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Introduction: **MY Legacy in Brief, Defining Moments**

It all started on August 18, 1940, in Memphis, Tennessee, eighty-one years ago which is a long time to recapture everything that has happened in life. The desire is not to talk about mindless expressions of old feelings but to encourage others to trust God and His timing, believe in yourself and all things are possible thru prayer. With that said, I can say life’s journey has had many peaks to shout about and many valleys to cry about but I thank God for spiritual growth that helped me to persevere to find a way thru it all. In my wildest dream, I never envision living in a global “Pandemic” which caused an outbreak of many illnesses, and many deaths creating a world crisis that very few people understood. Thank God for His continuous grace, mercy, favor, and blessing to have lived amid a world crisis to see the year 2022 in real time.

Without a doubt, I have lived eight decades to witness many deaths and living legacies in our rich heritage, who carried torches, boycotted buses, and tore down barriers for people like me to have a chance at life to succeed. To give a quick glimpse from a historical perspective of the times, I was born after the great depression, lived through a recession and a booming economy. On the national scene our country was going through, World War II, Korean War, Viet Nam, and the Pershing Gulf War. Looking back, It was memorable to see my handsome two older brothers dressed in uniforms go off to the Korean War and years later, my good-looking youngest brother go off to the war in Viet Nam. In the final analysis, It was difficult and painful to say good-by to them going away to fight in a war not knowing if or when they were going to return. Triumphantly, they all retuned home safely and with a sound mind.

In the 50’s it was easy to see the reflection of society on education. Separate but equal education mirrored societal changes. Elementary and secondary education evolved around an industrial society, moving through the postindustrial age, to technology, and now the information age of social media. Through it all, education was the catalyst for change and the key to success. I applaud my family who supported me, faith that sustained me, and friends who helped me maintain my sanity as I traveled this journey along with many other pioneers who blazed the trail before me. I submit that life’s pathway was not an easy road to travel with so many distractions, challenges, and detours. In the midst of it all, I believed! I believed that I could do more than what surroundings dictated. The concept of living in poverty forever did not rest well in my spirit. My heart and soul yearned to become successful, and I was not going to give up until I found a way to have what I considered a better life.

As I share my illusions, everyone needs somebody to care about them, to love them and just be there to encourage them daily. My increased faith, family and friends were valuable contributors whom I had to rely on to overcome many devasting defining moments/events in life that could have crushed or destroyed my life. Many times, I had to stop and check myself before I wrecked myself when obstacles were in the pathway in which I traveled. Each time I encountered hardship, I learned to pray and often God rescued me in my seasons of discouragement. Rather than succumb to the trials and tribulations I encountered, somehow, I had this crazy faith that gave me strength to endure and believe that I could become somebody. With that in mind, I am going to reflect and regurgitate how God in his infinite wisdom place the right people in my life at the right time when I was the most vulnerable, confused and ready to give up on life’s journey.

Starting with my birthplace, Memphis, Tennessee in the 40’s and 50’s, gave me the opportunity to experience segregation even though I did not understand the significance of it at an early age. Memphis like most southern states had segregated schools and Jim Crow laws governing the law of the land, limiting Colored people’s rights. As I grew up, I realized that the struggle was real which contributed to my desire to leave.

Moving on, I attended segregated schools with excellent colored teachers who cared and taught students how to compete in a segregated society. I sat on the back of the bus and I was supposed to drink from the colored fountain labeled in public places, but I did not. To focus on segregation was less important than to focus on survival! How do I survive living in a place or a society with laws that influenced my life that I hardly understood? What I did understand was, education was the passport to freedom and that an investment in knowledge pays the best interest/dividend.

Confused by society’s laws, the family structure was complicated as well. My parents were struggling to raise seven children. I am the 5th child of seven siblings and I had to find a way and space in our home. I learned later that it was never about the size of the space; it’s about the love that fills the space. My older siblings were too busy to ‘SEE ME” and my two younger brothers lived with our godmother so I spent a lot of time playing outside with friends and sometimes along, dreaming of what life would be like “if”. As a youngster, I had too many “ifs” to try to name them now. Mama was the glue that held the family together. She was my first lamplighter. Her presence would light up the room and her love could make you think that the sun was shining when it was pouring down raining. When I think of mama now, this song comes to mind*, “If I could hear my mother* *pray again, If I could hear her tender voice as then, how glad I would be, would mean so much to me, If I could hear my mother pray again*”.

Our living conditions were not the best, but it was not the worse either. We lived in the Projects, LeMoyne Garden, for 14 years, an area for poor working people that consisted of good and bad neighbors. Moreover, the neighbors were what I call the village where most of the people looked out for each other, and some were just gossipers and spies waiting to comment on everything negatively. As a teenager, I was disenchanted with siblings’ rivalry and what I call life. I had acne (pimples) all over my face, a little plump, and I was teased and called names. In other words, I was, I suppose, the ugly duckling in the family. At the same time I could count on my faithful Mother, Ethel H. Brown, who shared her extraordinary faith at all times. Her love and perseverance overshowed the poverty or problems i thought I faced, and she comforted me by saying, “everything is going to be alright baby”. Mama’s love and prayers taught me to have faith and never give up.

Going to church and to school became my favorite past-time and safe place to get away from home. As I reflect on my up bringing, church and school were my foundational steppingstones that offered opportunities and were absolutely necessary for me to grow and develop to become prepared for what was to come in my journey called life. It is difficult to admit that even though I loved, loved church and school, it was not enough to erase the burning desire I had to leave home.

In 1955-56, I was fifteen years old and there were two major defining events that almost shattered all my dreams because I thought my life was falling apart with so much happening. These events are what I call my valleys that caused uncontrollable tears to flood my soul night and day when I was trying not to cry. I was in Yazoo City, Mississippi visiting my aunt for the summer when Emmitt Till was killed. The world was in an uproar and fear began to creep into my head. Am I safe in Mississippi? Am I going to get killed if I go into the grocery store? Well daddy took care of that. He came and got me but the memory that lingers is how gruesome Emmitt Till’s body looked when they put his picture on the front page of Jet Magazine. It was crying time again. This was my first experienced with the mystery of lynching in my era. Later that year Mama starting fainting outside of her work location in the street and sometimes on the sidewalk and the remedy or solution to determine the cause was for her to have brain surgery. The family, mama’s family and daddy’s family, was call to the hospital after the doctors’ evaluation. The surgeon informed us that it was a 50/50 chance of survival. Before going to the hospital mama called a meeting with all her children to let us know her mind was made up. With a very pleasant look on her face and her heart filled with so much love, she convinced us to stop crying and believe that God was not going to take her away from us. Broken hearted and torn, I was scared, as a matter of fact we all were scared including my daddy. Arriving at the hospital, we learned that there were two other patients scheduled to have brain surgery on the same day as mama. Unfortunately, the two other patients died on the operating table, but thank God, mama’s surgery was successful. Considering the extent of the surgery and mama’s swollen and unrecognizable face with a hole in the center of her forehead, brought us to our knees, yet we were all excited and rejoicing. Four days later, the doctors notified the family stating it was critical that mama have surgery again to drain the blood that accumulated in her brain. Disappointment, and distrust plagued the family. In the end, reality brought us together and we all agreed to take another chance because we wanted mama to get well and come home. After the second surgery, mama was lying in bed in a coma mystifying the doctors and terrifying us. Weeping and wailing filled the room and we were completely traumatized. Finally, we realized that she was still breathing, and we could not give up because there was still hope. I was chosen to stay at the hospital to talk to mama while she was in a coma because my two sisters were married with children, and it was difficult for them to leave their families overnight. According to the doctor, it was wise for her to hear a familiar voice as often as possible to help her wake up. I stayed at the hospital for seven days. I went to school and returned to the hospital after school. I talked, prayed and prayed and continue to whisper in her ear, “I love you mama, please don’t leave me”. On the third day she opened her eyes and said, “my baby”. Excited and overjoyed, I could not wait to tell the doctor that she spoke to me. Regrettable, I was told perhaps it was just my imagination. Alone in the hospital, on the seventh day, she not only opened her eyes, but mama also started talking. I ran to get the nurse and the doctor. The doctor’s words I remember vividly, “We are witnessing a miracle”!!! He admitted that he had done all he could do, and stated Mrs. Brown was alive because of God’s grace, mercy, and favor. There was not a dry eye in the hospital room.

Devasted by both events, “BUT” Mama’s survival was the first test of real faith in believing that only God performs miracles and answer prayers. With increased faith, I began to believe mama’s words, “everything will be aright”.

When mama got sick, we were living in our own home. After a long recovery, mama’s faith restored her overall health but left her partially paralyzed on her left side. Despite mama’s health condition, she became strong and self-sufficient. In the meantime, I graduated in 1958 from Booker T. High School with honors and attended LeMoyne College for one year. One summer day, in 1959, when Mom and I were having our usual talk, I told her I was not satisfied with who I was, and I wanted to move away. She understood without any questions and gave me permission to leave without the consent of my father.

The desire to leave was so overwhelming, I failed to consider how I was going to get to Chicago, but God did. Surprisingly, a family friend was visiting Memphis who lived in Chicago, and we had a conversating regarding my desire to move there. She welcomed the opportunity to let me ride with her. God placed the right person in my life, at the right time for me to leave.

In November, I secretly packed my one and only tin rusted suitcase with a few socks, three dresses, a few skirts, sweaters, and some underwear. I was ready to take a leap of faith as a 19-year-old, go to Chicago with $19.00 in my pocket. I wore the only pair of shoes I had and coat. In retrospect, I literately hitchhiked a ride to Chicago, sleeping most of the way. After arriving in Chicago, seeing the tall buildings, bright lights, cars driving at 1am in the morning and people walking the streets like it was daytime, I developed panic attacks, anxiety set in and a fear of failure. I began to think, “Oh Lord what have I done”. Wow this was a different world, a different environment, and to think I have come here to live. The next day, I looked in the mirror and told me “remember this was your idea to leave”, now pull yourself together and go for the gold”. I was the first sibling to leave home for a better life and new start. It was too late to turn back. I was bold enough to leave, now I had to be brave enough to stay. Then, I remembered my Mom’s departing words as she whispered in my ear, “Baby remember if you can’t make it in Chicago, you can always come home, but know, “everything is going to be alright”!!!!!!

This was a bittersweet moment!! I refused to let my budget delay dreams that were birthed in my spirit and I could not allow fear to dictate my decision. Chicago I am here I come!!!

**Chapter 1. Reflection of my Birthplace**

Leaving Memphis and going to Chicago was quite a transition. I question myself and ask,” Do I have any regrets”, and the answer is “NO”? Just to give a little flavor of what I left behind and things that appeared to be noteworthy other than family and friends, I am reminded that Memphis, Tennessee was known as, “Memphis City Beautiful”. Its mission was to transform and keep Memphis a beautiful and safe place in which to live. (memphiscitybeautiful.org.) On occasions, we participated in the cleanup, paint up day parade that was held to emphasize its mission. Edward Hull Crump, known as E. H. “Boss” Crump was the Mayor of Memphis from 1920 to 1940 and was the dominant political force in Tennessee until 1954 and it can be noted that he made provisions for Colored people to vote without taking a written test or paying poll taxes to vote, which was a common practice of other southern states. Politics were not on my radar therefore I know little about the voting process. Interestingly, Mr. Crump also worked with Professor Blair T. Hunt, the Colored Principal of Booker T. Washing High School, the largest colored high school in Memphis. Mr. Hunt fought for his Colored students to use the same textbooks as the largest white school, Central High school for separate but equal education. Perhaps, I should mention that my alma mater, Booker T. Washington High School reputations was outstanding, and I received an excellent education which prepared me to excel and complete my educational journey with much success in Chicago.

My thoughts of Memphis, with all its beauty and cleanliness, I am reminded of many positive and many negative things happening in society in the south. Brown v. Board of Education rule the land; segregated schools, sat on the back of the bus and there were colored water fountains. As mentioned earlier, Jim Crow laws prevailed, and most Colored people knew their place in society. We enjoyed our neighborhoods and learned to live with the social injustices that permeated the south. Memphis was a great place for my parents who migrated from Mississippi for a better life. My daddy got a decent paying job a Firestone, Tire and Rubber factory. We had a roof over our heads and food on the table every day. They also enjoyed the floor model radio that was the entertainment of the day and a way to get the news. Mama and Daddy enjoyed listening to the fireside chat of President Roosevelt who brought hope to the people with the New Deal and spoke encouraging words for Colored people to cope with post World War II depression that existed. Food was scarce, limited supplies, especially sugar, rice and flour. Somehow my parents managed. Little did I know as a child, that our family was not the only family struggling during this time. Poverty was not restricted to a particular race, many families, struggled during the depression and post-depression.

As I continue my recall of Memphis, there are a few notable historical sites now that were very intriguing as a child and off limits such as the Lorraine Motel. As an adult I witness one of the most life changing events that occurred in Memphis, TN; the death of Martin Luther King. When MLK was killed, I had flashbacks that caused me to imagine what it was like as a young adult walking downtown Memphis and passing by the Lorraine Motel where MLK was assassinated. The Lorraine Motel was known in the community as a house of ill repute, and we were warned to cross the street when we came near the motel. My friends and I would make up stories like girls, “guess what I heard about the Motel”. True or false these were the activities we imagined were going on inside as we continued our leisurely walk downtown. Years later I heard on national TV, MLK was killed and died in St. Joseph Hospital in Memphis in 1968. This event caused many negative things to occur in society and especially in Memphis. Even though I was living in Chicago, the world appeared to be in shock, amazed and disappointed. People from every ethnic group and background, mourned MLK’s death. The mission that existed to keep Memphis beautiful and a safe place to live, failed to protect the most powerful Black man that lived. As MLK once said, “Injustice anywhere, is a threat to justice everywhere”. My hometown will forever be known in history as the place where MKL was killed. More importantly, to honor MKL and his efforts/fight for civil rights, the Lorraine Motel is now a historical site and many years later the National Civil Rights Museum was built around the location of the Lorraine Motel. The Museum is a complex of museums and historic buildings that trace the history of the civil rights movement in the United States from 17th century to the present. Many of my classmates’ spear-headed this noteworthy project from start to finish and I applaud their efforts.

As I continue to walk down memory lane, tracing some of my steps I am reminded of Memphis as being the home of the Blues. Blues appeared to be the kind of music that helped you forget the woes of your past and deal with the trials ahead. Blues was so popular, I supposed, because music was the universal language that connected colored people together and they could relate to it without expressing their thoughts or revealing their situations.

Often as I walked down Beale Street, I got to hear famous musician like BB King perform. The music was loud, but my friends and I enjoyed the music walking outside the cafe as BB King sang, “The Thrill is Gone” playing his guitar named Lucille. Listening to the blues, reminded me of some of the gospel music we sang in church that gave the feeling of inspiration, yet I knew the difference between the two genres!! It was fun to walk slowly down Beale Street listening to BB King, Bobbie Blue Bland, and other entertainers but we could not tarry. Beale street was a place where my friends and I could see a lot of actions take place and see family members and other grown-ups engaged in unscrupulous activities that were taboo because we should not have been attentive to grown folks’ business as we were often told. James Baldwin wrote a book in the 50’s “If Beale Street Could Talk”, a novel about the Love between a man and a woman, their love of family, and the struggle and conquest of love in a world flooded with hate, that appeared 5 months on the New York Times Bestseller List. His book captured some of the actions that occurred on Beale Street. For many years as I visited Memphis, Beale Street is a great tourist attraction , even though the flavor or aura of Beale Street has changed overtime.

My siblings and I had the opportunity to continue to hear the blues when mama and daddy were not home. Saturday was cleanup day for us, and we listened to WDIA, a colored radio station that featured the blues singers, Rufus Thomas, Carla Thomas, the Teen Town singings, talent shows and more. Memphis, as mentioned, is also known as the “Home of the Blues” where many famous singers and musicians were given the opportunity to showcase their talents, and become famous worldwide, some of whom were classmates and neighbors.

W.C. Handy Theater was the father of the blues that allowed talented Colored people from other southern states to come and perform. The theater closed and Stax records was created perhaps to continue the legacy of W.C. Handy. Music was the **only thing** that disregarded segregation, there were no boundaries and no color barriers, only a soul connection existed. The exposure I received from Stax, was due to the fact that it was within walking distance from our home, and near one of the places my sister and I often past when going to our favorite homemade ice cream store. After the death of MLK, Stax records completely went down, racial tension was high, and organizations were struggling after riots ensued.

Years later, Stax Records was reconstructed and expanded in the same location as The Museum of American Soul Music, that operates a Charter School of the Arts **and an after School Stax’s recording studio**. The new Soulsville is a replica of the former Stax Records I knew growing up, producing singers and musician, such as, William Bell, Isaac Hayes, Sam and Dave, Dave Porter, Otis Redding, Bar-Kays and many other artists. In 2022 Stax Museum of American Soul Music is open and doing well as Soulslville USA, with amazing exhibits to relive the past as well as serve as a training ground for future artists.

Resilience, and perseverance are major components of my life and walking should be included as well because of its significance. Walking was the most dependable form of transportation for me to see downtown, Beale Street and other notable sites mentioned. It was not uncommon for strangers to offer a ride. There was a sense of community, cooperation and caring for each other but the best part of walking was walking past the Harlem House on Mississippi Blvd. smelling the hot dogs and hamburgers after school and wishing I had money to buy something. The candy store was a few blocks away and we would put our pennies together to buy lots of candy for ten cents. The best part of waking up and walking in Memphis was going outside, running to the neighborhood store for my oldest sister to cook, going out to play, walking downtown, walking to church and to school.

It is impossible to talk about delicious foods and the candy stores without mentioning the fresh green vegetables, homegrown tomatoes, and beans that were commonplace in everyone’s home. Frozen foods did not exist. Fresh vegetables were on the table every day at dinner time. Live chickens hopping around the yard after the neck was rung off was gross, but it was the best fried chicken ever. The best treat when walking downtown was to save your lunch money to buy a pull pork BBQ sandwich with coleslaw which was finger licking good. Memphis BBQ was and still is, indescribable delicious and has become world renown. Currently Memphis has many attractions for tourist beside those mentioned. Memphis has grown and expanded to included German Town, and other communities. Downtown has been expanded featuring Mud Island, the Pyramid where many sports events, especially the Memphis Grizzlies, and community events take place. My most recent visit to Memphis was filled with nostalgia seeing my relatives and few friends who are still there. More importantly, it was a sentimental journey to visit the grave sites of my parents and two older sibling who remain in a resting placed I hardly recognized as home.

**Chapter 2. Memories of** **Mama’s Sustaining Love and the Village**

To describe home and my family, imagine a delicate knitted quilt with different designs and different stiches going in opposite directions, some loose, some strong and some weak, yet the end results are a beautiful tapestry woven together forming a beautiful picture on one side. However, on the underside, there are loose ends, knots, frayed ends held together by the love and care of its owner. As I think about this quilt, I am reminded of my family, how different we all were. Some strong, some weak, some fragile yet my mama’s love held the family together to form a beautiful picture when outside the house despite the chaos happening on the inside.

Mama was a very beautiful woman with flawless skin, a native of Yazoo City, Mississippi and to this day, I will always think of her as the kindest, loving beautiful person that ever lived who loved God.

Her family was very large with 18 siblings. She was the third oldest in her family and they live in what was known as the city yet rural with outdoor toilets. She married my daddy in 1932 and they migrated to Memphis during the depression for a better life.

Mama was an angel in disguised that God gave to us as a mother to cover us with her prayers and pour love into us when things were not lovable. She accepted her journey as a wife and mother. The most fondness childhood memory of mama seems like yesterday. I remember how she embraced me with so much love when she was not distracted by daddy and other siblings. Her love kept me grounded and our home environment became oblivious. I enjoyed Mama sitting by her side and rubbing her hand over my hair to comfort me and her warm loving spirit covered every pain imagined and gave me hope to face any challenge.

It was impossible to talk negative to mama because she had a standard response, “Everything is going to be alright.” Don’t worry about me, I am going to have heaven on earth”. In other words, leave me alone, stop worrying about me; I am alright.” Then she would quote her favorite scripture, Isaiah 54:17, in mama’s words, “*No weapon formed against me shall prosper, And every tongue which rises against me in judgement, shall be condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is from me, says the Lord.”* NKJV

Daddy also a handsome native of Yazoo City, Mississippi, and the second oldest of 15 siblings. He was the epitome of a man raise in Mississippi on a farm with many acres of land. His family owned one of the largest farmlands in Yazoo City. And as a young man, when he was not working on the farm, he was well dressed going to church and going out on weekends when he lived in Mississippi. Additionally, the values that his father instilled in him were the same values he imposed on us, his family. He believed children should listen and not ask question nor be in the room when grownups were talking. He also had double standards which were common during the 40’s and 50’s. Mama nor the girls in the family could wear pants, sleeveless or short dresses or makeup. He was an old school thinker who believed a woman’s place was to get marriage, have children, take care of them, the house and nothing more.

Daddy’s routine was very predictable; most of the time during the week, daddy was quiet, unassuming and a man of few words whose presence dominated the household. When Friday came, he was like a chameleon, a person who changes his/her opinion or behavior according to the situation. He shifted for passive to aggressive, a completely different person. Alcohol consumption began mostly on Friday and ended on Sunday. He was loud and ready to raise hell for no specific reason. As I grew older, I began to challenge my daddy’s belief system to mama and my words fell on deaf ears. Mama did not want me to question her about daddy. All the other siblings seemed not to care, nor ever voiced an opinion about daddy. Apparently, I may have been the only sibling who let it be known that I had concerns with our family situation. Time had brought about a change in society. Women started working outside the home and I began to imagine a different world. With many crazy thoughts my siblings did not engage in a conversation with me about how the world was changing and how women were important as men. They would look at me with a jaundice eye and keep on going on their merry way, good, bad or indifferent. In other words, they were completely disengaged with my minutia.

Initially, I thought my mama was so accepting of everything until I grew up and had a family. I came to understand mama’s love and why she was protecting the family structure. The thought never occurred to me that mama had no intentions of separating from my daddy or breaking up her family. Daddy was not perfect, and mama knew that too. Daddy and I did not always see eye to eye, but he was our provider. We were never homeless, we always had food to eat and clothes to wear. To that end, to live in daddy’s house I had to learn how to put my case to rest against him and forget why and continue my silent rebellion.

As life moved on, rather than talk to mama, I talked to God, asking Him to help me find my way, and being the 5th child of seven sibling was not easy. My oldest sister was in charge of us when mama and daddy were at work or away from home, and she had a tendency to do things her way. She welcomed the opportunity to send us outside to play to get out of her way.

Playing outside whenever possible was my favorite past-time for me to find my space, my voice and kept me away from the chores and chaos inside our household. On any given day in LeMoyne Garden, when playing outside with our neighborhood friends, my two older brothers, were allowed to roam the neighborhood, while my sister, and I had to stay close to home even though she had no interest in playing with me because we had different opinions on the types of games to play. My sister whom I loved dearly was competitive physically, played ruff and did not mind fighting. I, on the other hand, enjoyed the easy fun games that were less competitive, and I had no interest in fighting. My two younger brothers, most often were inside or at our godmother’s house. My oldest sister was the best cook ever and as the youngest girl I was ignored most of the time, lonely and isolated because evidently to them, I served no useful purpose. My brothers and sisters did not “see me”. Generally, I had a different focus on life, and I wanted to do more activities outside the home other than church and school; and more attention from the family. In the meantime, I had to find my space somewhere creating my own utopia. The front porch was a great place to spend time alone, dreaming and drifting off into space. When I was involved, I generally became the scape goat or victim of some of their dangerous games. My first gruesome incident occurred when I was about 10 years old. I became the unthinkable casualty and a nightmare for my siblings. One morning after breakfast, my oldest sister, decided to organize a pretend clinic in the house after mama and daddy left for work. My brother, the third and smartest sibling was the doctor, my sister was the nurse. The rest of us were the patients. The clinic was supposedly open so that we could all get our vaccination, even though we were all up to date on our required vaccines. I was encouraged to go first if I wanted to be a part of the clinic. The living room was the waiting room, and the kitchen was the doctor’s office. My name was called “Jackie Brown” come forward; it is time for you to see the doctor according to the nurse. I proceeded to the kitchen and a chair was waiting for me to sit. As I sat in the chair, I saw the fire burner turned on and my brother was standing next to the stove with a butter knife in his hand. He told me “don’t worry it will not take but a few minutes and we will be done”. My sister held my right arm out. I closed my eyes, and my brother laid a hot butter knife to my arm. I bellowed out a loud scream as I watched the skin roll off my arm. Panic set in, I sat there with tears flowing down my face, in pain and my siblings were scurrying around to find something to cover my arm before mama came home. Needless to say, everyone was quiet when mama came home, and I had fallen asleep. When mama saw my arm, she was too upset to fuss about it, she just rushed me to John Gaston Hospital where it was determined that I had received third degree burns. In the meantime, daddy was never told of how the incident really happened because we may have all gotten a whooping. In time, my arm healed, as of today, I still have the scar on my arm. After that incident, I wasn’t asked to play with them again because in their eyes, they did not want to be accused of trying to hurt me again. In essence, their intent was not to harm but to explore creative ways to dramatize their illusion of a clinical setting. To relieve me of the agony of being the target of my siblings’ explorations, Mama, decided to take me to work with her and I learned to clean the white family ‘s home. Riding the bus with mama to work was a defining moment that gave me time alone with her without any interruptions. To my surprise, one day while at worked with mama, she was told, when I grow up I could become the maid. Anxious to leave that day, I could not wait to tell my mama, please, do not tell your boss I want to work for her because when I grow up, I am going to have my own maid to clean my house. Mama smiled and gave me her favorite expression of love, wrapping her arms around me, saying, “baby, everything is going to be alright”. The thought of becoming a maid was difficult to conceive and somewhat devastating to be looked at as a maid when I grow up. My goal was to make sure I did everything possible to find a way how not make this become a reality.

Another intriguing incident happened, I was outside finding my space and my voice with my friends and having fun, I was called to come inside before the streetlight came on. Befuddled and a little puzzled, when I came inside, I was told that I was going to get a whooping. I had no idea as to why, As the older siblings were getting their whooping with an ironing cord, running, and hiding from daddy, I questioned my mama, “why am I getting a whooping”, I have not done anything wrong. I soon realized rule #1. Everyone gets a whooping when one sibling did something wrong. As fate would have it, daddy was so tired when it was time for me to get a whooping, I only got a few hits. Determined to asked questions, when my other sisters and brother did not, was unheard of in our household as a youngster. Therefore, I silently rebelled and agonized over the idea of why I had to be punished when I was totally unaware of what happened.

There were three unwritten rules to follow.

1.Be home before dark or before the streetlights came on.

2. Everyone got a whopping when one sibling did something wrong.

3. Dinner is served when Dad comes home.

Our family structure was not complicated living in a three-bedroom apartment. All the girls slept together in the same bed and the boys slept in the same bed. It was not unusual for some of us to sleep on the floor. The two younger boys live with my godmother. It was amazing to think how much mama loved us, managed seven children, and worked. Living in chaos and confusion was the norm. I became the family snitch because I would speak up and tell what little I heard from my siblings. I also did some of the housework so my sister and i would not get in trouble. To keep peace, I would retreat to my favorite spot, sitting on the porch, dreaming to let the mundane stuff go; thinking about the future, wondering what I wanted to do and who I wanted to become. Little did I know at that time how often I drifted off into my dream world to escape the confused world in which I lived and the disillusion of family. I began to realize the limitations and the advantages of living in a household with a large family. Most of my basic needs were met and I began to examine myself to find a way to live with my siblings whom I loved yet I did not feel well connected to anyone but my sister who was one year and five months older than I

and my youngest brother. We spent real quality time together as we grew older.

The neighbors played a great part in taking us to church, giving my Mama a helping hand and spying on us. Peeping out of windows and watching us outside was a common occurrence. Before mama could reach the house, she was greeted by the naysayers, telling her what we had done that day. Mama was cool, she thanked them and kept walking. Another common occurrence was to borrow a cup of sugar, a stick of butter, a cup of flour or an egg from your neighbor. It was like the barter system; you give me this and I will give you something else back. Hardly ever do I remember taking an egg back to a neighbor or any of the other items borrowed. That was the way of life in the project, it was our village, everyone looked out for each other, good, bad, or indifferent. The good news was we could earn a nickel of dime for running to the neighborhood grocery store for the older people. In those day, a nickel could by a big bag of candy or 2 popsicles. The village was important because there was little room to judge people. Everyone cared and looked out for each other. Literally the same economic situation and the same living conditions were common factors. Fourteen years, we lived together, cried together and we all went to school together. On Sunday, our quiet day was church day. Most of the village people went to church including us.

Seldom did we have to worry about daddy on Sunday. It was his day of rest after his Friday and Saturday weekend getaway from home, with his friends.

Daddy gave us his approval for us to go to church every Sunday and during the weekdays even though he would never attend church when I was living in Memphis. He stated often that he did not want to be a hypocrite. In retrospect, I suspect my daddy was lenient because his oldest brother, Rev. Brown was the Pastor of the church, Christ Temple Church of Christ Holiness located on Williams and Lauderdale. Uncle Bud (Rev. Brown) loved his brother, and he was supportive of us and showered us with love and candy on a regular basis. Often, I thought of my uncle as my surrogate father.

Mama enjoyed church and every opportunity afforded her, she would go with us. Repeatedly, we all had to go to church if we wanted to go to a movie on Saturday or go to some other function. As a way out of the house, when I was 11 years old, my sister, Jean and I joined church which was a family routine or ritual. We sang in the choir, went to Sunday School every Sunday and on weekdays, when necessary, which gave us access to more freedom. I loved going to church, singing in the choir and attending Sunday School. It was a relief to have peace of mind, hear a good sermon, good singing and learning about the word of God that reminded me constantly to keep the faith. Amazingly, as I recall all seven siblings joined church and attended regularly until they moved away from daddy’s house. Some of the church members would pick us up for church and many days we walked having fun along the way. Clothes and other gifts were often given to our family by some of the good church members. Our godmother, who attended our church was the family’s special gift from God who dedicated her life to caring for my two younger siblings and she did not hesitate to give her unconditional love and support to the entire family. Apparently, she volunteered her service with very little income, to provide a vehicle or pathway for my family to succeed, buying clothes, shoes, food and permanently keeping my two younger siblings. She was our spiritual god-fearing earthly angel who love and showered us with gifts. God’s grace and favor. I am reminded of this song when I think of her, “Precious memories how they linger, how they every flood my soul, in the stillness of the midnight, Precious, sacred scenes unfold.

The church mirrored my father’s belief system; it was how he was reared. He would often repeatedly say, he was not going to church because he did not want to be a hypocrite. He contended that some of the same people sitting in church on Sunday were out drinking with him on Saturday. Actually, this was a statement that I did not understand, nor did I want to understand. Fast forward, one sunny day, after I left home, I received a called in Chicago from mama, telling me that daddy quit drinking and joined church. Shocked by mama words, I felt numb. Little did I know that I would ever hear those words from mama. Flashbacks of daddy’s behavior came to mine. I had some doubt and at that time, I did not know if I should laugh or cry, but I believed mama. Moreover, it was my duty to not despise new beginnings for mama. Her well-developed faith and her well-defined prayers over time, resulted in well-defined answers. In 1965, my daddy surrendered his life to Jesus, after we were all grown, joined church and repented. God answered mama’s intentional prayers; and often she would say that she would live to see daddy saved, have her heaven on earth and she did. Seeing in believing, I was convinced that daddy had changed his life when I went home to visit. Daddy, a godly man greeted me with open arms. It took much prayer for me to find a way to tell him how I regretted his behavior when I was growing up. My Dad asked for forgiveness, prayed with me and in time I did forgive him.

Mama and daddy became faithful members of Christ Temple, and he treated mama like a queen, even though she had gone thru many storms and health challenges that left her partially paralyzed. Her dream and prayer had become a reality and they both served God until He called them home to glory, in 1985, and 1986.

**Chapter 3.** **Mixed Emotions**

**(External and internal conflict were at the core of my existence**.)

Another unspoken rule in the house was education. Education was not an option; we all had to go to school without any questions. Dutifully every morning, we took turns getting dressed for school along with taking our bag lunch. We all happily left home together going to our respective school. To start the school day apparently, we all knew that elementary and high school were places of enjoyment, fun and laughter.

Teachers were no joke in the south and most of them were demanding and committed to teaching and learning. They realized the challenges Black students encountered in a segregated world. Separate but equal education was a reality, pride, respect, and dignity were mandatory and at the core of our existence in schools. What was more telling was the fact that everyone loved their community school because we all lived together, played together, and found a way of life that was acceptable in our little community!

. A point of interest, in first and second grade, my educational journey began in a Catholic School. I attended free because three of my siblings had to pay and the fourth child went tuition free. We wore uniforms which was our saving grace and the Nun demanded and enforced discipline in the classroom.

One day while sitting in class in 1st grade, I had an epiphany that came out of nowhere when I looked at Jesus on the cross in the classroom on the wall. In a fleeing moment I began to wonder if I would be hung on the cross if I misbehaved. Imagining that, I exhibited very good self-control. I was very attentive, challenged daily and on the honor roll.

Financially Catholic school became a challenge for my parents, and it was difficult for us to remain in Catholic School. With no other option, we all transferred to public schools. Attending public school for the first time in fourth grade was a whole new ball game. Uniforms were not required, and Jesus was not hanging on the cross staring me in the face for me to be on my best behavior. School was my safe haven, and I had a little too much freedom in public school. The children wore what we called our school clothes and that’s when I began to change my behavior somewhat. Academically I excelled with good study habits and continued to be very interested in school. The harsh reality of realizing that I had a limited wardrobe caused me to experience external pressure because it was hard to find different clothes to wear every day. I was not pleased with the clothes I had to wear sometimes with my usual ponytail and shoes. When you think you look good you tend to feel good and as a youngster, I did not always feel good about myself. As we all know kids can be cruel, name calling and poking fun at other kids who are not like them. Instead of getting angry, I began to act out becoming silly, loud and telling jokes to compensate for the internal conflict that existed within me regarding my well-being.

. School was still a fun place to be. I stayed on the honor roll, played in the Junior High Band. Sometimes I got in trouble because I finished my work earlier than the other students. Most of the time when name calling and bullying existed, I persevered mainly because of my sister. She was not afraid of anyone or anything. On the playground, my sister let everyone know, “do not ##&!( blank, blank) with my siter, because if you do I am going to beat the S##T out of you” . Somewhat embarrassed and glad at the same time, my protector watched over me! Actually, dealing with my sister taught me how to have more confidence in myself, become independent, and make my own decisions. Generally, teasing was ignored, with my sister on the scene, it stopped completely. Other issues became a concern, such as walking to and from school, especially in high school. My sister and I left home together and were supposed to return home together. The expectation in my mind was to have a very eventful, enjoyable day yet it was sometimes painful. On any given day, there were days I had to anxiously wait for her because she decided to venture off. It was an unwritten rule that we had to stay together and if not the consequence of going home without her would not be pretty for both of us. Eventually, we understood that we were different, and she would go her way and I had to go my way, even though she was my ride or die sister. This was another defining moment when I decided it was time for me to stand up for myself. My sister got a job in high school and bought me clothes and taught me how to put clothes in the lay-a-way when I did not have enough money to buy items to improve my appearance. I became absorbed in ways to continue to make life better, becoming more independent and having the audacity to think I was cute. The ugly duckling was turning into a beautiful swan. Life was getting better or rather I should use the adage I had learned to, “accept the things I could not change, change the things I could and wisdom to know the difference”. Employment was not a priority, yet I learned that it was a necessity to earn some money for my new look. Babysitting was the best I could do, and it paid off handsomely. The external environment became less and less threatening as I matured and learned how to navigate thru all the requirements at school and participate in a few activities. As a teenager, I was awkward, tomboyish and a little rough around the edges. At this stage “Jackie Brown,” my nickname, became known in all of her classes because she was humorous, smart, and funny, looking for love in all the wrong places and coming out unscathed. At this point in life, I can truly say that I was a work in progress not understanding my worth or value masking my feeling to soften the disillusion.

Growing and exploring campus life advanced me to the next level of expanding my horizon. Meeting John Coleman in the hallway next to my classroom was the highlight of my sophomore year. Every day at lunch time he would arrive at his locker, minding his own business and I was spending time in the hallway observing him. Once the chance meetings started, little did I know that his best friend was in the same classroom as I. Proper introduction occurred and he, too, had been observing me. It was widely known that he was a good guy, polite, a gentleman and out of my purview of friends. Early on I was being pursued by another guy who was a senior, but it was short lived because I soon learned he indulged in drinking liquor which was absolutely a “NO DEAL” for me. Initially, five best friends and I were looking at the football and basketball players as potential prom dates. Fortunately, that did not happen; the desire to get a prom date was over when I met John. He was very attentive and attracted to me and I was kind of cool with no understanding where this relationship was going when he asked me to go to the prom. After I thought about it, I realized that there was one other hurdled he had to get through and that was to meet daddy, Mr. Brown. Talking to boys at school was where courting happened if I could call it that. Dating was not accepted very well by daddy therefore school or church was the only option.

Getting married appeared to be the norm or the pathway for the females in the family. My oldest sister got married right after graduation but remained at home with her spouse. School was definitely not a priority for my other sister. She got married and moved away as well, but she moved just around the corner from our house.

In the meantime, I found my niche in high school yet the dynamics in the household had not changed. We were all grownup and daddy was still daddy with business as usual. The circumstances that allowed me to go to the prom with daddy’s permission escapes my memory. Extremely excited, I went on a first real date to the prom and to my embarrassment, daddy was sitting on the porch when I arrived home and of course I got the lecture regarding life and being out late with a young man which was a big letdown after a great evening. Moving past the first date, John and i became good friends. In other words, he became known as my boyfriend only to mama and siblings but not daddy.

We both graduated in 1958. John moved to Chicago to attend college. We separated but yearned to be together again someday.

I also graduated with honors and a member of the National Honor Society. Going away to school was out of the question. To continue any educational endeavors, it had to happen in Memphis. I enrolled in LeMoyne College thinking now that I am eighteen, more freedom would be available for me to exercise independence but no, no. One year was enough; there was little or no hope to finish because my daddy’s strict rules applied as long as I lived in his house. It was once said to one of the siblings, if you don’t like the nest you are living in, go and build your own nest. Overall, even though it was problematic, I would have been more involved in college with more family support, financially or emotionally. In hindsight, I was not capable or aware of the fact that I should have been asking for HELP! Sometimes I wonder why didn’t I instead of being silently rebellious?

In the midst of the uncertainty, and not returning to LeMoyne College caused a little friction in our home. Puzzled by the fact that I did not ask for tuition to return to college daddy was disturbed but he would not confront me with this issue. Many things crossed my mind; however, one thing was for certain, I knew I could not stay home and be idle. The options were to go back to school, get a job or get married. None of these options piqued any interest or were available. Looking ahead I envisioned very few opportunities in Memphis yet at the same time, Memphis was going through a transition. Memphis State was being integrated by four classmates and segregation was being challenged. Emotions were running rampant; I had gained some independence in terms of taking care of myself and feeling very confident and mature in believing I could have a better life. Regardless of all these events taking place, mentally the time was not right for me to join any group fighting for equal rights because I, too, was fighting for freedom internally. Finally, I realized a decision had to be made. Worry and discontentment overshadowed my thoughts processes. It was time to leave behind the old, embrace the new, travel the path less travel that has the most to offer and the time was now. In spite of all the challenges I faced, the chaos and confusion, I survived. “Yet I rise”!!!

**Chapter 4. A state of uncertainty: My Big Dream**

Imagining living in poverty forever, tired of the strict rules of my Dad and his dominance over the family increased my desire to leave. Dad spent a lot of time away from home which made it easy for me to ride away into the sunset. Mom was my heroin and with her love and permission provided the comfort needed for me to carry out my departure. Dad continued his rendezvous which disturbed me greatly and it was too difficult to continue to be in a state of bewilderment. All the other siblings were either married, in the military or at godmother’s house. I was the lone ranger in the house with no real job other than babysitting. Mom’s brain surgery and her perseverance gave me strength to fight and not give up. Dad soon realized I was trying to be obedient but not the one to pacify him. I was not domesticated enough to take care of the home nor in a state of mind to accept the responsibility. Cooking and caring for the household were not my forte. I was not trainable or coachable to learn how to cook and demonstrated little or no interest in learning. The best cook, my oldest sister and her family were staying with us to help care for Mom and Dad. With my sister and her family there, it did not register in my head that I should learn how to cook, and everything was working in my favor. Mom would be taken care of and

she also understood my life was at a standstill and uncertain about my future. She gave me her blessings to leave. The only problem was there was no real plan of action to consider.

Different thoughts racing in my head caused many sleepless nights. It seemed irrational to have a dream that was birth in my spirit ignored or fall by the wayside. Apparently, uncertainty was a part of the plan because traveling to Chicago with $19.00 and one suitcase was a life changing event and taking a BIG chance. Inquiring about the move with family members would only cause more conflict and uncertainties. Permanently moving to another state was uncharted territory in our family based on the fact that none of the other siblings had moved away and I was going to be the first. The one and only plan was to get away to fine myself and a better life. Having a plan was vital to succeed yet at that moment it was less important. Greater than that, to imagine what real plan I could have with only $19.00 would have been a baseless claim for success. Rather than block an opportunity, I chose to believe that I had to take a chance to get a chance. I prayed about leaving and I was convinced that it was the right thing to do. The stage had been set and I felt a sense of relief and anxiety at the same time. Packing was not easy even though I had so little to pack. I was grateful that I had gotten a free ride and once I got the little tin suitcase packed, get in the car my past would be in the past. Looking at another perspective, there were so many unanswered questions. If I were to inquire for answers, the moved would become more complicated. In my state of mind, it was better to go with the flow and not allow my budget to delay my dream that was birthed in my spirit many years ago. With that said, God had made provision for me to leave and when I arrived in Chicago, I also believed He would make provisions for me to stay in Chicago as well.

Once I got in the car to leave, I turn the page for the next chapter of my life to begin. Silence filled the car for several hours due to exhaustion and anxiety from this life changing event. Later on, however, it became an exciting drive in Chicago. Arriving at 1:00 am in the morning was my first eye opener, looking at the bright lights and tall building in awe.

the city was so big and dirty as I glance out of the car window. People were outside as if it were daytime with cars speeding up and down the streets. White Castle was our first stop to get food and I was introduced to mini hamburgers. Music, night clubs and restaurants lined the streets of Cottage Grove and 63rd street. At a loss for words, I could not imagine what or how to begin. At the time Chicago was beyond my comprehension.

At the blink of an eye reality hit me in the face. What are my next steps? How long will my money last? My imagination was on overload. How was I going to navigate in this big city or better yet where was I going to live? I prayed and asked God to sustain me until I got a job. Mom’s words continued to echo in my head, “Baby, everything is going to be alright”. With that thought in mind, I began to ponder and create scenarios asking myself, Where do I go from here? I stayed overnight at my friend’s apartment, and I knew my stay was temporary. Desperate for answers and help, the next day I called my high school friend, and prom date, John Coleman who now lived in Chicago. He made his grand entrance back to Memphis, in July 1959 looking like a million-dollar man, fine as wine and we spent a lot of time together.

The thoughts that occurred to add some logic to the situation I was sort of counting on him to be the catalyst to support the ideas or ways to start a new life even though those words were never spoken out loud. When I spoke to him, after reminiscing our past, I informed him that I had moved to Chicago. Somewhat shocked of my arrival, the next day he came to visit. After having a conversation for hours, realizing I was literally homeless, without hesitation, he had a solution. We went for a ride and stopped at this big court way building where his aunt was the manager of rooms known as kitchenettes. I almost fainted when I saw this one-room apartment with a bed, stove, and refrigerator in it. The bathroom was for everyone on that floor. It was too late to turn around; Failure was not an option, so I accepted the room. Lesson learned, be careful of what you pray and ask God for. God gave me the opportunity to leave home. I was more than ready to leave, now it was time for me to accept the new challenges ahead to give some purpose to my life.

This chapter or part of the book represent completions of my past and the other chapters new beginning; It can also be considered as the turning point in my life! Before I go on, I paused to remember that it was time for me to examine the negative forces that I imagined getting in the way of success. Sometimes we must look in the mirror and inspect or dissect the flaws, weakness, and struggles that keeps us bound. As I start the examination process, first and foremost, my parents loved me and as the youngest girl they were overly protective in my mind. The disconnect I felt was based on my personality of being a misfit in an environment that I did not understand as well as living in poverty.

Yes, daddy was a pain in the rear sometimes, but he was our provider. The real struggle was being “Jackie” in reality, a non-existing person. It was a nickname that protected internal conflict that morphed into battles of distractions and discontentment for survival. The family’s flaws and disconnect appeared at times when I did not understand or have the talent to do things I dislike because I was guaranteed to fail. My family had no blame or shame in my departure, and it caused no discord in the family unit. A few of the flaws still exist today as I write. In time, life’s lessons taught me how to cope, understand, compromise, and make adjustment as I matured. That’s my assessment! BUT for my life to change drastically over time, there is another segment to consider. Was it my plan/idea to leave or was it God’s plan/idea? As you read on how transitioning from “Jackie” to Louise, it may be appropriate to say that this was God’s destination for me because He opened doors I could not see, my destiny!

**Chapter 5. Who am i? Becoming Louise- the Metamorphosis**

**Building** **confidence; Finding my way and investing my resources**

A new start required much faith to overcome fear. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthen me”, became my unspoken mantra. Encouraged by Mom’s words, I had to discover who I was for a new beginning. Before I could gain momentum, an identity crisis became prevalent immediately. Since birth, I have been called “Jackie Brown.” poor, from a dysfunctional family who exhibited, by my own assessment, maladjusted behavior at times. Jackie was rarely serious but humorous and funny avoiding questions about family, and other personal issues. These characteristics provided an escape mechanism to cope with the gaps and disappointments of life. On another note, deep down inside unknowingly Louise was always trying to discover a purpose or plan to deal with people and how to escape an environment she did not chose to understand because the pathway available was leading to nowhere, yet she survived. Now I was baffled that Chicago at this stage of the game had little or nothing to offer unless I change my name and thinking with a new perspective.

Tough questions had to be answered immediately. Louise Elizabeth Brown, my birth name was an unknown in public and private. In my private world Louise was the person I needed to become familiar and comfortable with. Perhaps she was the little girl who was always dreaming, looking for her space to find a way out of poverty. Who do I want to be was not the question? To get a job and a social security card, I had to become “Louise” putting the past behind me and developing a new outlook on life. Jackie had to GO! Excuses, immaturity and lack of focus became invalid thoughts. This was the first steps toward independence with no one to blame and no excuses.

Memphis became a closed chapter in my life. Employment was the first order of business and I quickly learned that poverty was universal. Poverty was not a condition that I could walk or run away from. It’s a condition that I had to face and focus on ways to overcome. Wow! This was a brutal reality check. The pathway to failure was clear as day but failure was not an option

. I had to figure it out and I did. Becoming Louise changed my action and my thinking.to adjust to new opportunities. My expectations had to change. I expected to come to Chicago, make a new life for myself and learn how to cultivate Louise. The transformation did not come over night. Just as you tune-up your car after many mileages, Jackie not only needed a tune-up but a complete overall for a new way of life to become Louise.

Louise had to step up and become the woman she had dreamed of for a better life and $19.00 had to be invested wisely to stay the course. A new start consisted of owning and developing the personality of Louise to become successful in a big city of unknowns. It was time for my intellect to surface and to be utilized. Chicago became a quick study with no time for regrets, it was time to move forward with my running shoes on before my money was gone. Louise shifted gears, becoming a work in progress, working on every aspect of her life. There were a few areas that registered within I had to work on: Get rid of the toxins in my mind and body: Refuel, replace old habits, and practice patterns of success: Stay the course, focus, and set goals: manage stress. These were the characteristics and expectations for future success. In the meantime, employment was the top priority just to survive.

The essence of time was important, and a day consisted of going thru a makeover to keep moving forward as Louise, as well as look for a job. During my transition period, I invested $3.00 in carfare to look for a job. Three days later, I was hired at Alden’s Catalog Company making $36.00 a week. I traveled two hours to get to work using public transportation, rode two buses, and two trains, leaving home at 6:00 a.m. to get work by 8:00 a.m. I learned how to navigate around the city using public transportations, and the crowded subways were overwhelming initially. Many times, I would fall asleep on the bus and missed my stop. However, I was constantly reminding myself that this was the life I had chosen in the big city, and it was time to stay focus and stay the course.

Finding strength to overcome my fear of hardships had become a way of life to endure all the different challenges. Refusing handouts, working parttime, and spending more time with John was somewhat encouraging and rewarding. I was determined to live a better life. I quickly learned as I stated before, poverty had no specific location. The struggle was real. This stage in my life made me realize all the excuses I created in my mind about my family were somewhat baseless claims and no longer in the way, God had shown me that Chicago was a big challenge and could be a great blessing if I were serious about new beginnings, but I had to trust Him.

I was no longer in the place where I thought I had little hope and support. Positive thoughts began to replace the negative ideas of the past. My parents had fulfilled their responsibilities by providing food, clothing, and shelter. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Need was revealed, and I understood, self-actualization was to be accomplished by me and had to become the norm. God met me at the level of my expectation! If I wanted more out of life, I had to expect more and do more to achieve success. It was no longer by parents’ responsibility. I remembered the phrase “If it is to be, it’s up to me”. Hard work, determination, a new lifestyle and becoming Louise was an extraordinary process trying to refuel and replace old habits. I missed my family, especially Mom and sometimes felt all alone but these were random thoughts. Becoming sophisticated, self-sufficient and a mature young lady was not an easy task, and the new pathway was just getting started. A new calling had been placed on my life which required a new approach to life along with prayer, seeking answers from God and trusting Him. As time moved on, I thanked God, my move to Chicago became the biggest challenge I have ever encountered and, in the end, a great blessing. Had I not taken he first step, God would not have made provisions for the next series of events that were to come.

After five or six months in Chicago and very few friends, John and I were reacquainted and reunited as friends. With no family nearby and very little money, John had become very protective as we spent more time together. He was more than I could ever dream of, loving, kindhearted, gave me a place to live when I could have ended up homeless, and willingly paid the rent until I could become independent and find my way. The chemistry between us was so powerful, we became lovers, and I was willing to take the risk to become intimate with him **one** time when we both needed someone to love. A couple months later all the dreams I had could have been shattered when I learned of the outcome of our actions.

Another defining moment, a valley had come that caused tears to flood my soul. I became pregnant and my heart was troubled because I did not want to put another burden on him or me. The situation was a mystery to both of us, yet he was willing to be a man, stand up to his responsibilities and do the right thing. I began to think, was this really happening. Briefly daddy came to mind and all I could think of was “Lord I am grateful that I am not living in daddy’s house with this situation”. Thinking out loud I pondered if this were God’s idea for me to come to Chicago to connect with the man who cared, protected, and showed loved in spite of the negative situation that could have become a potential disaster. The thought of marriage and a baby sent chilled down my spine. I cried and cried because I was not prepared to be a wife and mother. I was still working on becoming Louise. Confused and devasted, It was time for me to go see Mom.

I once read, “Always find the path to the people who made you who you are”.

**Chapter 6. A new** **beginning, pregnancy, marriage and a husband**.

**Living from check to check, perseverance and rejoicing through my storms**.

Due to our unseen circumstances, John nor I had planned for a baby or had money to pay for a wedding. Before we took that leap of faith. We both did some soul searching. We decided to wait until we saved enough money to get an apartment. I went home to see family; Mom and Dad were excited to see me. Before I could get the courage to discuss my condition in terms of needing help or potentially having to move back home, I received a phone call from Alden’s Catalog Co. for a full-time position. I returned to Chicago! God made provision to help us get an apartment of our own to live together as man and wife legally. God’s timing was perfect. When it’s God’s idea, He makes provision. Therefore, the stage had been set for me to have the strength to endure any hardships or obstacles with God as my guide, The challenge was real yet there were different dynamics to contend with during this time in my life. Love and understanding as a team gave me faith that together we could make a difference and perseverance thru our storms. A small wedding, with close family only, my favorite Uncle who now lived in Chicago Heights performed the ceremony. Going thru pre-counseling, this scripture I remember, “The wise woman builds her house, but with her own hands the foolish woman tears hers down”. Proverbs 14:1 (NIV). I was not capable of discussing or comprehend this scripture until later in our marriage. It was truly a blessing to have a man/husband in my life to have positive communication and give some purpose to the future.

With a supportive and understanding husband, I was introduced to motherhood when our first child was born recognizing this was a new chapter in life. Adjusting and learning some of the basic things as a wife and mother as twenty years old and working as well, fatigue and exhaustion became the norm.

After our second son was born two and a half years later, change was inevitable. I was not going to confuse my past failures with my present challenges. One day as I talked to Mom and asked her to come stay with us, she sweetly informed me that in her condition she was not able to come and leave Dad. However, she suggested that my brothers were available, and I did not think that was a good idea. Well Mom thought it was and she sent my oldest brother and soon after my two younger brothers came, and they all chose to stay and found jobs to be near us since I had no other immediate family in Chicago. The family I left were now joining me able to see me and willing help. Family matters, my siblings gave me more determination and will power to succeed. I had become their conduit for new beginnings.

It was great having my siblings in Chicago but there were other issues I needed to resolve within our household. Owning up to the notion that I could no longer work with two children was a necessity. Parenting skill were slowly being developed, and becoming a stay-at-home mom, was difficult at best. Some days, I recalled many of the missed opportunities I had to learn to cook. Looking back, I recall barely getting a “C” on my report card in Home Economics”, in high school. The love of cooking or just having to cook draws a total blank that generates little or no interest in cooking. Discarding all of the sentimental reasons, I had to learn how to cook to feed the family.

Preparing for my first meal, It took a lot of love and understanding to look at the food I tried to cook and eating it was a miracle from God that we could digest it.

Repeating the same sad sob story of not being domesticated to take care of a home or cooking for anyone including family was passe. As a wife and mother, it was more than a challenge. It was becoming humiliating and heartbreaking that a southern girl could not cook. Consequently, I had to LEARN HOW TO COOK even though my husband and my small children accepted the fact that cooking was not my forte early on, they still expected food and I had to cook. Simple foods like oatmeal, ground beef and hot dogs were easy to prepare. Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches were my specialty. My most embarrassing moment occurred when I tried to surprise them with fried chicken. I learned how to cook rice, a few veggies and spaghetti but fried chicken would be an added attraction. When I set the table with the veggies, rice and chicken on a platter, I was pleased because my hand had grease burns, yet I had completed the task. After the food was blessed. John couldn’t wait to get a piece of chicken. Surprisingly, when he cut his chicken, blood started to run from the chicken. The children were too young to understand what was going on. Rather than embarrass me, John smiled and said, “let’s not eat the chicken today, we can save if for another day.” He quickly understood that I could not cook for real. Over time, together we weathered many storms, calling on my brothers when needed. Four years after marriage John recognized my potentials as well as my discontentment. The potential he saw was not a stay-at-home Mom cooking. I was an excellent manage of the household finances, taking care of all the other family chores, business, and setting priorities for the family. Apparently, I had a mental block with cooking, especially every day and raising a family with minimum wages. Knowledge is power! Evidently, I lacked the knowledge or skill to plan or cook a meal or get a job. This was not on my radar or what I signed up for on my experiential journey. The Harsh realities of life were overwhelming at times when I felt so inadequate which created negative thought, about marriage. I should have

been happily married and satisfied with a wonderful hardworking, loving husband and two adorable sons, with a nice apartment yet I could not separate the poverty I ran away from with the challenges I was currently experiences living check to check. Instantly I recalled the scripture in Proverb 14:1 “ A wise woman builds her house but with her own hands, a foolish woman tears hers down”. Without a doubt I had to change, I was becoming the foolish woman tearing down our house with my on hands. How soon had I forgotten that I had come a long way from being the nineteen-year-old young girl who came to Chicago with nineteen dollars in her pocket and no place to live. Instead of complaining I start rejoicing Shouting and praising God for placing the right man in my life at the right time to save me from dangers seen and unseen!

I prayed, Lord, change me and hummed this song in my head, “It’s me, it’s me oh Lord, Standing in the need of prayer! I had to become the change so God could change my situation.

After much prayer John convinced me that it was time for me to return to college to get a decent job to supplement his income especially if I wanted us to stop living from paycheck to paycheck. I sincerely believed in hindsight, that he wanted to relieve me of some of the burden of being a stay-a-home Mom with little or no parenting skills. I can only imagine what he was thinking when he was away at work wondering if I were going to burn the house down trying to cook or harm our children trying to take care of them. These are the toxic thoughts I had to dismiss and think positively.

The time had come for me to grow up, complete the task of becoming Louise and learn how to do the things that Jackie did not care to do or took the opportunity to learn how. Finally, Louise, discovered the key that unlocks the doors of opportunities and remembered mama words, “never give up”. The message was clear, John was on point, education was the piece of the puzzle that was missing, and it was time to buckle up our seat belts and get on the fast track to complete my education to change our situation. Did I like that I had to return to school and leave my babies, No! I understood I had to accept the challenge, work hard to be the change for God to change the situation!

John worked two jobs, kept the kids during the day while I attended Chicago Teachers College. The storms were passing over as we stood the test of time standing together on faith, facing our hardships, setting goals together and making many sacrifices, In 1968 I graduated from Chicago Teachers college and got a job teaching school immediately, In Chicago Public Schools. It was time to celebrate. The boys went to Memphis to spend the summer with their grandparents and to give us a break. Apartment living was good, the time had come to find a place we could call home!

Being skilled in finance, we bought our first house in 1970. These defining moments were the highlights or peaks in life that gave me something to shout about with tears of joy. John and the boys really rejoiced and were very proud of the wife and mother I had become. I became a wise woman helping to build a foundation for my family to ease the pain of living from paycheck to paycheck. Look at God, our situation changed after I changed. Jackie Brown had become Mrs. Louise E. Coleman, a successful, intellectual professional woman, focused on her family while continuing her educational endeavors, supporting her husband and make sacrifices for her sons’ private schooling for them to get a good education.

The boys attended Catholic School to prevent them from becoming latchkey kids. Getting a job as a teacher gave me the opportunity to take the boys to school and pick them up after school. Catholic Schools also mandated that all students had attend Mass. With that in mind, John and the boys were baptized and became members of St. Bride’s Catholic Church. Born and bread in the Church of Christ Holiness Doctrine, I join Second Temple Church. To keep from separating the family I went to Mass with them to avoid confusing and they went to church with on special occasion. It was the best decision at the time to keep peace and God in our home

**Chapter 7. Blessings in disguise My Educational journey**

Education had consumed every spare minute of the day! Preparing for my first assignment brought on sleepless night and I was unable to shut down my brain thinking about how I was going to approach students and staff.

In my quest to succeed every theory regarding education had been explored

during my educational journey. Arriving early at Raymond school was filled with anxiety and excitement. Raymond School located in the Inner City of Chicago was in an unfamiliar location which cause some anxiety. I was ready, finally to get a job and have another purpose in life along with being a wife and mother. This was an opportunity to model the behavior or rather use the pedagogical skills I had learned in class. Little did I know that I was in an opportunity room with 25 students labeled as 3rd, 4th and 5th grade students. Grateful to have a job, the details of teaching a mixed classroom were not disturbing until I greeted the students. Every student walked in the room bright eyed and full of energy. Bell to bell planning was on the board and I proceeded to introduce myself. Chatter was going on as if I were not present. On the first day, I recognized the leader of the group. He and I had a special confrontation and afterwards he understood I was not there for foolishness and a few weeks of exploration in term of how I was going to control the class behavior and teach at the same time required more attention and addition work. I rolled up my sleeves and let the class know a little bit of about my background, they soon began to settle down and teaching students at Raymond were some of the best days ii spent in the classroom. After the first year I was asked to join the sixth-grade teachers who were very selective and popular for getting great students’ outcomes. Teaching was fun and it brought back so many memories of the days I attend elementary school.

Raymond School students taught me the value of teaching Black students. Every little Black girl reminded me of who I was. I understood their need to belong and to be loved. Searching for answers to reach all students, I enrolled in a master’s program at Loyola University to learn how to write curricula to meet the needs of students and integrate art into the curricula so that all students had the opportunity to learn.

Raymond School provided the opportunity for me to develop my teaching strategies and have a successful career for approximately 18 years with students winning Science Fair awards, participating in broadways plays in school. great academic achievement to excel and attend competitive school to continue their education.

I earned the Teacher of the Year Award in 1983 many other awards and recognition as a teacher. My career as a teacher had many defining moments that contributed to my enjoyment in education, such as having students over the years find me and thank me for being a great influence on their education and life in general. Several students have become my friend on FB. More importantly, one of my six grade students sends birthday cards now that started in 1983, keeping me updated with his career and other events. These are the precious memories that I cherish as a teacher. Education was not my first career choice initially, yet it has been proven to be the best option to further my career. **By 1980** I completed a master’s in education and also earn an Administrative Certification to become a principal in Chicago Public Schools or the State of Illinois. The highlight of these events was having my parents come to Chicago for the first time to celebrate and witness their youngest daughter who was the first to leave home and now the first to receive a Bachelor of Science, master’s in education and an Administrative Certificate.

Earning mama and daddy’s praise, respect and making them proud was an extraordinary day in my life. Daddy finally realized I was not crazy or acting out when I left home: I felt trapped in an environment that offered little hope and I silently rebelled. At the time I appeared to be a misfit in search of self and apparently no one understood that but mama. Mama and daddy prayed for us and were grateful that God had covered us during our storms and had continued to make provision for us to not only survive but to prosper. When they were leaving, I overheard daddy tell his son-in-law he was proud of him for taking care of his daughter but be careful she is different and strong willed. Silently, I thought, he is still stuck in 40’s believing a woman’s place was in the home and submissive to her husband.

After their departure, it was business as usual debating our next steps. Literally, I had become a professional student, but I decided not to attend any university to obtain a doctorate degree until our sons were out of high school. They had become dependent on their Mom being home and i remembered all the sacrifices made for me to complete under grad school. However, as time moved on I got the urge to return to school again to get a doctorate in education to give me more leverage in becoming a school superintendent or college professor.

Living up to my goal. I was accepted in the Doctoral Administrative Program at the University of Illinois in Urbana as a six-grade teacher. Rigorous exams and extensive paperwork were required. I met all the requirements, I thought! However, In the middle of the first semester, my Professors advised me that I would be dropped from the program if I did not become a current administrator. In other words, I was going to be on the list to exit the program. God’s miracles were amazing and on time. Ten sitting Superintendents in the program learned of my situation and offered me a job as principal. I accepted principalship in Joliet in 1986.

As I climbed the ladder of success, our sons were grownup, enjoyed school and played sports with their father cheering the on, and sometime coaching their teams. I was the cheerleader waiting at the gate for them to get dressed after the football games. Often the boys would convince their Dad to take me home so they could have fun with the girls. No one could convince me to leave so I stayed. Flash back, I was acting like my daddy only giving them some space and sober. Communication was a top priority, love and respect permeated our home and there was a clear understanding, “keep your Mom happy and we will have a happy home”!

They also learned how to do chores including cooking. It was no secret that I was not the best cook but at least I learned how to keep the family fed. Daily family gatherings were around the dinner table where quality time was spent together debating options for them and debriefing our day. On Sunday we went to church. After graduating from high school, they too, went off to college. John worked for the US Post Office, as a Chicago Police Officer and later became an entrepreneur. We were empty nesters. Life was good. Louise had become the change and God changed the situation: she became the woman Jackie dreamed of, classy, smart, confident and on the move. We were reaping the benefits of our hard work, determination, and sacrifices. God’s blessings were overflowing. Understanding that the timing was right for me to accept the principal’s position to stay in the doctoral program, Joliet was indeed the right career move! It was different in terms of the students and staff due to its diverse population, and it was 40 miles outside of Chicago. Considering the positives and negatives, Joliet was an opportunity of a lifetime. Moving from teacher to principal was relatively a smooth transition in terms of knowledge and skills and recognizing good teaching was a plus. Most of the teachers were well equipped to educate all students. We worked together as a team, collaborating, and creating a participatory environment to improve student achievement. Effective School research was the foundation for teaching and learning. The student population was 350 students and of that number, approximately 75 students were Black. Discipline was considered the major problem and I chose to oversee discipline to create a safe and orderly environment for students and staff. Three years later, with ongoing teacher training, believing all students can learn and good leadership put Taft school on the map. Taft School test scores ranked in the top category in the State of Illinois. In 1989, I was awarded the Illinois Distinguished Educator Award with $25,000.00 prize personally attached. My career was skyrocketing. Imagine a Black women came to Joliet with no experience as a Principal and three years later her name had become a household name. Compliments were coming from organization across Will County, Resolutions form Politicians, parents and other educational organizations and universities! Symbolically, I had reached the mountain top of Mount Everest, the highest peak in my world! It seemed as though God was testing my strength to see if I were still trusting Him and standing on His promise to never leave nor forsake me! Indeed, I was.

**Chapter 8. Survival in Valleys: leaning on God’s unchanging hands**

To whom much is give much is required! With the move to principalship, I was able to remain in the doctoral program, complete the required courses and exams to qualify to write the dissertation. The light was shining bright with the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

At the height of my career, with three chapters written for the thesis and all the excitement surrounding the award, lighting struck, John became gravely ill several months later in July 1989.

It was the most devastating news I had encountered. Slowly I began to slide down the mountain top to the lowest valley with no light in site. After receiving the award as one of Illinois Distinguished Educators, I was asked to become the superintendent of Joliet Public Schools even though I had only served as principal for 3 years. Plus, principalship was great and teamwork was amazing. Large community ceremonies were held in honor of our accomplishments at Taft School and proudly my husband attended the ceremonies even thought he was weak after having surgery. He continued to encourage me to take the job as superintendent but at the time all thoughts were on him getting well. I appreciated the offer, but anxiety and stress were building up inside of me regarding his health. John’s health was steadily declining, as he continued to have more surgeries. It was surreal watching how much strength and fortitude he exhibited when his body was consumed with pain. Curiosity caused me to question his physicians as to why he wasn’t getting better, and his answer was surprising: ask John why. Determined to keep us motivated and focused on succeeding: and for our sons, now young men, stay grounded and in good spirit, John failed to inform us that he was terminally ill. The doctors had given him 6 months to live. In a state of shock and helpless, I could not grasp the concept that his life was ending and in God’s hands. We hugged and cried uncontrollably until God calmed our spirit.

During John’s sufferings, he kept a smile on his face and his tenacious strength to help the family understand God’s will. We prayed together daily. His fortitude, persistence and will to live was hard to conceive. Alone, I cried out loud, “Why God, Why”, and wondering “Where was my faith”, why am I falling apart”? This was not the time to question God. I struggled with my faith decreasing as fear of being along increased. Imagine sitting on the bedside, helpless, watching your husband fade away. The memory of this situation keeps me humble; looking back and wondering where I would be if God had not held my hand and carried me until I could stand. With a trouble heart and torn, the only place I wanted to be was by his bedside during his last days. For john it was the opposite; he did not want his condition to prevent me from moving forward with life. Determine to encourage me to accept the job as superintendent, rather than talk about him, our conversations centered around the job as a great opportunity, and it would be a historical moment for Joliet hiring its first Black superintendent.

When he described his feelings to his best friends, he stated that his greatest joy and achievement in life was to live long enough to see us reach our goal, for me to be successful and become an independent Black woman. As he **lie** dying, his major concerned and last request was for me to take the job as superintendent, go on with my life so he could rest in eternal peace. My soul cried out Lord why me? Why now? I called on God to rescue me and answer my prayer.

On John’s deathbed, he gave me permission to accept the job as superintendent in Jan,1990, and I was hired. Somehow, I persevered, traveling thru the snowstorms to and from work praying along the way. The team of doctors prescribed different types of medication, radiation, and visits to cancer centers for special treatment. The cancer had metastasized in his body, no more surgery and the doctors had done everything they could do. There were two options open; go to Hospice in the hospital or hospice at home. In May John was place in Hospice at home to spend his last days with us. My sons and I were trained to care for his wounds. The School Board Members were aware of how serious John’s health issues were, and insurance paid for him to have a nurse during the hours I worked which was a blessing in disguised. Troubled by the fact that I had to leave my husband everyday was difficult yet the smile on his face when I came home gave me strength to endure and to celebrate life as he transitioned. On July 21, 1990, one year later after being diagnosed, John made his transition.

Grieved, weary and lost, my sons and I had to find our way to continue our journey. They were married with children, so I chose not to become a burden to them. It was a journey I had to explore and carve out a different pathway to move forward.

Their Dad constantly reminded them to “take care of your Mom”. Work kept me busy during the day, at night I cried myself to sleep. I cried on the way to work and on the way home. Once I arrived at work, I preformed the duties like a professional should, and I continued to do well. Sleepless nights, filled with grief became the norm at home. Weight loss was becoming noticeable. Some of my friends and colleagues were very concerned about my health. Overcoming the pain of losing the first love and greatest supporter was heart wrenching. Therapy was offered and I went for a while, nothing seemed to help until I turned to God in Prayer. One horrendous night, I heard God’s voice “Be Still”, I have never failed you.” I was frightened, looking around the room and scared, yet this incident caused me to think about how good God had been in our lifetime together. Eventually, with much prayer and two best friends, the pain eased, and I began to think about the goodness of God and how he had blessed us with a man who dearly loved us. God molded and shaped our lives together as one. Giving God the glory for all He had done brought me to my knees and slowly out of darkness. Walking in FAITH and rejoicing for God’s grace, mercy and favor allowed me to finish my doctorate four years later, to become Dr. Louise E. Coleman in 1994. My career as the first Black Superintendent was filled with many successes, awards and recognitions. The life of the first Black Superintendent is a book to write later. As I on Him. God was and is my refuse and a very present help in the time of troubled. John Coleman was the vessel/servant God used to transform my life. This amazing man completed his earthly journey. He taught me how to become Louise, and to that end I say Thank you God. Leaning on God, learning to accept the peaks and valleys in my life opened many windows of opportunities. I am truly grateful for the opportunity I had, to be there to hold his hand and give him joy as he transitioned to his heavenly home. Admittedly, it was very difficult to see him suffer. In the end, I was able to sustain the pain and found comfort in knowing that my husband would be proud to know that my successful career continued, and I had to find a new beginning with the strength, courage, determination he and God had poured into my life to become a successful Black woman, my life, my legacy!

My mantra now is “To God be the glory for all the things He has done in my life. In retrospect, I sometime wonder what my life’s reflections would look like if I had stayed in Memphis, Tennessee? The answer is not important. Leaving behind the old, embracing the new, traveling the path less travel that had the most to offer

worked for me and made me stronger!

History has its eyes on you!

**My New beginning:**

After being a widow for 10 years, in 2000, I became very independent, successful with a rewarding retirement and began a new career at the university level as well as a National Educational consultant. To end this chapter of my life, I met Dr. Kenneth Freeman who captured my attention, and this was the start of another series of life changing events!