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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 my life. My 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 that my life’s journey has had many peaks to shout about and many valleys to cry about but I thank God for my spiritual growth that helped me to persevere to find my way thru it all. In my wildest dream, I never envision living in a global “Pandemic” called Covid 19 that caused many illnesses, and many deaths creating a world crisis that very few people understood. I pause and thank God for His continuous grace, mercy, and favor, that I am blessed to have lived amid a world crisis and to see the year 2022 in real time.

Moving forward, this also means that I have lived eight decades to witness many deaths and living legacies in our rich heritage, who carried torches, boycotted buses, and tore down barrier for people like me to have a chance 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. With great fondness, I mentioned these wars because I was born a year before World War II. 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 my brothers 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 stage of social media. Through it all, education was the catalyst for change and the key to success. I applaud my family who supported me, my faith that sustained me, and my 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 my surroundings dictated. The concept of living in poverty for the rest of my life 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 faith, family and friends were valuable contributors whom I had to rely on to helped me overcome many devasting defining moments/events in my life that could have crushed me or destroyed my life. Many times, I had to stop and check myself before I wrecked myself. Each time I encountered hardship, I learned to pray and 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. My focus was not on segregation, my focus was 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 my passport to freedom and that an investment in knowledge pays the best interest/dividend.

Confused by society’s laws, my 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 my 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 my 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 began to face many challenges with my siblings 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 was my hope. 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 haven to get away from home. As I reflect on my up bringing, church and school were my foundational steppingstones that offered me hope 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 for me 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 delighted 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 my real faith in believing that only God performs miracles and answer prayers. My faith increased and 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 to stay!!!

STOP HERE!

**Encouraged by my Mother, I had to discovered who I was in Chicago. I was confronted with an identity crisis. I was known as “Jackie Brown” in Memphis yet on my birth certificate stated I was Louise Elizabeth Brown. My mind was racing, What was I going to do? This was my first step toward independence. There was no one to blame, no excuses. I had to figure it out and I did. Becoming Louise changed my actions and my thinking. I thank God, my move to Chicago became a big challenge and a great blessing for a new beginning. Had I not taken the first step, God would not have made provision for the next chapters or series of events that were to come, my marriage, my career path and overcoming my greatest loss that shattered my world. This story is my legacy, filled with many peaks and valleys, along with the harsh realities of life that taught me the need to change my pace, change my place and change my perspective on life to become a successful Black woman.**

**End introduction**

***Leave it out for now use later.***

**I contacted my high school prom date /boyfriend, John Coleman, who lived in Chicago who had made his grand entrance back to Memphis, July 1959. He looked like a million dollar man and we spent a lot of time together. In his quest to see me again, he came by the apartment where I was living, learned of my condition and found me a kitchenette room to live in until I found a job. When I saw that kitchenette, I decided that failure was not an option. I got a job, I put the past behind me knowing that I had to endure the harsh realities of life. After I cried and cried, I realized I had to persevere. A few months later, I**

***OMIT for Now*….got pregnant, married John Coleman and we had two children. Encouraged by my husband John Coleman, I went back to College and obtained my BS, two Master degrees and my Doctorate. Then lighting struck again. In 1990, I was devastated when I learned that my husband had six months to live. At the same time, I was at the height of my career and was offered a job as the first Black Supt of Joliet. On his deathbed, he gave** me permission to accept the job. Shortly **afterward, he made his transition.{{ Leaning on God, learning to accept the peak and valleys in my life, I am truly grateful for the opportunity that 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 sustained 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. }} Use later**

PICK UP HERE

**Chapter 1. Reflection of my Birthplace**

Leaving Memphis and going to Chicago was quite a transition. I question myself and asked,” 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 crossed 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 thought 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 genre!! 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, Isaic Hayes, Sam and Dave, Dave Porter, Otis Reddings, 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 cole slaw 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 of 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 most kindest, loving beautiful person that ever lived.

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. 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 my daddy and other siblings. Her love kept me grounded and my home environment became oblivious. I enjoyed Mama sitting me by her side and rubbing her hand over my hair to comfort me and her warm loving spirit covered my pain 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 my 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 live 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 of Friday and ended on Sunday. He was a weekend alcoholic, 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 struggling with our family situation. Time had brought about a change. Women started working outside the home and I began to imagined a different world. With my 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.

Initially, I thought my mama was so accepting of my daddy’s 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 the provider for us. We were never homeless, we always had food to eat and clothes to wear. To that end, to live in my daddy’s house I had to learn how to put my case to rest against my daddy and forget why.

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, 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 place and my space somewhere. 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, I was too weak. To relieve me of agony of being the target for my siblings, 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 puzzle, 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 agonized over the idea of why I had to be punish when I was totally unaware of what had 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 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 and dreading my environment, and thinking about the future, wondering what I wanted to do and who I wanted to become. Little did I know at that time that I was a dreamer who often drifted off into my dream world to escape the confused world in which I lived and the harsh realities of life. 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 a lot of 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 old people. In those day, a nickel could by a big bag of candy or popsicle. The village was important because there was little room to judge people. Everyone was literally in the same economic situation and the same living conditions. 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, drinking 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. Nevertheless, 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 gave me hope. 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, I am 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.

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.

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

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

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 my 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 call 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, 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 was 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. As we all know school kids can be cruel, name calling and bullying but 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, walking to and from school was always eventful and sometimes painful especially in high school. My sister and I left home together and were supposed to return home together. 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 my life and make things better. 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 and participate in some school activities. Meeting John Coleman was the highlight of my junior year. He was described as good guy, polite and a gentleman. Initially my five best friends and I were looking at the football and basketball players as a potential prom date. Fortunately, my desire to get a prom date was over when I met John. He was very attentive and attracted to me and I was overjoyed. There was one other hurdled he had to get through and that was to meet my daddy. Dating was not accepted very well by daddy. My oldest sister got married right after graduation and school was not a priority for my other sister. She got married and moved away as well, but she just around the corner from our house.

In the meantime, I found my niche in high school yet the dynamics in my household had not changed. 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 my first real date to the prom with John and to my disappointment, daddy was sitting on the porch when I arrived home and of course I got the lecture of my life about being out late with a young man which was a big put down after a great evening. Moving past my first date, John and i became good friends. In other words, he became known as my boyfriend 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 my education, I enrolled in LeMoyne College and stayed there one year, with little or no hope to finish because my daddy’s strict rules applied as long as I lived in his house. Overall, I probably would have been more involved in college but I had no family support, financially or emotionally.

In the midst of my uncertainty, and not returning to LeMoyne College caused a little friction in our home. Puzzled by the fact that I did not ask him for tuition to returned 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 my interest. Looking ahead I saw little hope for me in Memphis yet at the same time, Memphis was going through a transition. Memphis State was being integrated by four of my classmates and segregation was being challenged. My 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 find a better life. Finally, I realized a decision had to be made. Worry and discontentment overshadowed my thoughts process. 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 is now. In spite of all the challenges I faced, the chaos and confusion! Yet I rise!

**Chapter 4. In a state of uncertainty:: My Big Dream**

Planning my Great Escape

Struggling with poverty. Tired of the strict rules of my Dad and his dominance over the family even though he spent a lot of time away from home. Mom was my heroin. My Dad continued his rendezvous which disturbed me greatly. It was too difficult to continue to endure. My sibling were either married or in the military. Mom’s brain surgery and her perseverance gave me strength to fight and not give up. My Dad soon realized I was trying to be obedient but not the one to pacify him. I was not domesticated nor willing to accept his behavior. Cooking and caring for the household was not my forte. I had no intentions of learning. Needless to say, my oldest sister and her family moved back home to help care for Mom and Dad.

She also understood my life was miserable. She gave me her blessings and permission to leave.

**Chapter 5**.  **Chicago 1959-60**

Traveling to Chicago with $19.00 and 1 suitcase was a life changing event.

I am the first sibling to move away to another state. I had a few relatives and a few friends in Chicago. My only plan was to get away from home. Once I got into the car to leave Memphis, I felt relieved and anxious, knowing that I need to develop a strategic plan. In the moment that was less important. However, it was an exciting driving to Chicago. Arriving in Chicago at 1:00 am in the morning was my first eye opener, looking at the bright lights and tall building in awe. From my perspective the city was so big. In that moment 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 please sustain me until I got a job. My Mom’s words continued to echo in my head, “Baby, everything is going to be alright”.

**Chapter 6. Who am I? Finding my self**

Where do I go from here? I stayed overnight with my friend and I knew my stay was temporary. Desperate for answers and help, I called my high school friend, and prom date, John Coleman, and told him I moved to Chicago. Somewhat shocked of my arrival, he came to see me. Realizing I was literally homeless, he found me a room in this big building where his aunt was the manager and the rooms were known as kitchenettes. I almost fainted when I saw a one-bedroom apartment with a stove and refrigerator in it. The bathroom was for everyone on that floor. It was too late to turn around. Lesson learned, be careful 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.

**Chapter 7. Building** **confidence; Finding my way and investing my resources**

Faith over fear became my mantra. My identify crisis became prevalent. Since birth, I have been called “Jackie Brown.” Tough questions to answer. Louise Elizabeth Brown, my birth name is a conflict. 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 look on life. Jackie had to GO! I invested $3.00 in carfare to look for a job. Three days later, I was hired at Alden’s Catalog Company making $30.00 a week. I traveled two hours to get to work using public transportation. I rode two buses and two trains, leaving home at 6:00 a.m. to get work by 8:00. I learned how to navigate around the city using public transportations, yet 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.

**Chapter 8. Excuses removed: Learning to become an independent women**.

Finding strength to overcome my fears and hardships had become my way of life to endure all the challenges. Refusing handouts, working parttime, and spending more time with John was somewhat encouraging. I was determined to live a better life. I quickly learned that poverty has no specific location. The struggle was real. This stage or chapter in my life made me realize all the excuses I created in my mind about my family were no longer in the way, God had taken them away. I was no longer in Memphis, the place I had little hope and support. 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, or it had to become the norm. I wanted more out of life, therefore I had to do more to reach that goal. It was no longer by parents’ responsibility. I remembered the phrase “If it is to be, it’s up to me”. Hard work, determination and a new lifestyle was somewhat fearful. I missed my family and sometimes felt all alone. After a few months, John and I were reacquainted and reunited as friends. With no family nearby, we spent more time together, we became lovers. John was so kind, gave me a place to live and willing to help me find my way. The chemistry between us was so powerful, I was willing to take the risk to have sex with him one time when we both needed someone to love. Not in my wildest dream did I think about the outcome. I became pregnant and my heart was hurt because I did not want to put another burden on him nor me. I began to think, was this my idea or God’s idea to come to Chicago to be with the man who loved me. It was time for me to go see Mom.

**Chapter 9. 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 nor have 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. When I went home to see my family, Mom and Dad were excited to see me. Before I could get the courage to discuss my condition in terms or moving back home, I received a phone call from Alden’s Catalog Co. for a full-time position. I returned to Chicago! God made provision for me to help us get an apartment. When its God’s idea, He makes provision.

We had a small wedding, close family only, performed by my Uncle who lived in Chicago Heights. Going thru pre-counseling, this scripture was said, “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 until later on in our marriage.

**Chapter 10. Blessing in disguise**

With a supportive and understanding husband, our real struggle began after my second son was born. Change was inevitable. I could no longer work with two children. My parenting skill were not fully developed. Becoming a stay at home mom, was difficult. I mentioned earlier. I did not know how to cook, how to be a wife or mother. Together we weathered many storms. My husband decided I should go back to school. He worked two jobs, kept the kids during the day while I attended Chicago Teachers College. Standing together on faith, making many sacrifices, I got my first teaching job in1968. We bought our first house in 1970. I became a wise woman trying to build a foundation for my family and a professional student. My focus was on being successful with the support and sacrifices of my husband earning 2 masters degrees and a doctorate degree.

**Chapter 11. My Educational journey**

During my educational journey, Raymond School students taught me the value of teaching Black students. Every little Black girl reminded me of who I was. I earned many awards and recognition as a teacher. My career as a teacher lasted 18 years and I have many defining moments that contributed to my success. In my quest to become a superintendent, 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 dropped from the program. God 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, my sons enjoyed school and playing sports with their father cheering the on and sometime coaching their teams. 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. Life was good.

**Chapter 12. Peaks and Valleys**

In 1989, at the height of my career, John became ill and it was the most devastating news I had encountered. That same year, I received an award as one of Illinois Distinguished Educators and asked to become the superintendent of Joliet Public Schools where I served as principal for 3 years. My proud husband attended the ceremony even thought he was weak. He also encouraged me to take the job as superintendent. My thoughts were on him getting well. I appreciated the offer but I my anxiety was building up regarding his health. John health was steadily declining. I questioned his physicians, why wasn’t my husband getting better. John’s doctor told me to ask John why. Determined to keep me motivated and focused on succeeding: and our boys ground and in good spirit, John failed to inform us that he was terminally ill and the doctors had given him 6 months to live. In the midst of John’s sufferings, he found strength to help me to understand God’s will. We prayed together daily. His fortitude and will to live was hard to conceive. My faith decreased as fear of being along increased. Our conversation centered around me accepting the job as the first Black Superintendent of Joliet District 86. My heart was torn and troubled because I wanted to be by his bedside during his last days.

When he told me and his best friends, his greatest joy and achievement was to live long enough to see us reach our goal, for me to be successful and become an independent Black woman. As he lay dying, his major concerned and last request was for me to go on with my life so he could rest in eternal peace. My soul cried out Lord why me? Why now?

**Leaning on God, and survival**

I accepted the job as superintendent in Jan,1990, in May John was place in Hospice at home. My School Board Members knew my husband was gravely ill and my insurance paid for him to have a nurse during the hours I was at work 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 the harsh realities of life. On July 21, 1990, John made his transition. My sons and I had to find our way to continue our journey. Work kept me busy during the day, at night I cried myself to sleep. I cried on my way to work and on the way home. Once I arrived at work, I pretended I was ok and I continued to do well. Sleepless nights, filled with grief became my norm. Weight loss was becoming noticeable. Overcoming the pain of losing my first love and my greatest supporter was my greatest challenge. I received therapy, 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 and scared yet it caused me to think how good God has been in our life time together. Eventually the pain eased and I began to think about how God had blessed me with a man who dearly loved me and how God brought and shaped our lives together as one. Giving God the glory for all He had done brought me out of darkness. Walking in FAITH and rejoicing for God’s grace, mercy and favor allowed me to finish my doctorate and become Dr. Louise E. Coleman. My career as the first Black Superintendent was filled with many successes, awards and recognitions. I had come this far my faith, leaning on God. God was my refuse and a very present help when I was troubled. John Coleman was the vessel/servant He used to transform my life. My amazing husband, John Coleman had completed his earthly journey. He taught me how to become a successful Black woman and to that end I say Thank you God. 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.

**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!