

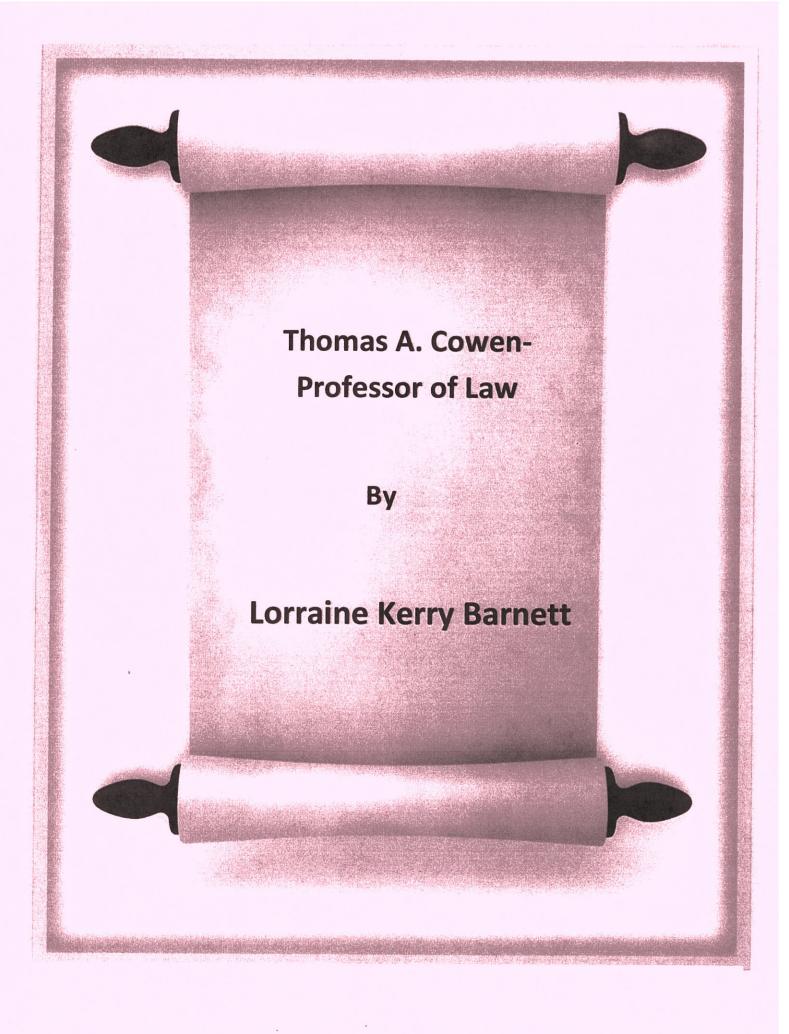
Essex County Division of Senior Services 2021 Legacies Writing Contest Winning and Honorable Mention Stories

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Thomas A. Cowan-Professor of Law

I attended Rutgers University- School of Law in Newark, New Jersey, from 1970 to 1974. I did not find it easy. Aside from personal distractions and needs, I realized that I would have to learn a new language that was as foreign to me as French or Spanish. I had not had any previous exposure to the law. Some of my colleagues had come from families that had a tradition of law practice. Several were already working in a parent's law firm and just going through the motions of making it official. I specifically recall one of my classmates being the son of a United States Congressman. The competition was brutal. The large law firms would readily snap up someone who was connected in that way. It could lead to government contracts for legal services and sundry other financially rewarding benefits. Unfortunately, I did not fall into that category, but I still had something to offer. I would work hard, I had integrity. I was loyal and committed. None of these character traits were reflected in my resume.

Deciding to go to law school was a huge leap of faith for me. Before I actually started attending, I remember meeting one of the law students in a cafe on campus. She was a beautiful black woman, who carried herself with such poise and dignity, that I was immediately impressed by her. Her name was Geneva Stanford. I joined her at her table, and she was kind enough to take a little time with me while having her lunch. Our meeting was brief but impactful. I doubt if she ever realized how much those few minutes meant in helping me to make the decision to pursue law as a career. I never told her but I should

have.

My view of attorneys was framed by the media. Should I admit that, at the time, I was naive enough to be strongly influenced by the way things appeared on TV and in the media? Well, if we are honest, we will probably all have to admit that we allow the media to frame our opinions more than we should. I thought that all attorneys were great orators, loud talking and articulate. I saw myself as somewhat reserved, quiet and non-confrontational. Was I really up to the challenge? I expressed my reservation to Geneva and she gave me an answer that became emblazoned in my mind.

"Geneva," I ventured, "I'm not sure I would make it as a lawyer. I don't really talk much."

She answered me with conviction. "Lawyers aren't talkers, they're thinkers!"

With that I was given the boost I needed to move forward. So I attended law school and graduated with the Juris Doctor degree in 1974. The four years that I spent pursuing the degree were very challenging years, but I made it. I married, miscarried, and had my first child all while in law school.

By now you're wondering, "Who is Thomas A. Cowan?" Well, he was one of the professors at the law school. I did not have a class with Professor Cowan, but we did have occasion to converse from time to time. The open door policy that characterized the atmosphere at Rutgers, seemed to set it apart from other institutions of higher learning that were stuffy and formal to a fault.

Professor Cowan was a gentle and kind person who made you think of Santa on a weight loss program. He had a hearty, infectious laugh and piercing blue eyes that sparkled. Even when he was serious, his eyes seemed to laugh. His white hair and beard were always neatly trimmed and he was very welcoming and approachable.

One day, during one of our conversations, Professor Cowan said to me, "My wife and I have more money than we sometimes know what to do with."

I don't recall what we were discussing at the time, but that particular comment would not be forgotten. I was tempted to say, "If you don't know what to do with your money, I have a few ideas." I didn't say it. That would have been very inappropriate, not to mention tacky. I didn't know anyone else, personally, who could make that claim. As for me, it seemed that I never had enough money. There was always a need, and it seemed that I was always juggling my limited funds to prioritize and ascertain which need would be addressed first.

Anyway, it was 1977. I had been out of law school for three years and was practicing at Newark Legal Services. Legal Services was a federally funded law firm that provided free representation to the poor in civil cases. My husband, Lee, was working during the day and attending Rutgers Newark at night in pursuit of the bachelors degree. To say that we were struggling would be an understatement. We were both working, but our salaries were woefully inadequate for a family of 5 that was still growing. In addition to everyday expenses, we had the additional expenses of child care, student loans, and transportation to get us to and from work. To compound matters, I was pregnant with our 4th child who

was due in February of 1978.

We were crowded into a small apartment and needed more room. We had been turned away from many larger apartments. Sometimes it was because they did not want to rent to blacks. Of course they could not say that, but we were told that the apartment was no longer available although the advertisement continued to run day after day. We soon caught on. Sometimes our income was inadequate for the space that we needed. Sometimes we were turned away because we had children. Strange as this seemed, it was completely legal if the property was a two family owner-occupied residence.

We started looking for a house, nothing fancy or extravagant, but just a house that would meet our space needs and provide a good school system for our children. We found such a place in South Orange, New Jersey and because my husband was a veteran, we were able to utilize the GI Bill to assist with the purchase. Nonetheless, we were still struggling financially. I was working for the poor at Legal Services, trying to give back and I was as poor as some of my clients. We needed money for the closing costs which I think was about \$2500. That may not sound like much, but to us, at that time, it was like a million dollars and we had no savings.

Additionally, the house needed some work that the mortgage company insisted had to be done before approval. Lee was able to make most of the repairs with his excellent handyman skills and the electrical repairs were done by a family friend for the cost of materials only.

Even with this, we still needed the \$2500 for closing costs. There was nowhere that we could go for such a loan but we did not want to lose the opportunity on the house. I went to Professor Cowan. We were both working and were expecting a tax refund of approximately \$2000. I asked Professor Cowan to lend us the money and promised to pay it back as soon as we received our tax refund. We would not receive the refund for at least four months. Would he be willing to lend us the money and then wait that length of time for payment?

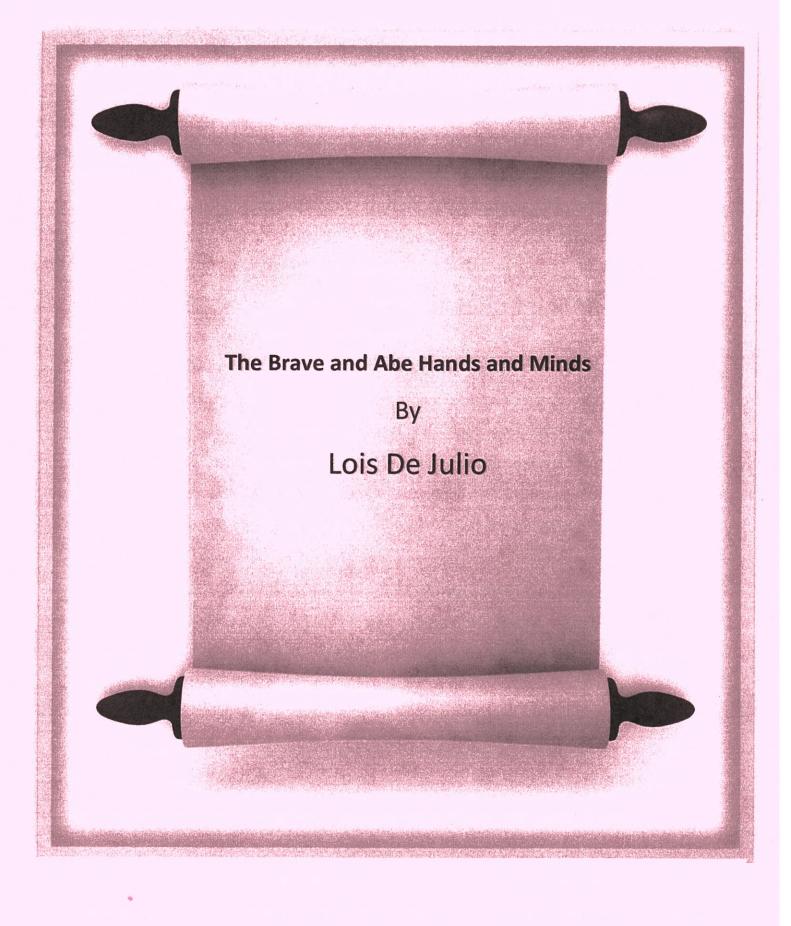
Initially he said he would discuss it with his wife, Maryanne, and get back to me. He didn't have to do it. He didn't have to trust me. We had a casual relationship and he was under no obligation to do anything for me and my family, but he did it. He talked it over with his wife, lent us the money, interest-free, and we bought the cute little colonial that we still own today, 43 years later. We raised our 7 children in that house and that was made possible by the kindness of one who took the time to care.

I spent so much time thanking him that he soon grew weary of me. I told him that what he did for us was so tremendous that we did not know how we could ever fully repay him.

To that he responded, "If you really want to repay me, find someone who is in need and help them."

So, I added that challenge to what I regard as my calling to help the poor in Haiti. I have been involved in missions to the country of Haiti since that time. I found some people who are in need and I continue helping them to this day. Professor Cowan would be proud of

me and around of the part that he played in what I have done and continue to do for people
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who are in need.
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with people from all walks of life. He especially liked spending time with his colleagues in the legal profession.

On the night of the reception, security was understandably tight at the banquet hall in Jersey City. A long line of judges and attorneys had formed in the lobby, as officers checked our identification. I found myself standing in line behind Justice Daniel O'Hern of the New Jersey State Supreme Court. While waiting, we chatted about Justice Brennan. Until that evening, I had not known that as a young lawyer, Justice O'Hern had been one of Justice Brennan's law clerks, and had maintained a close relationship with him throughout his career.

Once cleared through security, we all mingled through the cocktail hour, waiting for Justice Brennan to arrive. When he did, several bar association dignitaries met him at the door and escorted him in. He had never been a physically large man, but now at 83 years old, he was quite frail. Yet, he carried himself with such dignity that he was an imposing figure. He would have been intimidating except that his smile was warm and welcoming.

Almost everyone who has ever met Justice Brennan comments on his piercing blue eyes. A friend who had argued a case before the Supreme Court a few years before I did, told me that he felt like Justice Brennan could see into his soul with those eyes.

After speaking briefly with the dignitaries, Justice Brennan warmly embraced Justice O'Hern who had gone forward to greet him. They chatted for a few minutes, in the relaxed way of two former co-workers catching up, and then Justice O'Hern began introducing Justice Brennan to the other judges in attendance.

I was standing across the room talking to some colleagues when I heard Justice O'Hern call my name, and saw him gesture to me to come over to where he stood. He then proceeded to introduce me to Justice Brennan as a member of the Office of the Public Defender, one of the attorneys who had been making it impossible for the New Jersey Supreme Court to affirm a death sentence. For a time, the death penalty had been abolished in New Jersey, but had then been reenacted in 1982. For seven years the attorneys and support staff of the Office of the Public Defender had been battling to prevent the State from carrying out a death sentence. Death penalty

cases were always stressful and exhausting. They had taken a tremendous toll on our lawyers, our office's resources, and our families. As a staunch, life-long opponent of capital punishment, these facts were well-known to Justice Brennan.

Justice Brennan took my hand in both of his and said, "Yes, of course, the burden of the death cases always falls the heaviest on the Public Defenders, because the death penalty is almost always imposed on the poor." Then he looked at me with those piercing blue eyes and said, "But you must keep fighting. It would be terrible if we had an execution in New Jersey."

I remembered how long this man had been fighting to abolish the death penalty. I knew how strongly he believed that it was cruel; that it discriminated against the poor, and racial and ethnic minorities; that it was sometimes mistakenly and irreversibly imposed on the innocent. I also knew, with real sadness, that at age 83, he was nearing the end of his battle, and would not live to see victory. So I did the only thing that I felt I could do in that moment: I promised him-on behalf of the whole Office of the Public Defender--that we would not let that happen.

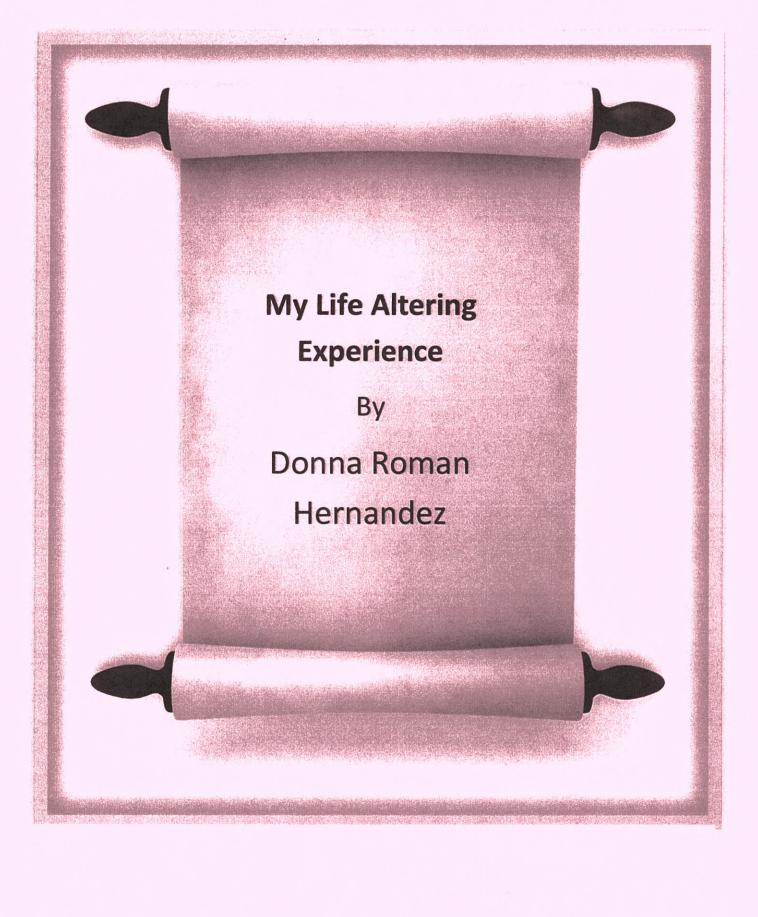
I had no right to make such a promise, and no idea if we could keep it. As it turned out, we did. On December 17, 2007, the New Jersey capital punishment law was repealed without any death sentence having been carried out during the 15 years it had been in effect in our state. I don't think that I am being immodest in saying that the staff of the Office of the Public Defender played a major role in securing that repeal. Sadly, Justice Brennan died in 1997, and never knew what we had accomplished, but at least we spared him the spectacle of an execution in his home state.

Shortly before he died, he wrote:

I have come to realize that I shall not likely live to see that great day for our country when the Supreme Court will finally rule that the death penalty violates the Constitution. That it transgresses the humanity and dignity of its victims. But even if it is not for me, as it was not for Justice Marshall, to finish the work, neither were we free to desist. The final labor it seems, will be left to the brave and able hands and minds of those we leave behind.

For those of us in New Jersey, the battle is over, at least for the near future, but dedicated attorneys in other states are still fighting against the death penalty. Because--as Justice Brennan knew only

too well--capital punishment is most often imposed on the poor, I like to believe that he was thinking especially of public defenders all over the country when he spoke of the "brave and able hands and minds of those we leave behind." If so, I hope he was comforted by that thought. I will always be proud of the part that my colleagues and I played in that work in his home state—proud that we were able to keep the promise that I recklessly made to him that night.



MY LIFE ALTERING EXPERIENCE

I am Donna Roman Hernandez, a lifelong Essex County resident who was born and raised in Newark, New Jersey. I served 30 years in law enforcement and retired at the rank of Captain.

At the age of 63 I want to share with you a life-altering experience that occurred when I was thirty-two years old that I believe was a defining moment in my life.

During my teens I made a conscious decision to withhold the details of a shameful and scary behavior and a culture of power and control that existed in our household. It was our family secret of domestic violence that spanned decades of non-disclosure.

I was afraid to tell anyone that my father battered me and abused my mother and siblings as well. I remained silent even after I became a Police Officer with the Essex County Police Department in Newark, New Jersey. I knew that my father had the potential to kill me. He owned several firearms and suffered with post-World War II physical and psychological trauma from the perils of his military service in the United States Navy.

During the decades of my victimization, I watched my mother try to create a better life for her children. However, she did not know how to make that happen because of all her internal pain, the lack of financial resources, no support from her own family and the psychological control my father maintained over us daily.

Most of my private time was spent worrying about my personal safety in our household. My father's unpredictable, volatile rage hung over us like a fog. Every area of my life was unfilled. My goals to succeed scholastically and personally were on hold. I could not catch my breath or collect my senses before the next trauma happened. Every time I looked in the mirror I knew I was living a lie, keeping my abuse and trauma a secret so that my father could satisfy his own batter's personality.

I wanted to define what my legacy would be, not what my father predetermined it would be--as

his punching bag and silent, compliant victim. I wanted my own voice to be heard, to have value and to release the biological bonds that connected us—not only as a father and daughter but as an abuser and victim.

A defining moment in my victimization did arrive in 1990. It happened on a Saturday afternoon in June of 1990 after I returned home from attending a criminal justice class at Rutgers University in Newark.

I arrived home to an argument between my parents in the kitchen. It sounded like one of their usual arguments until I heard my mother scream, "I hate you and I want you dead." As I entered the kitchen, I saw my mother with a meat cleaver in her hand. She walked towards my father and I intervened. As I pushed her behind me out of harms away, my father grabbed me by my neck, lifted me off my feet and banged my torso onto the kitchen table. The impact was so painful that it took my breath away. I felt physically and emotionally paralyzed. My father straddled me, placed his destructive hands around my neck and began to strangle me.

Intuitively, I knew my father's plan was to kill me first, then my mother.

Seconds were ticking by and so was my life. Suddenly, the kitchen became quiet. It was illuminated by a bright white light. I felt my body float upward towards the ceiling. I felt at peace. I looked down and saw my mother pound on his back to save my life.

I knew I was dying. I turned to my faith and asked God to save me...and my mother.

The room's silence was broken, and I felt my body return to the kitchen table. For the first time I fought back against my father's brutality and managed to land several

punches to his head. After he released me, I staggered to my bedroom where I kept my firearm. My painful reality was that my biological father had just tried to kill me. I would not give him a second chance to try again. I warned him that I had a loaded gun in my hand and that I would use it to defend myself. He walked away.

Leaving was risky but staying was no longer an option. At the age of 32 I knew it was time for my mother and I to leave him forever. But I had to carefully plan our departure. I slept with my gun underneath my pillow.

So, I developed a safety plan 'how' to leave without arousing his suspicions. I rented and furnished an apartment and brought our personal items there. We told no one that we were leaving. I encouraged my mother that this was the right thing to do, to move on with our lives. She was afraid that he would find us, but I assured her that if we stayed, he would kill us.

One afternoon we went to her doctor's appointment and never returned to that house of horrors. The physical abuse was over. However, we needed time and a safe space to heal and recover from his toxic abuse and control.

My mother filed for divorce and I ended the biological relationship I had with my father.

Unfortunately, a few years later my mother was diagnosed with cancer and she died at the age of 73. Before she passed away, I promised her that I would publicly tell our

survivor stories to inspire other victims of domestic violence to leave their abusers.

My father betrayed me; but God rescued me. I knew that this life altering strangulation assault on my life was the moment that defined what I must do—my mission--not only for myself, but on behalf of my mother.

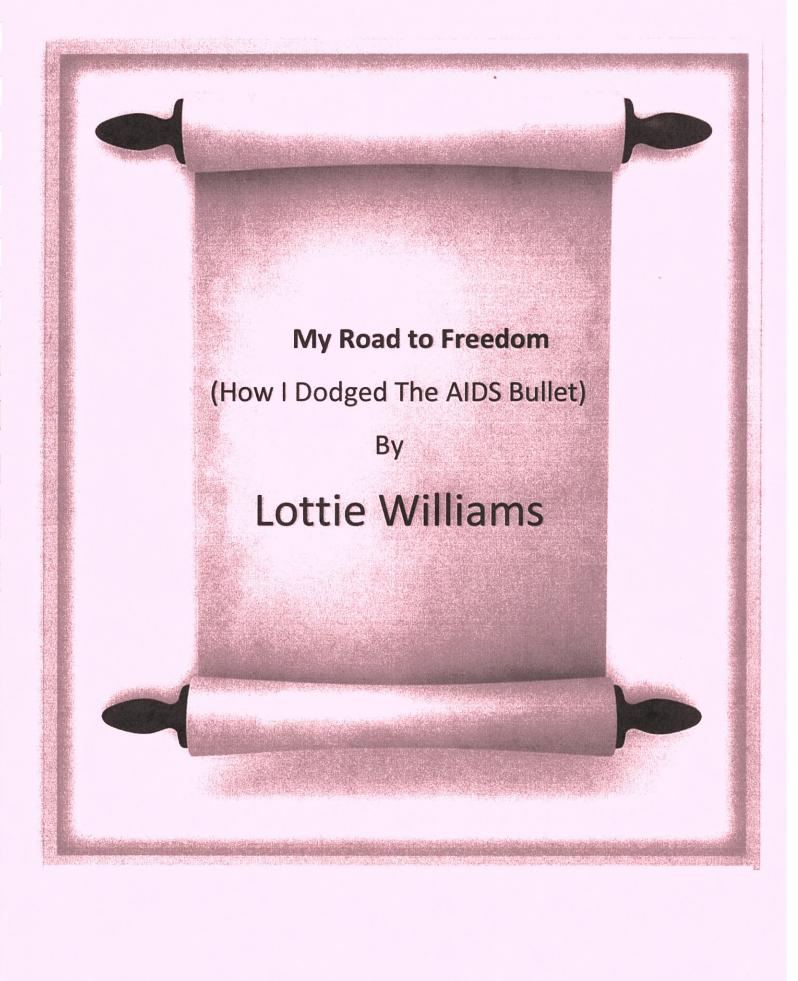
I needed to turn my personal victimization into survivorship and provide a tribute to my late mother's memory.

So, I founded an independent film production company, Blue Force Films and directed/produced my documentary/memoir, The Ultimate Betrayal: A Survivor's Journey that has been publicly screened at film festivals worldwide and is frequently used for domestic violence awareness trainings for law enforcement officers, advocates, schools, corporations, victim/witness advocates and other community-based groups. Since then, I have produced other survivor stories as well.

I also founded Violence Intervention & Prevention Specialists, a company that provides keynote speakers and quality trainings that emphasize healthy non-violent relationships for adults and youths; prevention and intervention strategies for domestic violence, sexual assault, and other violence-driven crimes. Annually VIPS honors people who 'make a difference' preventing or preventing violence in their communities.

I feel safe to tell my story because it is my legacy. It shines a light into the dark places

of my victimization and empowers others through survivorship to break the silence and cycle of domestic violence.



My Road to Freedom (How I dodged the Aids Bullet)

What does it mean to be free? Come take a walk with me along the highways of my life. On this highway, I have experienced many stops, turns, hills and valleys. But, through it all I have been able to maintain my sanity.

I have been given this amazing gift from God; it is called the gift of a dreamer. This did not start with a dream but the reason for it was revealed in the dream. It was actually the first time I had ever heard the audible voice of God. Does He talk? Yes He does!!!!

It was the year of 1996. Here I am married and the mother of one son. Life was going pretty good for me at the time. I was working my corporate 9-5 job, my son was in private school and 6 years old at the time, and my Husband was a long-distance bus driver. All sudden, my husband was becoming ill off and on. Doctors would test and announce that he has Mononucleosis. This is an illness with some of the same symptom as HIV/AIDS. Well, he continued to get sicker than he was previously. One night he returned home from a trip. How he made it home was nothing short of a miracle. He parked the car across the street in the driveway and I kid you not as he was walking, he was leaving a trail of everything that he was carrying. Suddenly, the doorbell rings and it was not an ordinary ring. It was the ring of someone in desperation. As I went downstairs and opened the door he fell in my arms because he had no more strength to walk. I literally carried him upstairs. The doctor decided to do additional testing and lo and behold next came the big announcement I will never forget this day as long as I live. He asked us to come to the office and see him. It was a Wednesday and as you many know most doctor offices are closed on that day (at least to my knowledge). I must

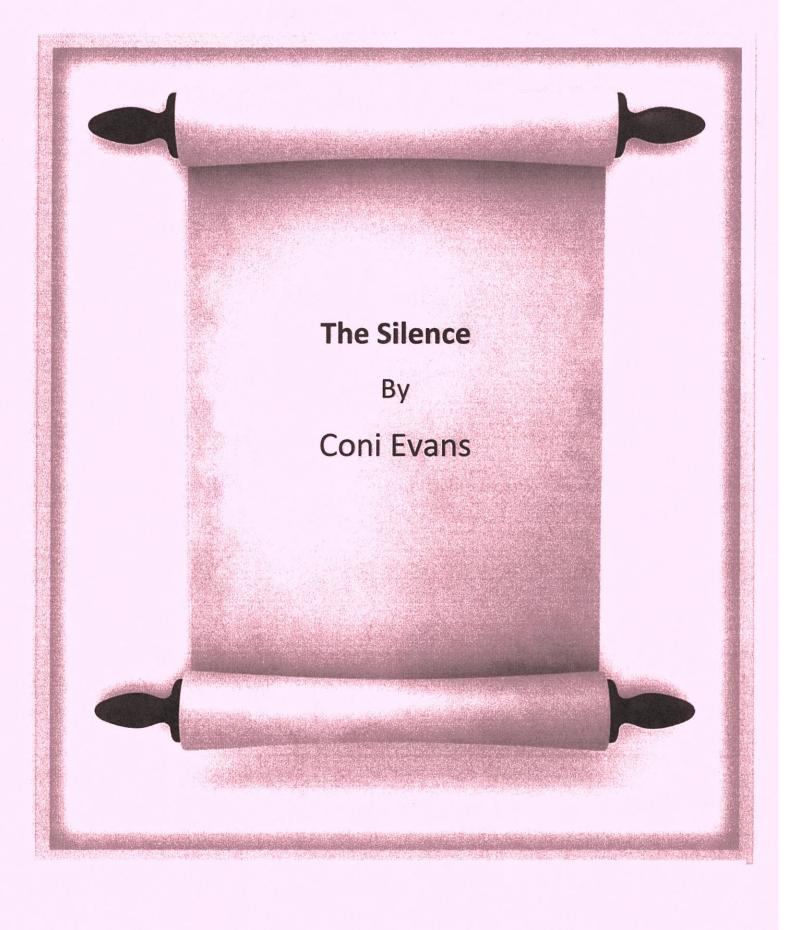
tell you I am a Lady of Faith. This rocked my world. The Doctor started to tell us that my husband had contacted the AIDS Virus. Not HIV but full-blown AIDS! I cannot tell you where my head was at the time. My mind went back to a moment where I said to him that you have all the symptoms of a person with AIDS. Little did I know that I was right. Trust me this was one of the times that I wished I were so wrong. Leaving that office was the longest ride of my life. We actually lived only 15 minutes away, but it felt like an hour. I do not know how I kept my composure. All I know is that I wanted to crawl under a rock and hide. He starts to apologize and that moment it was not enough for me. I felt so betrayed. Whoa! It hit me and I started thinking what if my son and I have it, too. No apology was good enough if that happened. I then remembered the doctor saying you and your son must be tested. In the words of Sir Walter Scott "Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice deceiving". In my mind I was saying "I'm out of here!" But God had another plan for my life. That night as I settled down to pray as I normally do but this time, I did not have much to say so I just asked God "Why?" I have learned that sometimes we can bring things upon ourselves by some previous action. I asked God did I do anything to cause this to come upon me and my family. He responded in an audible voice, "Luke Chapter 4". I remember this like it was today. I grabbed my Bible, which I keep on my bed. I started reading it and when I got to verse 18 it stood out like a bright light. Luke Chapter 4 state, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He hath anointed me to preach gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised". Of course, I was shocked and frightened. That started my journey to ministry but if did not heal my heart at that time. I was still determined to leave. What about the house we were living in at the time

and had bought right before marriage? Sometimes in life those material things just do not matter. I just wanted some peace and for this to go away. God told me that I could not leave and that I must stay there and take care of him until he dies. Well, next came Mom, her sisters and one of my friends at different times telling me that I could not leave. The struggle was real!! I finally surrendered. Today I will say that was one of the best decisions that I have ever made even though my son and I had not been tested yet.

Our Journey to the doctor was so nerve-wrecking. Imagine taking your son to the Pediatrician and making that kind of announcement. The Doctor told us he would test him but that he was pretty sure he did not have it and as he predicted, my son was cleared. Now as for myself I had to be tested several times. Apparently, husband had this virus lying dormant in his body for around ten years but because he was so healthy it took a long time for it to attack him. I went a couple of times. Finally, God spoke and told me no more testing and that I did not have it. OH, what a happy camper I was. We had to start seeing an Infectious Disease Doctor and what a blessing she was. Several trips had to be taken to the hospital. I cannot forget the therapy sessions. I sometime think about those times how he would go in there and just outright lie to the therapist. I could never understand how she could not see through it. There were times I would just sit there and laugh like you are fooling nobody but yourself.

God started preparing me to speak and tell my story, which was a hard thing to do. I was so embarrassed and ashamed. Sometimes we would go to the mall and because his looks had changed, I was too ashamed to walk with him. Then suddenly, it was as if my sister knew, and she would come and grab his arm. My tribe was the best!!

I am the youngest female in my family. Always quiet and laid back but when God is preparing you for something he will put you with the right people whether you like it or not. I was working in corporate and had been there for 24 years when all sudden, this next story started happening. I had a supervisor, who shall remain nameless. She would constantly harass me and embarrass me in meetings. One day I asked God, "Why do you keep allowing her to bother me?". His response was, "She's who I'm using to make you bold. Wow and that she did. The company started laying off and call me into her office to tell me that she is the reason I am still there. Something came over me at that moment. I leaned over her desk, looked her in the eyes and said you have no power unless my God gives it to you. Yes Freedom! I turned and walked away and told my friends that it would probably be my last day. But God I remained there until after my husband's death. His health began to decline. He was hiding his meds everywhere in the house. I think I must have the bravest son in the world. While I worked, he helped take care of his dad at the age of six years old. I went to the hospital one day and there was my husband in the lobby telling me he was late for his funeral. He saw his entire service in a dream. Imagine that! When he passed, I knew exactly what to do, because he told me. He wanted a wooden casket, etc. The ironic thing was he kept paying his life insurance policy. This the man who did not like paying bills. Son was seven at the time. A couple of months later my job entered bankruptcy. I had to take son out of private school. I held on as long as I could, but I ended up losing it all. That is everything but my mind and that was and is the most important thing to me today. Son went to college and got his Bachelors, Masters and now months away from his Doctorate. God kept His promises to me and today I am forever grateful. Whoever and wherever you are do not ever give up on Him because he will never give up on you.



The Silence

I walked slowly across the parking lot and got into my car. I felt like I was starting to get a slight headache, but it was probably just my imagination. I sat there in the car, remembering how it began. Thinking about the virus that brought the whole world to its knees. It has been almost a year now. Is there finally some light at the end of the tunnel? I am not sure anyone really knows.

We first heard about it on the news. Most people weren't too worried in the beginning. They thought it would be like a bad flu. I knew better. I had been in healthcare for forty-five years before I retired. I had been through a few pandemics, and I was really scared. And now that it was here, it was obvious that we were not prepared.

I had been living with my son and grandchildren for almost two years. I took care of the children while their parents were at work. One of my duties was to take them to school and pick them up. On Friday, March 13, 2020, I went to the school to get them. My nine-year-old granddaughter came running up to me.

"Nana, she shouted excitedly, My teacher said we had to bring all our books and supplies home. She said we might not be coming back to school on Monday because of the virus." Was it wrong that I felt a huge sense of relief? The media was saying that senior citizens were the group that was most at risk. They said it was dangerous for grandparents to be around their grandchildren, as the children could be carriers of the virus and remain asymptomatic. I

remembered a night about a week before, when I walked into my youngest granddaughter's room and found her sobbing.

"What's wrong sweetheart? I asked her."

I heard Daddy say that we could get you sick with the virus.

I don't want you to die, Nana She said between sobs."

"That's not going to happen, I reassured her. I know how to keep us very safe.

Remember that I used to keep everyone safe at my job." But deep down, I had to admit, I was terrified of this very thing.

We all tried to adjust to the new normal. My son and daughter in law worked from home now. The children did their classes virtually. We didn't leave the house. We tried to get groceries delivered but there were no delivery windows. There were many necessities you just couldn't get. I started to worry that we might not be able to get food. We went to the store one last time and bought as much canned food as we could. One by one our local restaurants started to provide curbside service. Our local deli started selling milk, bread, eggs and other staples. The community pulled together and there was a glimmer of hope. We could get through this.

Spring came and the pandemic got worse. Many people were getting sick and too many people were dying. Healthcare workers were overwhelmed and getting sick as well. They didn't have the right PPE to protect them from the virus. We saw horrifying accounts of refrigerator

trucks parked outside of hospitals, because there was no more room in the morgues. And the crazy thing was, I felt guilty for not being on the frontlines, helping to fight this battle.

Although the experts told us we did not need to wear masks, I personally did not agree. Why else had I worn a mask all those years when caring for infectious patients? Since you couldn't buy any protective equipment anywhere, I was surprised and grateful to receive a package from my old medical practice. It contained a few masks, gloves, goggles, and hand sanitizer. We reused the masks for months before they were once again available to buy. I was able to get some bleach from the store, and I made a diluted bleach solution. I cleaned everything that came into the house including groceries. I know that my obsession with disinfecting was getting on my family's nerves, but I was determined that when this virus was over, we would all still be together.

We started to fall into a routine as the weather warmed up. I helped my six-year-old granddaughter with her kindergarten classes. I would sit at her desk with her and look out the window. The trees and flowers were blooming. The birds were singing and building their nests. The sun was shining, and it felt warm on our faces, through the glass. You did not see any people though, it looked like a ghost town outside. The street was totally silent.

Every evening at seven the children and I would wait to hear the town horn make its thunderous sound. All over the country, people would gather to cheer and clap for the healthcare workers, who were risking their own lives to try to save other. Seven P.M. was the time when the shifts were changing at most hospitals. As the workers came into work and were also leaving, they were able to see how much America appreciated them. The children and I

would grab instrument or pots and pans and go out on the porch and make a racket for the prescribed five minutes. Unfortunately, after a few months of the pandemic, enthusiasm waned, and the tributes slowly stopped.

We became accustomed to hearing caravans of cars going by, honking their horns, with adults and children hanging out of the windows, screaming and flying banners. This is how people were celebrating birthdays and other milestones now. It was also how they were visiting their older relatives. I was lucky, I guess. Since I lived in the same household as my grandchildren, I got to see them every day. We were quarantining together, and as long as we stayed home, we were safe. Their maternal grandparents didn't see them for almost 4 months. They came by once or twice and waved to the children through the window. In June, when the case numbers dropped, they started to come over again. At first, we only entertained them outside. We knew they were being very safe and responsible, so they became part of our "bubble". It was good to socialize with someone outside of the household once again.

My son and daughter-in-law were friends with another family, that they felt certain, were extremely careful. They started taking the kids to their friend's pool on the weekends.

This was important for the well being of all concerned, as everyone was starting to suffer from extreme social isolation. I just sat in the house and read and watched TV, as I was scared to go out. At the end of the summer, my family went on vacation to the mountains with the other family. And still, I just sat there, as I had become almost agoraphobic. I had been hiding from the virus for so long, I was scared to leave our property, Later, I would learn that I had suffered from a special form of PTSD, caused by the pandemic.

Fall came, and it was time for the children to go back to school. It was decided that they would continue to do remote learning. Once again, I was relieved that they would not be bringing the virus home from school.

It was not easy for all of us to be quarantined together for over 6 months. I had retired and left my home in Virginia, to come and live with my family, because they needed me to help with the children. Now that everyone worked and learned at home, I wasn't really needed anymore. It had become uncomfortable living in their household now that my help was no longer needed. I felt as if I had become somewhat of a burden. I decided that I would get a place of my own. I was Leary of finding a place and moving during the pandemic. I had donated all of my furniture and household items to charities before I left Virginia. There would be no use for them while I was living at my son's house. Although I could buy most of what I needed to set up a household online, I would have t go out to a few stores. I was not at all pleased that I would have to leave my safe sanctuary, and venture out into the world, where the virus was.

I closed on my condo on election day. I had made it through finding a home, buying it, and purchasing what I needed to live in it. I was feeling like I was home free when I got the call.

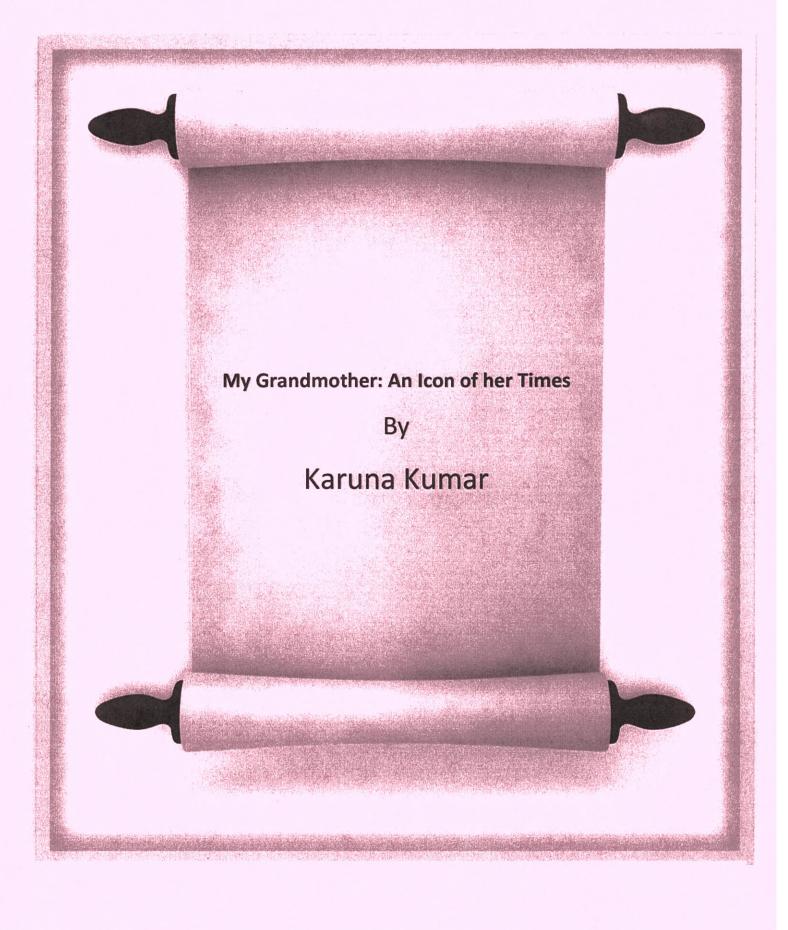
One of the people that had been at closing, had tested positive for Covid. Although we all had worn masks, we had been in a closed room for hours. I went into quarantine for 14 days, which delayed my move. I got tested, and when the results came back negative, it was quite a relief.

I finally got settled in my new home. It was really nice to have my own place again, although it was far too quiet without the kids. None of my neighbors seemed to wear masks in the building, so I didn't go out very often. I was only five minutes away from my family, so we

saw each other often. The holidays were not the big, loud occasions we were used to, but we were able to celebrate with the portion of our family that was in our pod.

The new year came and went, and I signed up for the Covid vaccine. I got the call in January to go in for my first vaccine. There was nothing remarkable about that first shot. And I had almost no side effects. My second vaccine was scheduled for February 2, 2021, the day we got almost 2 feet of snow. The appointment was canceled. It was rescheduled for the next Sunday when we were due for another big storm. Luckily, I was able to go the day before. I got to the vaccination center three minutes before it closed.

So now I am sitting in my car, right after my second vaccine, already getting a headache. I have a feeling that this time I will definitely have side effects. Yet, I am so very grateful. I am grateful for the scientists that were able to develop this vaccine in record time. I am grateful for all the essential workers that got us through this pandemic. I have hope that we will all be able to return to some semblance of a normal life soon. I also have hope that people all over the world will come out of this, all that much wiser, with a better understanding of what is truly important in life. But the thing I am most grateful for, is that everyone in my family, including me, is still alive.



She looked like the proverbial old grandmother with her faded grey-blue eyes; round wire-rimmed glasses; small, rotund figure; and thin, wispy strands of snow-white hair which fell onto her minutely-lined face. Little white hairs grew out of the thick black moles on her face. Like most grandmothers she had an endless repertoire of stories – stories that she had heard from her own grandmother. And every time she told these stories, she narrated them with new and intriguing embellishments. As a result, when she began her storytelling sessions, all of us grandchildren would crowd around her mesmerized and spellbound, no matter how many times she told her tall tales.

This diminutive old woman had the dignity of a queen, of a woman who had commandeered a large household for over seventy years. She had the fortitude of the matriarch who had been married off at the age of 13 and had given birth to the first of her many children at the tender age of 15. It was this fortitude that had enabled her to endure the death, through disease or accidents, of three of her young children at a time when in India, medical help was limited and hard to get. This frail little woman had also been the pillar of strength her family needed as they lived through the struggle for India's independence from British colonial rule. And in 1947, during the bloody aftermath of the partition of India into the two nations of India and Pakistan, it was she who ultimately led the family's flight from the city where they had always lived. Perilous though this flight had been, it had led them from a guaranteed massacre to relative safety, albeit with the loss of their home and most of their material possessions. With quiet determination

and resilience she had helped her family reconcile to this loss, navigate their way through the displacement, and adjust to a new life in newly independent India. My grandmother then had to go through yet another enormous loss - the sudden death of her husband and lifelong companion soon after this momentous event.

This remarkable woman was the role model for me, as well as for her other granddaughters, at a time when women in India were regarded as subservient to men and totally dependent on them. I used to marvel at how she would vehemently spurn all offers of any kind of help - financial or physical - from her children even after her husband had passed away. I could see how she hated the idea of being dependent in any way, on her children or anyone else for that matter. It was amazing how she walked erect, alone and without assistance even as she got older and more fragile. Her exceptionally independent and dynamic spirit never failed to astonish me and it was from her that I learnt to value independence and self-sufficiency.

In fact, my grandmother was the muse who spurred me on to seek a path to self-reliance. A great believer in women's education, she was my cheerleader as she counseled me to go for in further education and to get the qualifications I needed for a career and financial independence at a time when not many women in India had either. She would often complain that as a young child, she had desperately wanted to continue her own schooling but her father - my great-grandfather - had not let her stay in school beyond first grade. This was because at that time, it was believed that women should not receive any more

education than was needed to be able to count money for household expenses, and to read the scriptures. She was determined that such a fate should not befall others in her purview. And so it was with her encouragement and support that I overcame any opposition from other family members and went on to study abroad and take up a full time career.

She radiated an indefatigable energy and zeal – something I have always aspired to emulate. In spite of her limited resources that came from the lowly rental income she earned from her late husband's property, she managed to maintain an open house all through the year. Many were the times my siblings and I, raided her cabinet for her special goodies and treats - jars full of mouthwatering homemade sweets that we would quickly gobble up. And as quickly as we could consume them, she always found the time, energy and money to replace them.

Even when she was in her mid-eighties and her eyes and legs had begun to fail her, she would not rest or sit idle. Instead, she would continue to do endless things with her hands and would be constantly making little gifts for all of us - a piece of patchwork for a teen granddaughter's bedroom; some hand-crafted lace for another's blouse; a sweater for an infant great-grandchild; a lovingly hand-embroidered sari for her daughters and daughters-in-law; or a handmade shirt for our domestic helper. She never forgot a birthday, be it her children's, her grandchildren's or even her great-grandchildren's! One of my most vivid memories is of her greeting me on the morning of my birthday

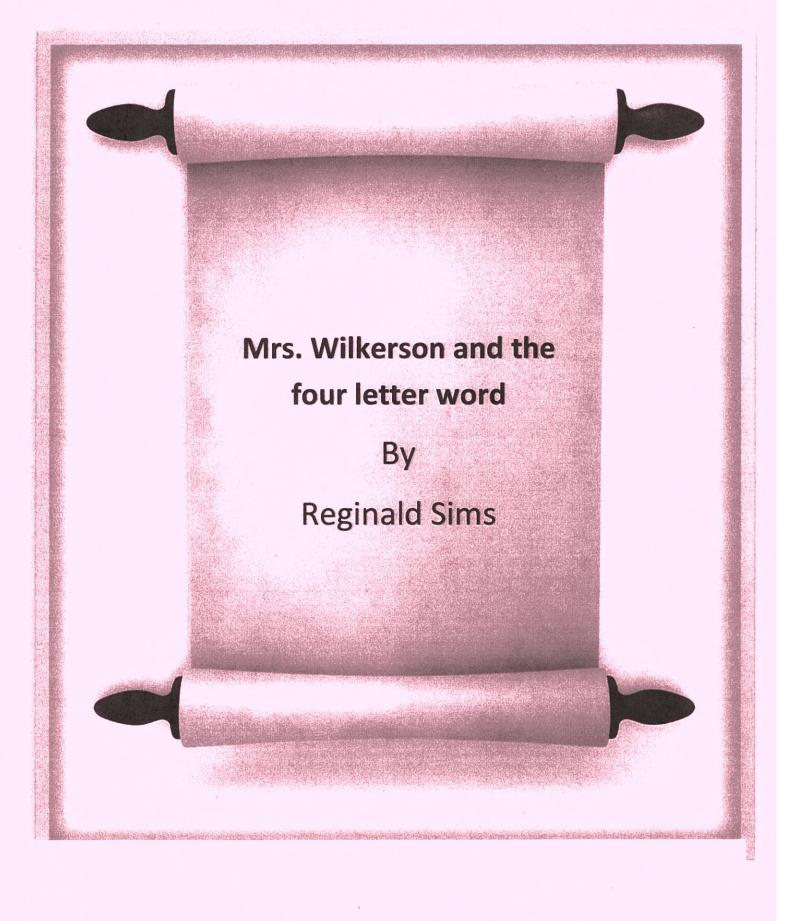
with a flower plucked early in the morning from my father's garden and a little packet of money, which she would press into my hands with a warm embrace. And this scene would be repeated on every birthday not just for me, but for all of her grandchildren. Convinced as she was, that doing these things for us was just a part of her inherent role, she was embarrassed by any show of praise or gratitude and would not allow any of us to even say 'thank you' for the gifts she showered upon all.

Although she came from a provincial middle-class background, she managed to keep herself up-to-date with all the happenings not only in her own household and that of her many children's, but also in the world. In spite of being barely literate, it was incredible how she kept track of scientific advancements. To do so, she often besieged me with questions and made me read out to her newspaper reports and articles on modern advances. Of all the phenomenal achievements in science that took place during her lifetime, the one that struck her as the most miraculous was man's landing on the moon in 1969! I cannot forget how she never ceased to marvel at it, to talk about it and use it as an example to rave about mankind's accomplishments.

What annoyed her most was social hypocrisy and injustice, vulgar displays of wealth, and ritualistic practices in religion. She had a hearty contempt for ostentatiousness in any form – be it the traditional Indian weddings or clothes and jewelry. Even way back in the 1960's, she wanted her children and grandchildren, male or female, to be open and fearless, not bogged down by the dictates of social customs. Her thinking was unbelievably progressive for her times and had a profound

influence on my own thinking. She was also a fierce campaigner for social justice and treated all those who served her with utmost respect and genuine concern and love. She would insist that her domestic helpers eat before she did, and was always ready to help anyone in need of money, food, or a helping hand. She gave generously to the underprivileged around her. She would spend hours talking to the woman who came to clean our house, making it a point to keep track of each of her children, urging her to educate them well and helping her out with food and money whenever necessary. My grandmother through her exemplary life made me realize that the most rewarding and meaningful service one could render is to help the poor and downtrodden.

My grandmother met much sorrow and much joy in her long and eventful life. Yet having taken both in her stride, and seeking as she always did to 'give' rather than 'take' from those around her, she died happy, content, and fulfilled. This was why perhaps, on the morning of her death, she walked so calmly towards what would in a few minutes, become her deathbed. This was the reason that she continued to walk erectly, smiling despite the unmistakable pain from the massive heart attack she had just suffered - the pain that was clearly reflected in her faded grey-blue eyes. This was also why later, there was such a serene, tranquil smile on her sleeping face as the flames of her funeral pyre leapt up. For wasn't death too to be taken in one's stride as the culminating point of an eventful life?



Mrs. Wilkerson and the four-letter word

My mouth is like a 7-11 store, it's always open and you'd be surprised what comes out of there. But many years ago, the lesson taught me at Vernon L Davey Junior High School still remains. And that was, one comes out of your mouth sometimes is not as important and how it is expressed. It was the fall of 1966. Being on student council there was an issue of hair in the cafeteria food. In oral communication, splitting hairs is when there is a debate over insignificant facts. But when split ends are found in the cafeteria food, well, that can be a recipe for concern. And with that lesson, I encountered Mrs. Jesse Wilkerson and the four-letter word.

Mrs. Wilkerson was not only an English Teacher at V.L.D but someone who was admired. To be in her class one had to be brilliant and or lucky. Despite being on the honor roll most of the year, I was neither. But at a distance, one could not help but admire her statuesque stance as she instructed or as she monitor the hallways as classes were changing. She admired accomplishment and distained levity. The popular pop song that year period was "Don't Mess with Bill". If you knew what was good for you, at V.L.D. one did not mess with Jess.She had a subtle way of demonstrating displeasure. It was the modulation of her voice or the movement of the eyebrow. Both of which could have been as demonstrative as Michael Carleone giving the Mafia death kiss to Brother Fredo in Godfather two. Even attempting to show disrespect to her was like visiting the cleaners with delicate fabric; yes you could go there but there were certain things you did not press.

Student Council was grass roots democracy at the juvenile level. And our classmates and

homeroom constituents were alarmed about the occasional hair strands in the food. There was no debate. There was a cry of change. If the proof wasn't in the pudding, it certainly was in the jello. And there, was Mrs. Wilkerson, digesting everything. And it was then that she said what would stay with me for over 50 year: "Well we must approach this with tact..."

With my limited vocabulary, it was a new word. And hearing it in context there was a sense that one would have to follow this issue with care. First there were facts to be considered as well as the feelings of the workers.

Well to spare you with the hair tingling suspense. Within a few weeks, the issue was solved. Hair nets were dispensed to the staff. The issue resolved. Odd how some lessons we don't learn from a classroom. As one lives one learns. Somehow, certain thing just sticks to you. While I may have forgotten how to diagram a sentence, TACT, is one thing that has stayed with me.

Tact. It would come in handy the next year when my family moved to Livingston. We were one of ten Black families. I would be the first Black male to graduate. Tact. It was most helpful while attending Marietta College in Ohio. There were a few whites who did not like me because of my race. While on the other hand, there were members of the Black Student Union who felt, since I was from the suburbs, that somehow, I wasn't "Black enough". Tough currents of issues to move around in, Tact helped me to navigate.

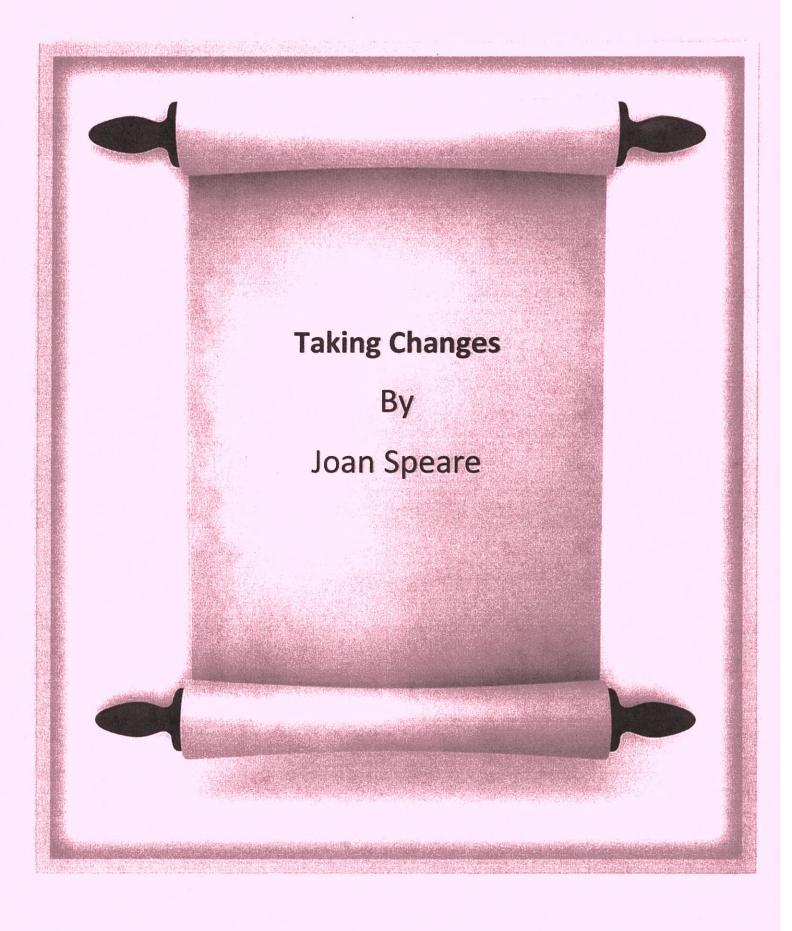
And years later, while defending a client in a civil suit, the evidence was insufficient to convict my client (who was truly innocent). But while professing my confusion, Tact won they day when the Judge stated: "You know you are a breath of fresh LET ME HELP YOU OUT!"

Odd thing about words, a tack can place something on a wall. But using TACT can hit the nail on the head especially when dealing with human emotions. It has been more than 50 years since that fateful day. And in my adulthood, I would see Mrs. Wilkerson at the local mall. It was a surprise for me that she had remembered a personal essay that I had been fortunate enough to have published in the New York Times. One could not help but think of some of the children who would be successful. In my class alone, there was Obey "buddy" Henricks, a professor at Columbia University. Or Stephanie Bush, a former Assemblywoman and later part of Governor Florio's cabinet was a classmate. And then there is Jason "grapes" Holt a distinguished lawyer.

For me, being a lifelong county resident, some of my personal accomplishments can be traced to that status. There has been ups and a few downs. And if there is a new challenge it can be done. Sometimes you must be persistent.

...AND SOMETIMES YOU NEED TACT.

...BY THE WAY I AM AFRAID OF MISS WILKERSON---(somethings never change)



Taking Chances

One night while I was working late, my son called to say he had found some keys - a huge ring with lots of keys along with identification. He wanted to call the person, but my motherly instincts snapped to attention. "Wait until I get home." I said.

The owner of the keys rushed right over to retrieve them. I was hesitant to let him into the house since I was new to the town and didn't know many people. He stood looming over me, tall, stocky and scruffy looking. I let him in as far as the hallway and stood at a distance. I was so grateful that my son was 6 feet tall and muscular - and standing by my side. The man was very grateful to get his keys back because some of them were to a bank vault for his business. He gave my son \$50 and said it would have cost him hundreds of dollars to replace all the keys.

After working all day and into the night, I was very tired, but he continued to keep a conversation going and asked what business I was in. When I mentioned I was looking to get into the Ad Specialty industry, he said he knew a company in New Hampshire that he had told they needed someone like me. Right, he just met me! I chalked it up to his wanting to date me. And I was right. He asked me out to dinner. One date was enough.

Ad Specialty was an industry I wanted to get into, but the sales jobs were straight commission. How could I take that chance? That seemed to be too much of a leap. I had found myself at that precipice at age 40. I was divorced with two children approaching the "expensive years" and in a dead end job. It was the 80's, and women were discriminated against in the workplace. Also conventional wisdom at the time was that women could not raise a boy.

I needed to prove to the world that I could do it differently. No, not the world, for myself I needed the proof. I knew deep in my heart that this was the industry for me and that I would flourish.

In a straight commission position, I would be equal to men. I would get out of it what I put into it. So I did interview with several local agencies all of whom wanted "experienced" sales people. What they meant was people with contacts. That didn't deter me. I had put it out to the world what I wanted and was waiting for an answer.

About three months later my phone rang. "They want to meet you." came a loud voice matter of factly over the phone. "Who are you? Who are they?" I had no idea and was ready to hang up. Should I be scared? Who would call and say that to me? But he mentioned the Ad Specialty company in New Hampshire. It was Mr Lost Keys.

I was so excited at the opportunity. My hand shook as I wrote down the name and telephone number. I needed to take a deep breath before dialing - and think through what I wanted to say.

About an hour later I called them and made arrangements to meet with one of the partners. The interview went very well. Mostly we talked about the industry and how much fun it is. It was a very exciting interview - lots of ideas flying back and forth. Of course, he was an Aries and I am a Gemini! The other partner better be an earth sign or nothing will get done! Turns out, he was a Taurus. We had lunch and it was pretty boring. He was the steady accountant type in the business. And I landed the position.

Somehow after two devastating divorces and the feeling that I wasn't good enough and wasn't prepared to be the head of household, I decided to listen to my inner voice and go for it. I'm so glad I did.

In about three months I was making good commissions. Mondays were my favorite day of the week. I loved the creativity this afforded me as I helped companies develop marketing strategies and provided the products to facilitate getting their message out. In a year I was in the top 10% of earnings in the industry in the country. And of course all those Ad Specialty companies in Massachusetts were calling me to join them. Now that I was successful, they wanted me and my clients. I just smiled inside because I knew they had no idea of my talents when I interviewed with them.

Who would believe that the loss of keys and my son finding them was a life changing event? Fortunately, I was brave enough to make the leap off the precipice. I knew deep in my heart that this was where I belonged and I would be successful. I was able to raise my children in style - helping with college for my daughter and the start of a business for my son. The best part of this job was that I had flexibility to schedule my time. I could watch my son play soccer and baseball and my daughter sing and dance in theater. And the next best part was that we could leave for Maine on Friday afternoons to visit my parents at the Lake House and not return until Monday morning.

In addition to the successful career, I also raised two wonderful children - my proudest accomplishments. Both my son and daughter are caring, generous and loving human beings. Women can certainly raise a son. Here is living proof.

When you are standing at the precipice and are ready to take the next big step, you need to believe that either one of two things will happen:

You will sprout wings and soar or you will have a soft landing.

Was it a soft landing, or did I sprout wings and soar?

Either way.

Doesn't matter.

Lesson Learned: Just Have Faith and Jump!



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