches. The 35 years I've been here have not yielded monetary wealth but I have gained invaluable knowledge. I often say "I wish I knew then what I know now". I am sure I would have done a lot of things differently. However, I can honestly say I would not take anything for my journey with the Lord

which has taught to trust Him.

I've worked lots of jobs during my years in Springfield. I've been a nurse's aide, sales clerk at the old Sears on St. Louis Street, worked for Ozarks Fighting Back, I've been a Special Education Aide for Springfield Public Schools, HIV/AIDS Youth Specialist for the Minister Coalition, and I served on a committee that helped understand sickness and death in the black community. I am presently serving on the Springfield History Museum Board, who along with the History Museum of Ash Grove is interested in keeping the history of Springfield and surrounding areas alive. The history of Springfield is a combination of victories and defeats. My life has been full of victories and defeats as well, however, living in Springfield has taught me to hope. I am a board member of the Center City North Group, which builds new houses for the needy. We have actually built two. I am also on the board of The Sherman Avenue Project, whose aim is to restore and rent old houses. Each of these jobs and experiences has increased my love for God, life, and my fellow man.

I have always wanted to teach, but after I didn't finish college, I became a teacher's assistant. I am now working with behavior disorder students and I've done that for the past 13 or 14 years. I have always worked around the school system. I started as a lunch room aide. I finally got a job as a teacher's aide, and I'm now hoping to finish the degree that I started in 1966. My major is education, but right now I'm looking at graduating with a degree in social studies. I hope to be able to teach in middle school. At my present age, I think anything would be exciting. Getting my degree has become a more personal objective. I now want to do it for the self Gratification, and the feeling of accomplishment that I truly finished what I started. My goal is to finish anything I start and never make commitments that I don't keep.



*Jesse Jackson for President*

Even under some negative circumstances, I have continued to grow and expand my knowledge through study and experience. A memorable experience for me was when Jessie Jackson ran for President of the United States. I was living in Springfield and was able to campaign for him. I felt like the activities with which I had been involved in Memphis as a young girl, and the politically minded people in the church with whom I had associated, helped me prepare for the exciting part I played in that election. The Hart delegation and our delegation eventually came together because we did not have enough representatives to get to the next level on our own. Springfield had the least number of delegates. There were only four of us representing Jessie Jackson. We were not college students, but just concerned citizens who were about 24 or 25 years old. I remember the excitement I felt when I stood up and nominated Jessie Jackson for president. It was also an emotional experience to see blacks and whites working together for the same objective. As I go back and reflect on that time of my life and the issue of segregation, even until now, I have an interest in running for public office. I haven't done it yet, but I have often toyed with the idea. I believe that too, stems back to being involved in that 1984 campaign. My life in Springfield hasn't been too bad. I haven't lived a real dormant life, but I always long to be back in the South and on my own turf.

Five years ago when I thought I would never finish college, I met Ilga Vise who showed me how I could accomplish my dream. Rosalyn Thomas was instrumental in helping me to apply for a minority scholarship through Drury and Springfield Public Schools. There have been times when I thought it was impossible to achieve my goals, but God intervened through people who assured me that nothing is impossible. Charlotte Johnson Cosby was one of those people. She never let me forget how God had made a way out of no way.

”Are we there yet”? is what the children always asked when we went on long field trips. I am not there yet, but I am still striving to accomplish my goals. “Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage”, Psalms 84:5. Am I there yet? C.S. Lewis said “The life we know is only the title page”. “This is not where we arrive, it’s where we practice”. I am still struggling to learn the lessons of love. Springfield has taught me how to be patient, wait, and persevere in the midst of trials. I have learned that I can’t always protect myself from hurt, but the truth is, when you give you always gain.

When I came to Springfield I had many fears. I still have fears but I have learned to overcome many of them. When love replaces hate, fear is eliminated because it takes courage to love and trust. I have seen lots of changes since I first came to Springfield in 1966. My children are all grown up and I’m a grandmother. I have enjoyed watching my own children grow beyond their humble beginnings and become the people God has called them to be.

My journey is still in progress and so is my spiritual growth and faith. Doors opened when I least expected them to, and I am excited about stepping in before they close. I am happy that I chose not to run away from the challenges I’ve faced in Springfield because they have made me and my children what we are today. Life is not so demanding that I can’t take time to reflect on how far I have come. I am looking forward to the future and I’m willing to go wherever He leads me. I don’t think I have reached my final years yet, but I have thought about where I will go and what I will do when my time in Springfield is ended. I am convinced that “He who began a good work in you will continue until the day of Jesus Christ right up to the time of His return, developing that good work and perfecting and bringing it to full completion in you”. Philippians 1:6 amp.



[jnmaul@juno.com](mailto:jnmaul@juno.com)  
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