Introduction: **Defining Moments: My Legacy in Brief**

August 18, 1940, in Memphis, Tennessee, eighty-one years ago is a long time to recapture everything that has happened in my 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 know that all things are possible thru prayer. With that said, I can say life’s journey has many peaks to shout about and many valleys to cry about but I thank God for spiritual growth that helped me 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 blessings 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. However, 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 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. Increased faith, family and friends were valuable contributors whom I had to rely on to overcome many devasting defining moments 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. For that reason, I want to reflect and regurgitate on how God in his infinite wisdom place the right people in my life at the right time when I was most vulnerable, confused and ready to give up on life’s journey.

Living in Memphis, Tennessee during 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 the struggles of life were real which contributed to the 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. Being the 5th child of seven siblings, 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 was 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, consequently, 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. As the saying goes according to the urban dictionary, “If if was a fifth, we’d all be drunk”. In spite of it all, 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 dark and dreary outside. 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*”.

Living conditions were not the best, but they were not the worst either. We lived in the LeMoyne Garden Projects 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 sibling rivalry or what I called life. I had severe acne, slightly plump, teased and called names. In other words, I suppose I was the ugly duckling in the family. At the same time, I could count on my faithful Mother, Mrs. 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, develop, and prepared for what was to come in this 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 to leave home as a teenager or just do something different rather than face the inevitable, living in the 50s’.

Fifteen years old, in 1955-56, there were two major defining events that almost shattered all my dreams and I thought my life was falling apart with so much happening. These events are called the valleys that caused uncontrollable tears to flood my soul night and day when there were no tears left 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. Was I safe in Mississippi? Was I going to get killed if I go into the grocery store? Well daddy took care of that. He rushed to Mississippi to reduce the fear of my life being endangered. 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 the fifties. Later that year Mama start having health challenges, fainting outside of her work location in the street and sometimes on the sidewalk. 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, 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 life changing events, Mama’s survival was the first test of faith in believing that only God performed miracles and answered 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, her 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, life moved on, 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 wanted to do something different, to move away to Chicago and experience another way of life. Mama had witnessed my growth, development, and maturity. She understood who I was and without any questions, gave me permission to leave without the consent of my father.

The desire to leave was so overwhelming, a plan of action had not been considered in terms of how to execute this adventure 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 quietly packed my one and only tin rusted suitcase with a few socks, three dresses, a few skirts, sweaters, and some underwear. Opportunity or not, I was ready to take the 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, literately I 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, 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 to dictate my decision. **Chicago my future and there is more to come! Consider this, a future is not a future without a past therefore, the past is where my journey begins!**

**Chapter 1. Reflection of my Birthplace**

Leaving Memphis and going to Chicago was quite a transition. I questioned myself and asked,” Do I have any regrets”, and the answer was “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. 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 knew very 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 at this time. 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, where daddy was able to get a job working at 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 the 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 and many families struggling.

Other memories of Memphis include a few notable historical sites now that were very intriguing as a child and off limits, such as the Lorraine Motel. Flashbacks caused me to imagine what it was like as a young adult walking downtown Memphis and passing by the Lorraine Motel where Dr. King 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, Dr. King was killed and died in St. Joseph Hospital in Memphis in 1968. My hometown will forever be known in history as the place where MKL was killed.

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, and the location of Stax Recording Studio and W.C. Handy where many Colored artist began their careers. 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 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 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 aura of Beale Street 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 other talent as well. Music was the **only thing** that disregarded segregation, there were no boundaries and no color barriers, only a soul connection existed.

Resilience, and perseverance are major connections of my life including walking. Walking was significant and the most dependable form of transportation. It was not uncommon for strangers to offer a ride as well. 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 fondest 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 sitting by Mama side as she rubbed her hand over my hair to comfort me as 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 of her 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, he 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, to no avail, 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 to have found their way, daddy apparently was their least concern. Perhaps, I may have been the sibling who let it be known privately to mama that I had concerns with our family situation. Time 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 and should have a voice. They would look at me with a jaundice eye and keep 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 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 **cussing or** fighting. I, on the other hand, enjoyed the easy fun games that were less competitive, and had no interest in fighting. My two younger brothers 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. Evidently to them, I served no useful purpose and sometimes in the way. My brothers and sisters did not “see me”. Generally, I had a different focus on life, and I yearned to do other activities outside the home other than church and school, and perhaps 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 now marvel at the notion that generally I became the scape goat or victim of some of their creative games that turned bad. 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 afterbreakfast, my oldest sister, decided to organize a pretend clinic in the house after mama and daddy left for work**.** As the patient I was encouragedto see the doctor first**.** As I sat in thechair, the next thing I rememberedmy sister held my right arm out. I closed my eyes, andmy brother laid a hot butterknife 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 arrived 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 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 as my badge of honor for overcoming the pain, After that incident, everyone was cautious, and it never happened 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 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 quality 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 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 to make this become a reality. Keep in mind this was the sign of the times in the fifties.

Another intriguing incident happened, while 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 inside, I was told that I was going to get a whooping with 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 in the family;

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. 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 a 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 and found 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 quality time together as we grew older.

The neighbors played a great part in taking us to church, giving 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 and more. 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 who was the Pastor of the church, Christ Temple Church of Christ Holiness located on Williams and Lauderdale. Uncle loved his brother, and he was supportive of us and showered us with love and candy on a regular basis. Often, I thought of him 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, 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, I recall all seven siblings joined church and attended regularly until they moved away from daddy’s house.

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 gave her unconditional love and support to the entire family. She was our spiritual god-fearing earthly angel who love and showered us with gifts. God’s grace and favor. By chance she moved to Chicago with her roommate, ending up in our Chicago home. This opportunity of a lifetime allowed my Chicago family to care for her until God called her home at 88 years old. 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 repeatedly say, he was not going to church because he did not want to be a hypocrite and I respected his decision. He contended that some of the same people sitting in church on Sunday were out drinking with him on Saturday. 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. Somewhat surprise by mama’s 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 at that time, and 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 intentional 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 was believing, I was convinced 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. Dad asked for forgiveness, prayed with me and in time I forgave him since he was authentic.

Mama and daddy became faithful members of Christ Temple, and he treated her 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. Thank God mama and daddy had an opportunity to visit us in Chicago to witness some of my major accomplishments as evidenced in the chapter, Living my best life.

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

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

Focusing on the family, 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 lunches. We happily left home together going to our respective school. To start the school day was exciting; 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, an epiphany came out of nowhere when Jesus was 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, exhibiting very good self-control, attentiveness was easy to exhibit and in turn a challenge daily to stay on the honor roll.

Financially Catholic school became a burden 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 indirectly causing 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 ensue interested in school. Realizing the limited wardrobe in the closet was disturbing and interrupted the positive external experiences. Pressure was building up internally; it was too hard to find different clothes to wear every day. Sometimes i was not pleased with the clothes I wore with my usual ponytail and loafers. Generally, it has been said you tend to feel good when you look good. As a youngster, it did not always feel good going to school. Kids were cruel, name calling and poking fun at other who were not like them was the name of the game. Instead of getting angry, I began to act silly, talking loudly, and telling jokes to compensate for the internal conflict that existed within regarding my well-being.

School was still a fun place. I stayed on the honor roll, played in the Junior High Band, and sometimes got in trouble because I finished my work faster than the other students. Name calling, making fun of people and bullying existed; I persevered mainly because of my sister. She was not afraid of anyone or anything. On the playground, she 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 was on time. Actually, dealing with my sister taught me to have more confidence, become independent, and make my own decisions. Eventually, teasing was ignored, with 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 anxiously awaited when 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 either of us. At the end of the day, we understood that we were different, and she would go her way and I 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. Forging ahead, 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 with stylish clothing. Absorbed in ways to continue to make life better and becoming more independent led to 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 a makeover. 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, my growth was awkward, tomboyish and a little rough around the edges. At this stage “Jackie Brown,” a nickname dominated my character and personality. Jackie was 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 was a work in progress not understanding my worth or value masking feelings to soften the disillusion.

Growing and exploring campus life advanced me to the next level of expanding the horizon. Meeting John Coleman in the hallway was the highlight of my sophomore year. Every day at lunch time he arrived at his locker, minding his own business and I spent 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. His personality was widely known as a good guy, polite, a gentleman and out of my purview of friends. Early on during the infantile stage of love, I was being pursued by another guy who was a senior, but it was short lived. 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, 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, 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 real date going 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 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.

Graduating with honors and a member of the National Honor Society, going away to college was out of the question. To continue any educational endeavors, it had to happen in Memphis. I enrolled in LeMoyne College thinking now as an eighteen-year-old, more freedom would be available to exercise independence but no, no. One year of college was not enough to earn more independence which dictated little or no hope for change because daddy’s strict rules applied as long as I lived in his house. Daddy 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, it was problematic to think that there would be more involvement in college with more family support, financially or emotionally. In hindsight, I was not comfortable, capable or aware that I should have been asking for HELP! Sometimes I wonder why didn’t I seek advice instead of being silently rebellious?

In the midst of the uncertainty of the next steps, 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 could not stay home or 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 very few opportunities were optional, other than school or work. At the height of all the disenchantment, Memphis was going through a transition. Memphis State was being integrated by four classmates and segregation was being challenged. Emotions were running rampant; independence in terms of taking care of myself and feeling very confident and personal maturity sustained the thoughts of having a better life. Regardless of all these events taking place, mentally the time was not right to join any group fighting for equal rights because, this too, was an internal personal battle, fighting for freedom. Eventually, a decision had to be made even though worry and discontentment overshadowed my thoughts processes. It was time to leave behind the old, embrace the new, travel the path less travel that had the most to offer and the time was now. In spite of all the challenges I faced, the chaos and confusion, survival was imperative. “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 to disappear and ride away into the sunset. Mom, the hero, with her love and permission to leave home provided the comfort needed to carry out my departure. Dad continued his rendezvous which was disgusting and too difficult to comprehend along with being 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 was the strength needed to fight and not give up. Dad soon realized I was not trying to be disobedient, and it caused him to pause to think what was going on. Staying home every day clouded my thoughts and there were more expectations than I could handle. Since I received no training early on, 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 and demonstrated little or no interest in learning. The best cook in the house was my oldest sister and she enjoyed doing it immensely. She and her family moved away when she got married. It was no secret she and her family move back with us to help care for Mom and Dad. With my sister and her family there, it did not register that I should learn more especially when everything was working in our favor. Mom was being taken care of and was eating great meals every day.

Good ole mama understood my life was at a standstill, uncertain about my future and somewhat despondent. Understanding my personal issues mama found the perfect time to talk, comfort, and gave me her blessings to leave. Mama’s assurance and love was encouraging. Ready to leave with mama’s blessing was a big relief; The problems that remain unresolved was no real plan of action existed to consider the how, when, or where.

Different thoughts raced in my head causing many sleepless nights. It seemed irrational to have a dream that was birth in my spirit ignored or fall by the wayside for the lack of a plan. Uncertainty was a major 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 a real plan of action looked like with only $19.00 would have been a baseless claim for success. Rather than block an opportunity, I chose to believe it was necessary to take a chance to get a chance. Daily prayers about leaving were convincing that it was the right thing to do. Stepping out on faith, the stage had been set and a sense of relief and anxiety occurred 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 to leave Memphis, the past would diminish. Looking at another perspective, there were so many unanswered questions. If I were to inquire for answers, the moved would have become more complicated. At this time realizing my confused 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 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, to turn the page for the next chapter 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 arriving in Chicago at 1:00 am in the morning. This was the 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 the first stop to get food and 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. 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. Moving to Chicago was not discussed or even a part of any conversation.

The thoughts that occurred to add some logic to the move, John was thought of often as I prepared to leave home. Being the good guy that I knew and thinking maybe he might support the idea of helping me adjust to Chicago and be the catalyst to start a new life. This rationale sounded logical; however, those words were never spoken out loud when I spoke to him by phone before leaving Memphis. Now Chicago was the challenge. Rather than allow loneliness and feeling abandoned, I made another personal phone call to John; excited to talk again, reminiscing our past, I informed him that I had moved to Chicago. Somewhat shocked of my arrival, the next day he came to visit. Our conversation lasted for hours revealing and bring him up to date in terms of my situation, he quickly realized I was literally homeless. Without hesitation or questioning the stupidity of this idea, he offered a solution to the problem. We went for a ride and stopped at this big court way building near 63rd Street 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 inside. The bathroom was the common area everyone used 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 a future life.

This was considered the turning point in my life! I paused to remember that it was time for me to examine the negative forces I imagined getting in the way of success in Memphis. That process required that I looked in the mirror and inspected or dissected the flaws, weaknesses, and struggles that kept me bound. As I started the examination process, first and foremost, my parents loved me dearly as their youngest girl, somewhat unusual and different from the others. Looking back, they were overly protective and perhaps baffled at this odd child that was among the children they had reproduced. The disconnect was based on my personality of being a misfit in a limited social segregated society that I did not understand as well as living in poverty; another sign of the time living in the fifties.

Yes, daddy was a pain in the rear sometimes, but he was our provider. Looking for excuses, the real struggle may have been trying to live a double life as “Jackie”. in reality, “Jackie”, a non-existing person was the nickname that protected internal conflicts 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 disliked and lacking constant encouragement, guaranteed failure. My family had no blame or shame in my departure, and it caused no discord in the family unit. As I reflect, personal flaws were uncovered that I had to overcome to move forward. 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 to leave or was it God’s plan to plant the seed early on for me to go and grow? As I made the transformation 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. Building** **confidence; Finding my way**

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, a new beginning had to be discovered and embraced. To gain momentum for a new purpose, an identity crisis presented itself immediately. Since birth, “Jackie Brown”, was the name used as if it were my legal identity. A brief description of Jackie: a girl from a dysfunctional family according to most psychological assessment and, by my own assessment, exhibited maladjusted behavior at times. Jackie was rarely serious but humorous, funny, avoiding questions about family, and other personal issues. These characteristics provided an escape mechanism to cope with the gaps and discontentment’s of life. On another note, deep down inside unknowingly Louise, in her own world, was always trying to discover a purpose or plan to deal with people and how to escape an environment she did not understand. At that period of time, in the fifties, the pathways available were leading to nowhere for Louise, yet she survived. Baffled with the names, Chicago at this stage offered opportunities and the real challenge was, defining self and becoming Louise. Until I changed my name, changed my pace and changed my thinking with a new perspective everything would remain the same.

Tough questions had to be answered immediately. Louise Elizabeth Brown, my birth name was 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 the sandbox of poverty. What name to use was not the question? To get a job and a social security card, I had to become “Louise” putting the past behind to develop 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, no excuses or exceptions.

Memphis became a closed chapter in my life. Employment, in Chicago, was the first order of business and I quickly learned that poverty was universal. Poverty was not a condition that could be ignored or run away from. It’s a condition that had to be confronted and focused on ways to overcome. Wow! This was a brutal reality check. The pathway to failure was clear as day with little or no income, but failure was not an option.

It was time to figure it out and not think of the situation or poverty as a generational curse. Becoming Louise changed my action and my thinking to adjust to new opportunities. My expectations changed as well if I were going to create a new life in Chicago; therefore, learning how to cultivate Louise was a priority. The transformation did not come over night. Jackie had run out and was on auto pilot, not only was a tune-up needed but a complete overall for a new way of life was inevitable to occur to become Louise.

Louise stepped up to become the woman she had dreamed of for a better life and $19.00 was invested wisely to stay the course. A new start consisted of owning and developing the personality of Louise to stay focus and keep the faith to achieve success in a big city of unknowns. It was time for my intellectual skills 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 ran out. Louise shifted gears, becoming a work in progress, working on every aspect of her life. There were a few areas residing within that desperately needed restoration to reach for the unreachable and to attain the unattainable. Apparently in retrospect, it was necessary to 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 adopted for future success. In the meantime, employment was the top priority just to survive, to break the generational curses without the support of the people who passed it on.

The essence of time was important, and a day consisted of going thru a makeover to keep pushing forward as Louise to find a job. During my transitional period, I invested $3.00 in carfare to go to interviews. Three days later, hired at Alden’s Catalog Company making $40.00 a week. Travel time consisted of two hours to work using public transportation, riding two buses, and two trains, leaving home at 6:00 a.m. to arrive by 8:00 a.m. Learning to navigate around the city using public transportations, and the crowded subways were overwhelming initially. Many times, I went to asleep on the bus and missed my stop. To continue this journey, i constantly remind myself that this was the way of life to live in the big city, staying focused and staying the course was an absolute necessity.

Finding strength and faith to overcome my fear of hardships had become a way of life to endure all the different challenges with so little income. Refusing handouts, working parttime, and spending more time with John was somewhat encouraging and rewarding. Determined to live a better life, I quickly learned that the struggle was real, and poverty had no specific location. At this stage of life all the excuses created in my mind about 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 the desires were serious to create new beginnings, trusting Him was the answer.

The place with little hope and limited support no longer existed. Positive thoughts replaced negative ideas of the past. My parents fulfilled their responsibilities by providing food, clothing, and shelter. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Need was revealed, and self-actualization was to be accomplished by me and become the norm. God appeared at the level of my expectation! If I wanted more out of life, I had to expect more and do more to achieve more. It was no longer my parents’ responsibility. The phrase “If it is to be, it’s up to me”, reminded me that hard work, determination, a new lifestyle and becoming Louise was an extraordinary process to refuel and replace old habits. My family, especially Mom was missed greatly and sometimes I felt all alone but these were random thoughts. Becoming sophisticated, self-sufficient and a mature young lady was not easy, and the new pathway was just getting started. A new calling had been placed on my life which required a new name, new approach to life along with developing a daily prayer life, seeking answers from God and trusting Him. As time moved on, I thanked God, the move to Chicago became the biggest challenge I had 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 only a 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 expected, loving, kindhearted, giving 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, and desirable to be together, we became lovers. Humble and lonely 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 could have been shattered when I learned of the outcome of our actions.

Another defining moment, another valley had come that caused tears to cascade down my face and sadden my soul. I became pregnant and my heart was troubled because this was not a part of the plan, and especially to put another burden on him or me. The situation was a mystery to both of us and unexpected, yet he accepted the challenge of becoming a father, to stand up to his responsibilities and do the right thing. I was willing to take the chance for love. 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”. Our rational would not have been acceptable, and as the old folks would say, “If you lay down with dogs, you may come up with fleas, and if you lay down with a man you may come up with a baby”. Looking for someone to blame or just come up with an excuse that made sense for this to happen, wreaked havoc on my nervous system. I remained grateful for all the support and willingness John exhibited to help me keep my sanity. More importantly, God’s grace became eminent. “I Corinthians 10:13, There hath no temptation taken you, but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it”.

Thinking out loud for some justification, years later, I pondered if this were God’s plan for me to come to Chicago to connect with the man who cared, protected, and showered his loved in spite of the negative situation that could have become a potential disaster. Perhaps this was a way to escape our demise and the beginning of many battles that had to be won in order to win the war of marriage. Anxiety along with the thought of marriage and a baby sent chilled down my spine being unprepared to be a wife and especially a mother. God was still working on me to become Louise. Lesson learned, when you are broken, fragile and/or venerable, never put yourself in way of temptation or compromising positions. Confused and devasted, knowing life will continue to go on in spite of the situation, It was time to go see Mom. I once read, “Always find the path to the people who made you who you are”. The timing was perfect, to rely on family to overshadow any pain and embrace everyone with open arms.

**Chapter 6. A new** **beginning;** **perseverance and rejoicing through storms**. Unconditional love when you need it the most was the greeting received from the family. Mom’s face brought joy to my heart and peace to my soul. The time had come to deal openly with the situation and move on to the next steps focusing on the future of the life that was growing inside of me. The top priority for this unpredictable unexpected visit was to share the unpleasant circumstances with them.

Before arrival, I rehearsed the conversation John and I shared previously regarding our situation, keeping in mind, he nor I had planned for a baby or had money to pay for a wedding. We were just settling down and gaining momentum working together to get out of the survival mode. Therefore, it was decided before we took that leap of faith, do some soul searching of the situation at hand and wait until enough money was saved to get married and get another apartment. How was I going to convey this message to the family when it was complicated and complex with so many variables? Tattered and torn, home was the best place to calm my spirit, and get refreshed by mama’s love.

Witnessing the excitement on Daddy and Mom’s face as they asked questions that were easily answered was encouraging. Before I could get the courage to discuss the situation in terms of possibly needing help, the baby or potentially needing to move back home, I received a phone call from Alden’s Catalog Co. in Chicago offering me a full-time position. Accepting the job positioned me to refrain from telling the family the full story of what had transpired in my life. The conversations were much brighter with a different twist. Secrets were hard to keep so I revealed to them that marriage was on the horizon, and they would receive more information later. With a full time, job waiting, it was time to return to Chicago. After arriving home, in private, I took time to thank God for making provision to move forward with a job, get an apartment of our own to live together as man and wife legally. Again, God’s timing was perfect, and He made provisions providing opportunities for us to do the right thing. Amazingly, the stage was set for us to have the strength to endure the hardships or obstacles with God as the guide, The problem had become an opportunity. There were different dynamics to contend with working together in unity. Love and understanding as a team were the essential components that gave us faith to stand together to make a difference and persevere thru our storms. A small wedding was held, with close family only, and the ceremony was performed, by my Uncle who lived in Chicago Heights. He was so excited to see us join together in matrimony; I am absolutely certain he called my daddy to let him know everything. Reflecting on our premarital counseling, as we were building our family, for some reason this scripture touched every fiber within and had taken residence in my heart: “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. Aspiring to be a wise woman was the intent to start a new life, to communication positively with my husband and give some purpose to our future.

Months later, as a wife with a supportive and understanding husband, introduction to motherhood two months early with our first child was emotional, exciting and the beginning of a new chapter. Adjusting and learning some of the basic things as a wife and mother, twenty years old, working as well, fatigue and exhaustion became the norm. Captivated and enthralled with our beautiful healthy baby boy I was inspired and energized every time I looked at him smiling, getting acquainted with his new surroundings, and later calling me Mom. Super excited about the arrival of his son, the three of us were breaking new ground and building the family’s foundation. My extended family in Chicago Heights, Illinois provided emotional and moral support and kept our little boy as we continued to work. It was a blessing to have family near to allow the little one to be cared for and loved in our absence.

An expected surprise happened two and a half years later in 1962 our second son arrived on the scene. John was elated and not concerned about the impact two children would have on the family’s income. Adjusting to a new baby and a two-year-old was a big challenge. We were steadily building a foundation for the family, yet it was a struggle to accomplish everything some days. Nonetheless, I was not going to confuse my past failures with my present challenges. The young girl from Memphis never asked for help. Living in Chicago with no immediate family, working with two babies, I adamantly admitted needing help. The time had come to recognize the importance of family and the value of family relationships. Seeking solutions, I talked to Mom encouraging 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, Wow! This was not a good idea. Well Mom thought it was, my oldest brother came to live with us temporarily and soon after the two younger brothers joined our family. They all chose to stay and find jobs to be near to help us since I had no other immediate family in Chicago. **The** brothers I hardly ever asked for advice joined our family, now able to see me, recognizing my maturity and willing to support our agenda. My brothers encouraged and inspired me to become more determined and dedicated to have the will power to stay focus and endure. I, in turn became their encourager and catalyst for new beginnings. Their presence brought a sense of belonging, family fun, and a reminder of the importance of family. As the years passed, we were blessed with two sisters-in-laws, and two nieces who stayed at our home every weekend expanding the Coleman/ Brown’s Chicago clan. This was also the beginning of us opening up our apartment and later on our home to other relatives who wanted to migrate to Chicago to live.

Moving on, It was great having brothers in Chicago, baby sitting and spoiling the babies yet there were other issues I needed to resolve within our household. Owning up to the notion that working with two children was problematic. John preferred his children stay home, supported the idea, and willing to work two jobs to make it happen. However, my idea was to keep working even though it was a big challenge, packing the boys to go to the babysitters house every day, riding the bus and El trains for hours. Our routine and rhythm were good and manageable until Chicken Pox, colds, illnesses, and other problems plagued the little ones. After missing many days of work, immediately changed my mind and resigned. It was time for me to take care of our children.

As time passed, parenting skills were greatly improved, even though being a stay-at-home mom, was difficult at best. Everyday there was a new and different challenge. My youngest son loved to eat, very active an energetic while his brother was calm and helped to keep him calm. Baby food was a life saver until they needed regular food. They kept me busy, alert and worn out at the end of the day. Some days, I admonished myself for the many missed opportunities I had to learn more about cooking growing up. Looking back was not reasonable at this time! Discarding all of the sentimental reasons, I had to feed the family and overcome the major personal flaw that had kept me bound, the mental block of cooking.

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 were all able to 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 humiliating and heartbreaking according to John’s aunt that a southern girl could not cook, and the constant reminder was irritating. Consequently, I had to try to LEARN HOW TO COOK even though my husband and my small children accepted the fact that cooking was not my forte.They quickly understood that my cooking sucked for real. Over time, together we weathered many storms, self-perseveration helped improve cooking skills. Calling on my brothers when needed was also a plus, especially the one who could cook. Four years after marriage, like most young couple, we were still working on building our family. Being the astute man he was, John recognized other potentials I exhibited as well as my discontentment.

As a stay-at-home Mom I was frustrated at times and sometimes irritated with the notion I was unable to work and contribute financially. The good news was John was proud of how I excellently managed the household finances, taking care the children, family chores, business, and setting priorities for the family. Apparently, he understood the mental block with cooking, while considering the importance of daily keeping the family solvent with minimum wages. Being frugal, staying within our budget was my specialty and everything was pretty stable. Stability was great for this stage of our life. Looking ahead, to the future did not look promising if everything remained the same.

Life’s challenges were overwhelming especially when I felt inadequate and unable to do anything about it. Satan was busy attacking my thoughts causing fear and frustration to dominate my thinking. Negative thoughts created negative actions or reactions. Married life was good, adjusting to unforeseen circumstances were difficult but expected. There were no books or advice on being the perfect wife or the perfect mother. Perfection was what I was striving for stretching myself to do the impossible, `pushing and yearning to do more and wanting more with little to offer. I learned to be patient, content and grateful for everything God had done in our lives.

To a great extent, married was good and satisfing with a wonderful hardworking, loving husband and two adorable sons, with a nice apartment was somewhat promising also. Thinking ahead, sometimes separating the poverty I ran away from with the challenges currently experienced living paycheck to paycheck was difficult. The enemy was trying to steal my joy! Instantly I revisited the scripture in Proverb 14:1 that was stapled in my heart”. A wise woman builds her house but with her own hands, a foolish woman tears hers down”. Without a doubt the time had come to change my thinking, and not allow negative thoughts enter my mind. Otherwise, I was becoming the foolish woman tearing down our house with my own 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 being frustrated and 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 our situation.

**Chapter 7, Living our best life**

After much prayer John convinced me that it was time for me to return to college to get a reputable job to supplement his income especially if I wanted more and to stop living from paycheck to paycheck. I sincerely believed in hindsight, he, too wanted more and returning to college getting a degree would give us more leverage to attain our goal to own a house one day. It would also reduce the financial burden in the future and dismiss the idea as a chronic complainer. Concerned with my frustration, I can only imagine what John was really thinking when he was away at work. Perhaps wondering if I were going to burn the house down trying to cook or harm our children trying to take care of them and cook at the same time. These are the toxic thoughts I had to disregard and think positively, affirming the sincerity of the need to get an education.

The time had come to grasp the idea of maturity, complete the task of becoming Louise and learn how to live a better life. The immature young girl, “Jackie”, who did not know enough to take advantage of the opportunities facing the future disappeared. Finally, as Louise, it made sense, the key to unlock the doors of opportunities was education along with remembering mama’s 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 the idea that I had to return to school and leave my babies, No! I understood the concept and accepted the challenge, of working harder to be the change for God to change the situation!

Action was taken immediately gearing up for our new adventure. In 1964, I officially became a college student, a wife, a mom, and everything was coming together for our good. John worked two jobs, kept the kids during the day while I attended Chicago Teachers College. Transportation was a problem initially because driving in Chicago was not on the agenda. To resolve this issue john quickly taught me to drive. We were on a mission, determined to get the job done, nervous and afraid I braced myself, learned to drive on the Dan Ryan Expressway; in the end earning my license to drive. Desperate measures required desperate actions.

As I attended school John became the expert changing diapers, babysitting our two-year-old and four-year-old getting up in the middle of the night if he heard a whimper. Established routines, with parameters set for housework, homework, preparing the boys to be cared for as well as spend time together helped us to persevere. 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.

Four years later, we reached a milestone, in 1968 I graduated from Chicago Teachers college and was hired for a teaching position in Chicago Public Schools. Immediately, it was time to celebrate. The boys went to Memphis to spend the summer with their grandparents to give us a break. Apartment living was good, the time had come to find a place we could call our home!

Being skilled in finance, we bought our first house in 1970. These defining moments were the highlights of our marriage that gave us something to shout about with tears of joy. John and the boys rejoiced and were very proud of me as wife and mother. Matured and as a wise woman, helped to build a foundation for the family to ease the burden of living from paycheck to paycheck with renewed expectations. Look at God, our situation changed after I changed. There was no room for Jackie Brown except for John, personally he fell in love with Jackie and he helped to mold and shape Louise. In the meantime, Mrs. Louise E. Coleman adopted a new lifestyle that qualified her to walk, talk and dress according to the new role as teacher. It was encouraging as a team to focused on family, supporting each other, and taking care of our sons occupied our thoughts to forge ahead.

Living in our own home was rewarding and as well as refreshing. Waking up every day in peace turn our world around with no landlord to contend with or listen to their complaints. The next phase was to get acquainted with the neighborhood, decorate the house and enjoy our fenced in backyard which was ideal for the boys to play and have fun. Together we created a lovely home and most of the neighbors thought we were too young to be the parents of our big and tall sons. As time passed, our home became the home for the kids in the neighborhood and they looked at our family as the Huxtables! **In hindsight**, we were professionals, a Businessman and an educator leaving home daily for work with our brief cases and dropping the boys off at school was probably quite impressionable for a young family our age during the seventies.

The boys and their father were very close and heavily involved in sports. John was intentional; he planned our events and kept us engaged and involved in everything possible. Organizing the family’s activities, we all had to select our favorite sport; Tennis was my lifelong sport. Football, basketball, and swimming were their sports. When the boys were in grammar school their father would volunteer as the room parent. Generally, that role was for room mothers. Most of the time I was working or in school; it did not matter John Coleman was always with his boys. Being with the boys all the time also created a challenged for him. Many ladies thought he was a single parent raising two boys consequently, I had to step-up my game show up on the scene sometimes to claim my property, my husband.

With his big smile, he was always elated to see me arrive on the scene looking good. Attending the boys sport events and just being present made him feel proud of his family and protected him from unwarranted accusations.

Watching the boys grow up interacting with their father was amazing: engaging in every aspect of their lives consumed his existence. The rule of thumb; if you keep your mother happy, we will have a happy home. Sounds familiar, daddy’s influence, different situation. When daddy was happy our home was happy.

Many sacrifices were made, and our goal was to create an environment for the boys to have a safe place to live and attend good schools. Adamant about proving a good education for the boy, private schools were the best options.

The boys attended Catholic School to prevent them from becoming latchkey kids. Getting a job as a teacher gave me the opportunity to take them to school and pick them up after school. Catholic Schools also mandated that all students attend Mass. With that in mind, John and the boys were baptized and became members of St. Bride’s Catholic Church. The boys were Alter Boys and served at weddings, funerals, and other special activities until they were in high school, attending Mendel Catholic Preparatory High school. Their father was their greatest supporter, actively involved as President of Mendel’s father Club, Football coach, a dependable volunteer for many school events. Often John was on the football field interfering with other coaches calling the game, especially if he thought it was a bad call against his sons. On the other hand I was present to cheer them on, keep them away from the girls that surround them after the games and to make sure they came home. It was amazing to think how I was manipulated by the boys and their father to give them more freedom to go out on dates with their friends. The family’s greatest asset was communication and a top priority. Love and respect permeated our home, and the truth had to be told regardless of the situation. There was no place for strict rigid rules! We allowed them to become independent and self-reliant at an early age since they demonstrated that they could be trusted to tell the truth if something occurred. After they learned how to drive, Chicago was not a challenge. They, too, were off to the races going on dates, games and other activities. They understood the city and could navigate and find any place in Chicago. Watching them grow, graduate and go off to college was heartwarming, exciting and filled with a little anxiety to see the boys all grown up and become young men.

John was not only a great father to his son, he also was the father to most of the young boys who were fatherless, paying for them to play little league baseball and attending countless other events to keep them engaged in positive actives. Most of the young boys believed they could call on Mr. Coleman anytime and he would be there for them. Our home became their home, a place where they were loved and safe. Words are not adequate to describe John Coleman’s actions. His fingerprints and personality touched the lives of so many boys and families in general. John was unique and somewhat mystifying in showing up helping others leaving lasting impressions on all the lives he touched. He loved life and lived it accordingly.

As a family and as we extended our home to others, we were living our best life, going to museums, restaurants sharing our evening together, enjoying John’s big ideas, jokes, and big plans for the family. Sometimes I had to reel him in to remind him that we still needed to be conservative in our spending. He was the big spender, ecstatic that I was employed, he did not hesitate to take me shopping to buy clothes and buy my first new Fairlane Ford 500 red car. We were pretty consistent in our journey, working, raising the boys, participating in their activities and attending church. John was an outstanding father and a wonderful husband who loved his family. He was my greatest supporter, security blanket, friend, confidant and he took pride in showing his love in every way possible. I imagined he saw me as a diamond in the ruff, needing to be polished, and buffed to get rid of the jaggered or uneven edges to sparkle and crown me as his queen to sit on his throne. John Coleman, the highlight of my existence was the most critical defining moment and the best thing that ever happened in my life was to become his wife and the mother of his children.

Continuing to be faithful as a family, God was present in our home, and we serve Him by giving our service to the church and attending Sunday worship. Born and raised in the Church of Christ Holiness Doctrine, I never joined the Catholic Church. Second Temple Church of Christ Holiness was the church I attended. To keep from separating the family we went to Mass together to avoid confusion and they went to church with me on special occasions. It was the best decision at the time to keep peace, love, and God in our home.

**Chapter 8. My Educational journey**

Focused on the family led to accomplishing one of the most important goals of life’s journey, completing my education. Financial stability broadened the scope of the family’s ability to move forward and enjoy the sacrifices made during this season. Education was the catalyst for change and the necessary component to give purpose to live our best life. With education at the forefront, it consumed every spare minute of the day before and after graduations. The big step was preparing for my first assignment in 1968, that brought on sleepless night and I was unable to shut down my brain thinking about how I was going to approach students and staff. Pacification and encouragement from the family gave me courage and confidence to get the job done.

In my quest to succeed every theory regarding education was explored in preparation for this season of my educational journey. Arriving early at Raymond school was filled with anxiety and excitement. Raymond School was located in the Inner City of Chicago in an unfamiliar location which cause some serious anxiety. Finally, employment was a part of a routine that was being established and added 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 them. Every student walked in the room bright eyed and full of energy. Bell to bell planning was on the board as I proceeded to introduce myself. Chatter was going on as if a teacher were not present. A precious memory occurred on the first day of school when one student refused to stop talking and continued to disrupt the class. Flashback of my elementary school days reminded me of my behavior in school.

It did not take long to recognize the leader of the group who was seeking attention. He and I had a special confrontation and afterwards he understood that foolishness was not tolerated. A few weeks of exploration in term of how to gain control of the class’s behavior and teach at the same time required more attention and additional work. I rolled up my sleeves and let the class know a little information about my background. Eventually, they settled down and teaching students at Raymond were some of the best days spent in the classroom. After the first year I was asked to join the sixth-grade teachers who were very selective and popular for achieving great student outcomes. Teaching was fun and it brought back so many memories of the days I attend elementary school seeking attention.

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. My students won Science Fair awards, joined the Young Authors, participated in broadways plays in school, and gained great academic achievement to excel and attend competitive schools to continue their educational journey.

The greatest joy was seeing the students faces light up when they enjoyed being engaged in learning and having fun as they became great students. Many field trips were planned as culminating experiences. However, the most valuable field trip was taking the class downtown to an event to complete the study of Chicago. Overwhelmed and amazed to see all the stores and activities had a chilling effect and a defining moment in the history of teaching at Raymond School. All of the students lived approximate fifteen or 20 minutes from downtown Chicago, yet they had never been downtown Chicago, which was an opportunity of a lifetime.

The Teacher of the Year was the first award I received for excellence in education in 1983 and many other awards and recognitions followed. Many defining moments 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 educational journey and life in general. Several students stayed in touch before Facebook now many students make contact via Facebook. More importantly, one of my six grade students sent birthday cards starting in 1983, keeping me updated with his career and other events and we communicate as of today.. These are the precious memories that I love and cherish as a teacher. Education became my passion even though it 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 anAdministrative Certification to have the option of becoming a principal in Chicago Public Schools or the State of Illinois. 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 was the highlight of graduation. My youngest brother was a bonus for their travel; he, too, was graduating from Chicago Teachers College. Celebrating with my parents was the most valuable memory of these events; My Uncle and his family came aswell, and it was an awesome memorable occasion.

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: Perhaps he understood that leaving Memphis was good for me as evidenced in the success accomplished. Growing up, I appeared to be a misfit in search of self and apparently no one understood that but mama. In the moment, it was great to see my parents proud of the journey at this stage of my life. Mama and daddy prayed for us and were grateful that God 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 with them and i remembered all the sacrifices they 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 more leverage in becoming a school superintendent or college professor. The boys had grownup and were attending college, therefore, more time was available to continue my educational endeavors. In the interim, my oldest son was sowing his seeds during his first year of college and an unexpected, little three-month-old baby girl was brought over to visit who was introduced as our granddaughter. Rather than describe this life changing events in detail, in essence she became the love of her granddad’s life and he committed to raising her so that her parents could finish college. My silent rebelliousmood was clearly understood that I was going to complete my career goals, and arrangement were made to include her in our home.

Living up to the goal of continuing the educational journey that captured every fiber of my being, Out of 600 applicants, 50 were accepted and I was one of the 50 accepted in the Doctoral Administrative Program at the University of Illinois in Urbana as the only 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, the Professors advised me that I would be dropped from the program if I did not become a current administrator. In other words, I would have 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. Encouraged by the family, and the favor of God, I accepted principalship in Joliet in 1986.

As I climbed the ladder of success, it was a great time for all including our sons who were grownup, and independent. When they were homequality time wasspent around the dinner table debating options for them and debriefing our day**.**

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 very good. Working together, Louise had become the change and God changed the situation: she became classy, smart, confident and on the move. We were reaping the benefits of our hard work, determination, and sacrifices. God’s blessings were overflowing. We learned how to face our ups and down, heartaches and pain and by the grace of God we were doing well.

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, Taft school students earned top scores in state. Thanks to our teachers and leaders, Taft School test scores ranked in the top category in the State of Illinois. In 1989, as the Principal, I was awarded the Illinois Distinguished Educator Award with a $25,000.00 prize personally attached. My career was skyrocketing. Imagine a Black women who came to Joliet with no experience as a Principal and three years later her name had become a household name. Compliments were coming from organizations across Will County, Resolutions from Politicians, parents and other educational organizations and universities as well! Symbolically, I had reached the mountain top of Mount Everest, the highest peak in my world! It seemed as though God was testing my faith and strength to see if I were still trusting Him and standing on His promise to never leave nor forsake me! Indeed, I was giving Him glory for all the things he had done in my life!

**Chapter 9. Fatal Tragedy 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, shining bright illustrated the effects of an excellent educational program under my leadership. imagine the excitement and absorbing the totality of the events that followed symbolically of reaching the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

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

It was the most devastating news ever encountered. Slowly the mountain top disappeared, the rainbow was covered with dark clouds, and I began to slide down the mountain ending in the lowest valley of darkness with no light in site. Trying to understand the peak and valley occurring at the same time was overwhelming. After receiving the award as one of Illinois Distinguished Educators other doors were opened, I was offered the position of superintendent of Joliet Public Schools. Uncertain and filled with doubt the only thing available was prayer to comprehend the offer considering 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 my proud husband attended the ceremonies even thought he was weak after having surgery. After much discussion and still uncertain John continued to encourage me to accept 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 regarding his health as I watched a physical change in his appearance and a gradual slowdown of his activities.

Remarkably, we were very hopeful initially, everyone was praying for healing; it looked promising at first as he received radiation and chemo treatments.

John’s health steadily declined, as he continued to have more surgeries. It was surreal watching how much strength and fortitude he exhibited with his body consumed with pain. Curiosity caused me to question his physician as to why he wasn’t getting better when I observed his ashen skin turn dark, nauseous, and lethargic condition intensified. By John request I had been denied the right to know that my husband was terminally ill. Determined to keep us motivated, stay grounded, and in good spirit, John failed to inform us of the seriousness of his condition. The doctors had given him 6 months to live. In a state of shock, I wanted to regurgitate and felt helpless, and unable to 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 with 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 alone increased. Imagine sitting on the bedside, helpless, watching your husband fade away with the endless pain and the rapid spread of the uncontrollable disease. The nights were like a recurring nightmare and the days resembled a race against time.

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 alone. 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. Determined 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 how 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 next goal, for me to continue to be successful and become completely independent as a Black woman. As he **lie** dying, his major concerned and last request was for me to accept 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, but God whispered, “I can’t give up now. I have come to far from where I started from, nobody told me the road would be easy, so I don’t believe God brought me this far to leave me”!

Pressing for answers and a solution regarding the superintendency, on John’s deathbed, he gave me permission to accept the job as superintendent. In January 1990, I was hired as the first Black Superintendent in Joliet and the first Black woman Superintend of Will County. Somehow, I persevered, traveling thru the snowstorms to and from work praying all the way to Joliet. The team of doctors prescribed different types of medications, radiation, and visits to cancer centers for special treatment. The cancer had metastasized in his body, no more surgeries 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 championed the opportunity to care for him and we 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 increased my faith and strength to endure to celebrate his life as he transitioned. The greatest tragedy occurred on July 21, 1990, one year later after being diagnosed, he made his transition.

Grieved, weary, lost and falling apart, 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. With only six months as Superintendent, It was a lonely 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 focused and 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, miracles happened. I preformed the duties like a professional should and continued to do well on the job. Sleepless nights, filled with grief became the norm at home. Weight loss was becoming noticeable and some of my close 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”, know that I am God; I have never failed you.” Frightened by the voice, looking around the room, scared, and bewildered; this incident caused me to turn the corner. Instead of weeping day and night, I learned to sing in silence, rejoice and thank God for all he had done in our lifetime together. Eventually, with much prayer, two best friends, my dear cousin who was also experiencing the loss of her husband and my prayer warriors/ storm sisters, rallied around me to comfort and console to ease the pain. Reminded of an author who proclaimed that “When someone is broken, don’t try to fix them. (You cannot). When someone is hurting, don’t attempt to takeaway the pain. (You cannot), Instead love them by walking beside them in the hurt. (You can) Because sometimes what people need is simply to know they are not alone,” (Jenny Albers).

With these absolute true statements, I began to thank God for my friends who help me to understand I was not alone and thank God for His goodness and how he had blessed our family with a godly man who dearly loved us and

God. 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. As you review in brief, my bio at the end of the book will outline my career as the first Black Superintendent filled with many successes, awards, and recognitions. The life of the first Black Superintendent is a book to be written later, “Survival of the fittest”. As I ponder thoughts. God was and is my refuse and a very present help in the time of troubled. John Coleman left many imprints for many people and his spirit still occupy the front row seat in our hearts. He was the vessel/servant God used to transform my life. This amazing godly man completed his earthly journey according to God’s will. He taught me how to become an accomplished, respected lady, poised with grace, 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 he would be proud to know that I honored his request ending with a successful career as superintendent until retirement in 2000. I found 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 had I 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 an independent widow for 10 years, in 2000, I retired as superintendent after a rewarding career and a handsome retirement package to began a new career at two universities, Lewis University and Governor’s State University for 12 years. At the same time, I joined the HYA/ ECRA Group as a Senior associate and became a National Educational consultant traveling across the country supporting school districts in finding superintendents. To end this chapter of my life, I met Dr. Kenneth Freeman, an educator, who captured my attention by attending board meetings, appearing at social events and relentless in his pursuit of happiness! This was the start of another series of life changing events!

**Reflections**

Faith was the journey that I had to pursue and follow as directed. Reflecting on my childhood days many people assumed that I was going to become a statistic, filled with baby mama drama like so many project girls are labeled. Leaving home abruptly created quite a stir in our church family because of the unknowns. With my Mother’s love, determined and destined to do well gave me the courage to step out on faith to find my way. Never give up on your dreams, stay focused and stay the course. As of today, it is hard to conceived that I actually left home at 19 years old with 19 dollars in my possession to start a new life in a big city like Chicago. In brief I was just an ordinary person, living an ordinary life who opted to take an extraordinary adventure in a different state where test and trials awaits. My legacy has been established as I transitioned from Jackie to Louise to become a wife, mother, and an outstanding educator. What I desire the most is to be remembered as a faithful servant of God who stood the test of time, who was willing to share her blessings with other and was able to overcome the hardships and the harsh realities of life by keeping the faith that God was always on my side. With the wisdom gained from the knowledge learned from the Word of God I persevered! The rest is written!

Notable Events: snapshot in time

Married in 1961, returned to college with two small children in 1964

Received Bachelor of Science in 1968 and Masters in 1980, Doctorate in 1994.

Obtained Two Administrative Certificates in 1983 and 1988

Professional Experience:

Teacher in Chicago Public Schools 1968-1986

Principal; Joliet Public Schools !986 -1989

Superintendent; Joliet Public Schools !989-2000

Assistant Adjunct Professor; Lewis University 2000-20006

Adjunct Professor Governor’s State University 2006- 2012

National Educational Consultant 1994 to Present

Hearing Officers: 2000 to Present

Numerous Awards: Highlighting a few

Lifetime Achievement Award: Lewis University, 2002

Rainbow Push, Joliet Affiliate Award, 2001, Roger Osman Award-Distinguished Service Award, 2000. Superintendent of the Year Award -1999, National Alliance of Black School Educators. Christian Women of Excellent 1998. Athena Award 1992 and National Hook-Up of Black Women 1992

Illinois Distinguished Educator Award 1989, The Black Woman Hall of Fame

Foundation 1988, Kizzy Award 1988, Phenomenal Women Award-NAACP 1984

Appeared on channel 7 Documentary “Schools that Works”, 1988

Governor’s Master Teacher Award 1983