

**ANNIE ZACHERY:**  
Part of My Life



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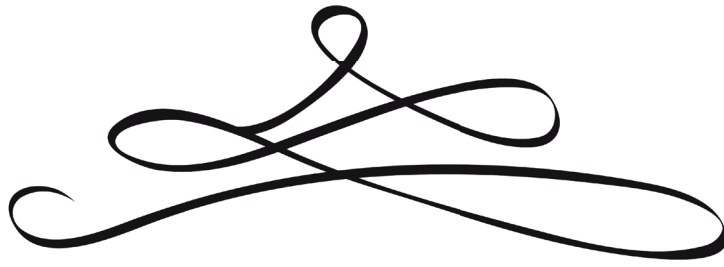
Annie Zachery began work on her auto-biography in 1992. In 2008 she partnered with the Voices From Our America team, working with Teresa Flores with help from Sam Gannon to record extensive interviews documenting her life. In 2011 Rebecca Bernard joined the project to work with Ms. Zachery on organizing and polishing the text and getting the book ready for production.

*For my family*

## Preface

I started this book back in 1992 and between now and then I thought I had lost what I'd originally written but luckily I was able to recover some of that writing. I decided it was important to finish this book before passing away. I would have been happy to put all of my life in here, but time has not permitted it. Time passes so fast, you can't do everything in a day. I hope it will be enjoyed by those who read it, especially my family.





### *Psalms 23*

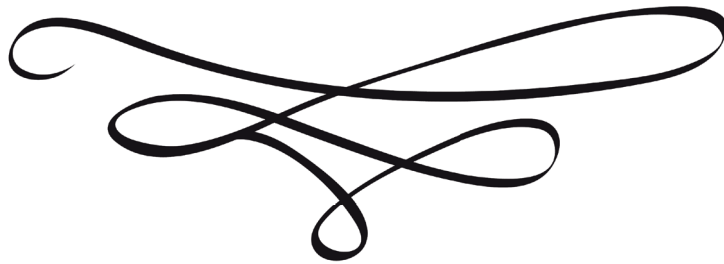
*The Lord [is] my shepherd; I shall not want.*

*He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.*

*He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou  
[art] with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

*Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my  
head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the  
days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.*





*My father, Council Price Rucker*



*My mother, Fannie Lawrance Rucker*





My name is Ms. Annie Zachery. I was born on June the 10th, 1916 in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. I was the first person in my family to graduate from college and I spent the majority of my years working as a teacher helping to educate the children of Rutherford County, Tennessee.

My story begins with my family. My parents were Council Price Rucker and Fannie Lawrence Rucker. I was the fifth of nine children altogether, five girls and four boys. The first born was my brother Robert followed by Elizabeth, Gracie, Willie Prince, then me, Annie, then Jannie, John Eddie, Logan, and finally, Bertha. Logan wasn't with us very long for he died only a few hours after his birth. Nowadays my sister Jannie is the only one of my siblings who is still alive. We grew up in the house that I live in today, here on Twin Oak Drive, which at the time was known as Lover's Lane.





*Uncle Rufus Lawrence and a friend*

My father worked as a sharecropper and my mother was a domestic worker while we children were growing up. It was always of the utmost importance to my parents that we received a good education because they themselves were made to leave school after the sixth grade in order to help support their families. This lack of formal education didn't stop them from having a whole lot of commonsense, though. As my mother used to say, "If you born a fool, you die a fool." Whatever you have in life you have to take it and use it. We as individuals can spend a lot of time making excuses about the things we don't have, but what good does that do anyone in the long run?

We were poor growing up, very poor, but we were also a close family and our parents always made sure that we were working toward achieving something better. We stuck together. I remember shortly after Logan passed away, it must have been in the wintertime because the house was awfully cold, icy even. Well, my mother was in a lot of pain because her breasts were full of milk and they didn't have the same kind of breast pumps that they have nowadays. Anyhow, without Logan there to take the milk I would help mother out by sucking the milk and spitting it out. We used to say that I was "the last one to nurse Mama." You see, that's the kind of family we



*My Grandmother*

were, you help out those you love in any way you can. You use what you have to make others' lives better.

As far as how my parents met that's a story I couldn't tell you. When I was a child, we didn't ask those sorts of questions, which sometimes troubles me now when I think of all the things I didn't get to learn more about. I never got the chance to meet my grandmothers, but I met both my grandfathers before they passed away. My grandfather on my mother's side was a slave. My grandmother was a slave as well. You can see in the picture in my living room that she's posing with her hand behind her back because her slave master had cut off her thumb. So many details of these stories get lost but we still feel the effects, which is why it is important to preserve these memories. It is important not to forget what has happened in the past and how we got to where we are now. I myself have never felt like a slave but I can see it in the world around me. I can see the way slavery has affected the modern-day black community. But I am getting ahead of myself; let me tell you more about my life growing up.



*My brother Robert on the tractor*

The house I grew up in and currently own has been in our family since 1918. I was born in a one-room house about a mile away from here, but we moved from there when I was two years old. Growing up we had a garden where we grew lots of things like okra, squash, mustard—everything under the sun. There were animals too. Horses, cows, hogs. My father would slaughter the hogs himself but the cows were taken to

a slaughterhouse in town. Both of my parents worked a lot and for not a lot of money. My father would sharecrop for different farmers and my mother worked for different families throughout the years. My parents always decided everything together when it came to raising us children. If one of us would ask Mother for something she would say, “Well have you asked your father?” and the same thing the other way around. They were really good together, a team. I think that's the only way to make things work in a family, to have a solid and united front.

Family dinners were another important moment of coming together. Whatever Mother cooked you ate, no questions asked, especially if you wanted to get a taste of dessert. And we always had dessert. Papa would say the main blessing before dinner and each of us children would recite a verse from the Bible. Throughout my childhood, my family helped to preserve and strengthen my sense of faith and gratitude for the things we had, despite the hardships we faced and the material things we may have lacked.

Now when I was little our house didn't have an indoor toilet. Or an outdoor toilet for that matter. Later on, we got an outhouse, and of course eventually indoor plumbing, but when I was a child we used to take ashes and go out to the woods. One time I was taking a bath in what used to be the kitchen. We didn't have a bathroom so we used to take our baths in a washing tub. Well, there I was taking a bath

by myself, and a rat pops its head out of the wall in the kitchen! I screamed as loud as I could and jumped out of the tub calling for my mother, "Mama! There's a rat after me! There's a rat after me!" Boy was I scared! Rats and houses should not mix.

On Saturdays, there would be ballgames and socials. Sunday was all about church and being with the family. Church was important because it was a time when the black community would have a chance to come together. We always had a black minister at the church and a choir where there would be singing. I used to sing in the choir and that was a wonderful part of my childhood. I remember we'd have picnics and fundraisers for the church where'd we sell pies and drinks and raise money for things. There was a great sense of community offered in those moments and it was important to have those feelings among our people especially in a time of such separation between races.

Now when I was a child, immunization was not the same as it is today so I suffered from whooping cough, measles, and other things, which delayed me from entering school until I was eight years old. When I started going to school, the world was segregated. I remember if you wanted a sandwich from certain places you'd have to go to the back entrance of the store. Drinking fountains, funeral homes, everything was separated between blacks and whites. And with the school system there were separate schools of course, but only the white kids had access to school buses. I went to what was known at the time as the Shiloh school for grades first through seventh. After integration, members of our community tried to get use of the facility as a recreation center for children in the area but we didn't get the rights to it. We are still trying to find something similar in the area to use. Something I have noticed in Murfreesboro to this day is the continued segregation of certain businesses, like the funeral homes, for example. They might not be declared black or white only, but they operate very much under that tradition.

Anyhow, the Shiloh school was a good three and a half miles away from where we lived growing up so without public transportation we were forced to either walk



*My niece*

to school or take a wagon. The wagon was a lot quicker, only when it rained we would end up getting soaked because we had nothing to cover ourselves other than umbrellas or coats. We would usually walk along in a group, all of us kids heading to school, and sometimes there would be a group of white children who would try to pick a fight or antagonize us, but they never succeeded. We didn't want to play along with that. My youngest sister Bertha was the last one to go to Shiloh, something that worried the rest of us because she had to travel there by herself. One time as she was walking a white boy riding on a school bus threw a rock through the window and it broke her glasses. The county didn't want to get involved at the time but luckily we had a minister at our church who was willing to help with the situation. I can remember seeing her face; the medicine they'd given her had caused her to swell up real bad and she was in a great deal of pain. Can you imagine what it feels like to be a victim of hate based purely on the color of your skin? You just had to take



the good with the bad. You had to persevere.

The Shiloh school itself was a one-room building, which held all the grades first through eighth. At the time I was attending, there were about thirty students in the class altogether. The county at that time was so underfunded that they would shut down the school during the cotton-picking and cotton-chopping season unless the parents of the students were able to pay the teachers' salaries themselves, which was not always possible. Now even at that time I thought this did not seem fair. Here we are, black children trying to get an education, and they shut down our school so that what? We can learn to pick cotton? To be sharecroppers? It wasn't right. And I think we see the aftermath of all of this neglect now. As I was saying before, I think that most black people do what they are told to do, whether or not they know that this is what is happening. You look in the school system and you see the black children, the ones who are acting up in class. They get moved out of the classroom so that they're standing outside the door, or else they're suspended from school altogether. The longer they're removed, the more alienated they become, the less they're learning and then what? How do we bring them back inside? What is the solution?





*My nephew Robert*





*One of my students.*

As I said before, our parents were very serious about us getting an education and I think it's important that children have that kind of parental motivation. My mother didn't want us to have to grow up and work in the houses of white women; she wanted us to be able to have our own careers and own set of skills. Honestly, I wanted to be a nurse when I was a child, but I became a teacher because I knew that this was something that I could do in a shorter amount of time and I needed to be able to earn money to help support the family. As a teacher, I was able to see firsthand the modern-day lack of parental involvement. Now I don't mean this in every case, but there are a lot of times when the parents don't know what their children are doing and when we were growing up, there wasn't a day that went by that someone wasn't around the corner checking in to see if what we were doing was the right thing or the wrong thing. And if it wasn't a parent, then it was an older sibling or someone responsible. Children need this, they need someone to watch over them, and sadly sometimes or a lot of the time, they don't seem to get that kind of supervision anymore.



*Jannie*

When I was two years old, I lost the vision in my right eye. My brother Robert threw a piece a glass and somehow in a freak accident it got in my right eye and so I lost my vision. I can't say that it has affected my life in any way, though, at least not in any way that I can really tell. I never treated it as a handicap and so it wasn't one. I accomplished everything that I wanted to accomplish regardless.

I had a happy childhood. We didn't have the same kind of entertainment that they have nowadays. There was no radio, no television, no telephone. We played jacks, jumped rope, played ball. I've always loved singing. Some of my favorite songs are "In Times Like These," "Leaning and Depending on the Lord," and "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child." I learned a lot from my mother growing up about cooking and sewing and things like that. My mother was a great cook. Cornbread, all different kinds of pies. blackberry pie, apple pie, peach pie. Cakes too. There were never any recipes, either. It was all instinct, a secret understanding with the ingredients. Something that you learned and then passed down through the generations. One of my nieces who goes to Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) doesn't even have the slightest idea how to cook. I don't think I could even try to teach her how to cook. It's a shame to see something like that get lost.

I left the Shiloh school after seventh grade to begin attending high school at Holloway. The curriculum at Holloway was standard: reading, writing, arithmetic, and language. It was difficult for me to get to Holloway, however, because it was a lot further away. My father would walk me down to the bridge nearby and thumb a ride into town on a Monday. During the week I would stay with two different friends, either Hattie Smith or Mrs. Mitchell and then come home Friday night. I remember one very cold day my father and I were looking for a ride and the man that my mother was working for at the time drove by. He offered us a ride in the trunk of his car, so my dad and I got in, and it was the coldest, coldest experience of my life. When I got to school my teacher, Ms. Williams, said, "Anybody willing to come to school this bad, you will not be marked tardy, you will not be marked absent. And the principal, Mr.



GEORGE LAWRENCE



HATTIE K. SUBLETT



ESTHER ST. RICKLAND



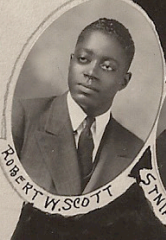
ANITA E. JARRETT



OPHELIA F. SMITH



JOSEPH T. CLANTON



ROBERT W. SCOTT



STANIA MURRAY

1939



CHARAN M. McADAMS



VIRGINIA MAE JAMES



ANNIE M. RUCKER



EMMA E. FRANKLIN



ALICE BUTLER

HOLLOWAY

HI-SCHOOL



ENGLISH - MUSIC  
INEZ HENDERSON



HOME EC. & SCIENCE  
MILDRED ROBERTS



JAMES W. MITCHELL



ALEAN RUCKER



SCIENCE - MATH  
WILLIE MAE GREEN



VOCATIONAL - AGRICULTURE  
GALVIN KERSY



PRINCIPAL  
S. J. GREEN



INDUSTRIAL ARTS  
W. A. ROGERS

Green, I don't care what Mr. Green says." Things were challenging, yes, but ultimately it was what you had to do.

One of my favorite parts of Holloway was singing in the Glee Club. I used to sing in the choir at church, and I'd been singing since I was six years old. At Holloway, they gave socials every Friday night. Now I wasn't much of a dancer myself but my sister, Jannie, loved to dance so I'd go with her and work at the coat check. I also used to work as a server at parties, particularly around holiday times. Mr. Green would call up asking if I wanted to work and I would always agree. Back then, you only got 50–75 cents for a full day's worth of work no matter how many hours you put in. During the summers, I would do domestic type work, taking care of white children and their households. We had to do laundry on a scrub board and let me tell you that was no easy task. Sometimes I would take over for the families that my mother worked for so that she could have a vacation and go visit her sister, Willie, who had moved to Detroit.

I think I was a quieter personality when I was at Holloway, less socially minded. I was very studious. In my third year, I had the highest marks in the whole school. I spent a lot of my free time around the house, hanging out with my brothers and sisters. I didn't get into a lot of the things that other teenagers got into. I always did what I thought I should do, what I thought was right.

One of the biggest social events of the year back then was known as the Cedar Bucket. It was a football rivalry between Holloway and Shelbyville. Each year the schools would take turns hosting the game, in the style of a homecoming. There would be a big celebration and lots of festivities. Whichever team won got to keep the Cedar Bucket for that year, which would be stored with the school trophies and other memorabilia. It was just like what it sounds, a bucket made out of cedar. I attended all the games, all four years. That was always a really good time. When I was an upperclassman at Holloway, Mr. Green started having me work as a substitute teacher for another school, which was then called the Bradley Academy. The



supervisor there was R. T. Butler. Instead of hiring a professional substitute teacher and paying him or her, they would send me off to Bradley for free. I would follow whatever curriculum they had been learning and go from there. I guess it was good experience in the long run.

When I graduated from high school, the schools were still segregated and I wasn't allowed to go to MTSU so instead I went to TSU, which is Tennessee State University. Tuition at that time was \$10, which may not sound like a lot of money now, but for a family as big as ours, at that time, it wasn't entirely cheap. College wasn't quite the same as it is now as far as options were concerned. We were put into groups, and I was a part of the E group and within that group, you would take your different classes. At the time, it was a matter of taking what was offered to you although you did pick your major. Mine was home economics. As a part of the home economics class there was a point when the twelve girls in my group shared a house together. The point was to learn to take care of a household as well as how to take care of children. At other times during college, I stayed with my cousin, although transportation remained a problem. When you don't have a car, Nashville and Murfreesboro are far apart. There were times when my mother's employer at the time, Mr. Paul Elrod, would pick me up Monday morning and drop me off Friday evening. He'd started honking his horn when he got to the bridge by our driveway so by the time he reached the house I'd be ready to go. I knew the Elrod family fairly well because I used to watch the two sons, Frank and Tom, during the summer when my mother was out of town. I recently had the chance to speak with Frank Elrod for the first time in oh so many years and tell him how kind his father was in helping me get an education. If it hadn't been for those rides from Mr. Elrod, and without money for the bus, I don't know if I would have been able to accomplish all the things that I have managed to accomplish. It was a great joy to say these things to Frank about his father, and wouldn't you know, all these years later, Frank lives just across town. It is a true wonder to have the chance to reconnect with those people who matter in

your life and who have helped you along the way.

Eventually, both my brothers Robert and Willie Prince got cars and so they would give me rides to Nashville and back. One time, before my brothers got their cars, on a Friday evening, one of Mr. Elrod's cousins gave me a ride home. Our house has always been surrounded by lots of trees and back in those days the road was referred to as Lover's Lane. Now as you can probably guess, this was because folks would come this way seeking a certain amount of privacy. Well as this cousin of Mr. Elrod was taking me home he decides to make a suggestion. He tells me, we're on Lover's Lane, well why don't we act like it? Now I have never been afraid of any man and I told him that if he dared to touch me, I would certainly hurt him badly, and if I didn't finish him then my father would most certainly complete the job. And wouldn't you believe it, he didn't cause me any problems after that.

During school I worked for the Parker family taking care of their child. I attempted to get a different kind of job by following an advertisement I had seen in the newspaper. They needed someone to peel the sprouts off of white potatoes. I showed up there one day, and by the end I was so dirty and dusty I wouldn't even get on the bus. I walked the entire way home and certainly never went back there. College was hard work, especially when you're making a living at the same time, but all that effort is certainly worth it.

I graduated in four years with a major in home economics and a minor in science. As I said before, I was the first to graduate in my family although my sisters did go to college as well. I was also the first member of my church to graduate from college. Now, when I graduated, unfortunately, there were no jobs teaching home economics in the area, so without a position in my specialty I was forced to take a job doing domestic work. I can't remember the name of the family that I worked for but come that September, I found a job in Decaturville, teaching. I met the principal when I arrived because I was going to be staying with him and his wife. His name was Crowder. Principal Crowder. I stayed with them until Christmas of that year, when





*My brother Robert and Martin Rose*





*Early paycheck during college*

sadly the principal developed cancer of the stomach and passed away. There were many problems with the school system in Decaturville. I was one of only two teachers. The other woman had an eighth grade education, which at the time qualified you to teach. She was a very capable woman, more experienced than I was at the time. The school itself was very disorganized. There weren't many children to begin with and to make matters more confusing there were names on the roster of children who were no longer living. After the principal passed, I decided to move along. I was planning on heading back toward Nashville when I found myself a job in Celina, Tennessee. The position in Celina paid \$80 a month at the beginning but eventually my pay was raised to \$119 a month. There were only two teachers in the school and because I had the highest degree I was also the principal. I taught the four upper grades while the other teacher, Louise Oliver, taught the four lower grades. Things in Celina were very divided racially. The day I arrived, someone had been killed in the school itself and you could see the blood on the floor. All of the black people lived in a community in the hills six miles from the town while the whites lived down on the other side of the river. Prejudice was everywhere and in the open.

In Celina, the schoolchildren were responsible for making the fires each morning. They'd go into the woods to collect the materials and build it from scratch every day. At that time in Celina you would either go across the river in a canoe or take the long

way to town in a wagon. I remember when I found out that the man taking us across in the canoe didn't know how to swim. Oh no. That was not for me, as I also did not know how to swim.

I enjoyed teaching in Celina. The children were sweet there and I have kept in touch with some of them to this day. One of the boys that I taught went on to become a principal in the Celina school system. He and his wife had two daughters who both teach in Murfreesboro. I saw his family at my Church on my 90th birthday, and it was a real joy to see how well they have got on in their lives. While I was in Celina, there was only one incident that caused me any real trouble. The other woman who was working at the school at the time wanted me to whip a young man who had gotten in trouble for throwing rocks at the school and for cursing. I told her that this was something I was unwilling to do because I didn't believe that whipping him was going to solve the problem. I believed the boy had another kind of problem going on, and a beating was not the right solution. She was angry at me for not following her orders though and had me arrested claiming that I had whipped the child. The case wound up going to trial. It was one of the most disturbing experiences of my life. I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep. I was so upset that this untruth would get me sent to jail and stop me from teaching. I didn't have the chance to speak to my lawyer until we were at the trial together. Thankfully however, all of the members of the community were on my side and my name was cleared. It is a terrible thing to be accused of a crime you did not commit. It is hurtful to have someone speak those kinds of thoughts about you.

While in Celina I roomed with Louise Oliver in the home of another older woman. During the course of our stay we discovered that she had been diagnosed with tuberculosis. At the time this was a major cause for alarm. If a teacher was found to have TB, their career would be officially over. When we found out the news we quickly moved out and headed to the closest testing facility, which was in Cookeville, forty miles away. Thankfully, we were both uninfected but it was quite a scare to come so

close to losing all chance at my vocation.

I stayed in Celina for a good while until there was an opening in Winchester, TN to teach home economics. I stayed in Winchester for two years and then went on to Vienna, Georgia for another year of teaching. This was around the late 1940s. In Vienna, I lived in an old plantation house. The plantation was still operating and there was a bell that was rung to signify the start to every activity that the blacks who worked there did, including eating. It was a strange place to be and I tell you I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it myself.

I left Vienna to be closer to home at the request of my father, although the closest position I could find at that time was back in Celina. Essentially, wherever I could get a job is where I would travel to work. The shame of it all was that I couldn't get a job in my hometown. I started teaching in 1943 and it wasn't until 1952 that I was able to get a position teaching in Rutherford County. It was when I got back from Georgia that I decided to go back to school and get my certificate in elementary education. When I went back to school, my sisters Bertha and Jannie were also in school, upgrading their degrees as well. I am glad that I became a teacher and I will say that I loved teaching and still would teach today if I could. I enjoyed every day of it. I think my strength to get through it and to get through many of the things that I have gone through came from reading my Bible and my faith in the Lord. I have always had help and for this I am thankful. When I taught, I always kept a copy of the Bible on my desk. The way I see the educational system heading today I swear I would teach for nothing if I could. I worry about these children, about the implications of all that has come before and the lack of attention they receive now.

Now, once I had my certificate in education I found a job teaching at Shiloh School where I myself had gone as a child. I taught at Shiloh until integration hit Tennessee. When integration came there was never a formal announcement. I found out by listening to the radio, not through the school system, which seems strange, seeing as I was a public school teacher at the time. In many ways, I believe the intro-



*Students at Winchester High School Home Economics*

duction of integration was mishandled. Many black principals took salary cuts that took them down to the level of teachers. Black children, when placed in the environment of a white school, were treated as inferior. They were met with prejudice, which if not shown outright, was displayed through a lack of expectation. I believe often the white teachers did not expect as much out of the black children and so the children were not taught to perform up to a higher standard. Many teachers assumed that black children were slower learners or had natural behavior problems and so they were treated as unintelligent. If you treat a young child like they have no potential, how do you expect they will act? How do you think this will impact future generations? I think integration needed to happen, but I do not believe that the way it happened, overnight, was the best or most appropriate way to go about it.

As for my role, I was sent to Walter Hill, which had been an all-white high school up until that point. I remember my first day, I was so nervous because I had heard rumors that they didn't want a black teacher and here I was on my way there. I could barely drive my car that day. I pulled up to the school and parked just about in the front entrance itself so that when I got out I could make it inside with as little exposure as possible. But then one of the teachers came out of the building and she saw me and put her arms around me. I remember she said, "Oh, we are glad to have you. Come on in." It was really good to have that kind of welcome from someone, you know? Because in reality the school wasn't ready for it, the children weren't ready for it. The prejudice in Murfreesboro ran deep. Runs deep I should say as of today. Prejudice in general still runs deep.

Anyhow, I became what was known as a "roving" teacher. You didn't know where you were going to end up each day so you'd carry your books in your arms and they'd send you along to classrooms as was needed. For the first two weeks I was there, however, I sat in the library without a single thing to do. I was on salary, sure, but they simply had nothing that they wanted me to be doing. Occasionally, I would help the librarian sort books. I was the only black teacher at this particular

school. I was eventually given a class of about thirteen students but they would often shift me around from class to class, almost like a substitute teacher within the school itself. I was ultimately teaching six different grades, juggling lots of different curricula. It was a difficult time, both emotionally and mentally. And of course, there were incidents.

I had a student one time, a tall slender boy from Florida who was calling me a nigger behind my back, only I was unaware of this at the time. Well, eventually, news of this spread from the students to the white teachers to the principal who was also white and he brought me into his office to confront the issue. And I remember saying, "Now, I don't see no need in having an issue about somebody that called me a nigger because I know I'm not a nigger, so I won't entertain that." And I think this is something that was difficult for them to understand in a way. That I didn't want to be protected from this boy, that I didn't need to be protected from this way of thinking because I had my own way of thinking. His words did not define who I was; if anything they defined the kind of hateful person that he appeared to be.



*My niece at her graduation*



*My co-worker Nannie Rucker*

Another incident along these lines came a bit later. I was teaching science at the time, given that I had minored in science during college. One of my students was the son of a board member from the board of education. Anyhow, this boy wasn't doing as well as he wanted to be doing, so I advised him that as long as he kept up with the test grades we would average them and in the end, he would be able to bring his grade up to a higher letter. Well I suppose this wasn't the answer this young man was looking for because he went ahead and got himself a C instead of a B and of course, he was

angry. His father decided to get back at me by taking me off of the science class and forcing me to teach the lower division. The board member didn't feel it was necessary to tell me his plan, however, and the only reason I found out what was going to happen was through a fellow teacher, another white teacher who was a good friend of mine and knew him as well. I remember she told me, "Do you know that he's going to demote you?" and I shook my head. What kind of lesson was that to teach a young person?

When the meeting came around and I was officially taken off of my class I didn't protest. This wasn't the first time that I'd been treated poorly and I wasn't going to let them think that they'd gotten to me. I decided to look at it differently. In each situation, what could I be learning? This is how I saw to treat things; this was the way to



get through. There had been another time, earlier in my career at this school when I'd experienced a similar time. I was out sick for a little while and when I returned they had shuffled my class around so that I was teaching all of the students who were known to be troublemakers. Rather than complain and make these students feel even worse about themselves, I decided that I would treat them as I thought they should be expected to act. And wouldn't you believe it, those children stopped misbehaving and started carrying on just like all their untroubled classmates. I remember the other teachers were angry at me once they saw how well behaved the kids had become and they requested a meeting at the office with the principal. One by one, at the meeting, I offered them my position and not a one of them wanted to accept. It is easy to be jealous of something that someone else has, but what good is being jealous when we can't even appreciate the things we already have ourselves? When people think the worst of you, it is much more likely that you will go down that path. Look at the world today, look at our students, our youth, our young men. The way that they end up in jail and return repeatedly. When the world judges you one way, and treats you one way, it is almost impossible to reverse that decision. In our schools we can't give up hope on people, we can't pre-judge them when they're still children. We can't let prejudice overwhelm our willingness to let people exist, to let people have a second chance, a third chance, a chance at all.



*Bertha Rucker Johnson*



*Annie and her Humanitarian Award*

When I think about everything that's happened, the sheer amount of struggling to survive that we, as black people, have had to do, and all because of the color of our skin, the fact of being born this way, in this place, surrounded by this prejudice—well. It makes me wonder how we did survive. As human beings, we all have minds, we all have hearts. And yet, growing up, I couldn't have done *anything* I wanted. And so the only way to get by is to just move on, to keep going, to never stop. I just wish I could say there was a stopping point in sight, a place of equality even far off in the distance, but I can't see that place yet. I don't think that point exists yet. This struggle isn't over but at least we have words now, or maybe the old words still ring true. "Before I be a slave, I'd be dead and in my grave." We have vision and we have the strength to persevere.

As important as it is to recognize our strength, I believe it is equally true to understand that we are also humans, and sometimes we need to rest and breathe. In 1961, I found myself in a place of high stress and tension. My teaching load was very intense and at the same time, there were a number of disagreements going on between the teachers and the parents at Walter Hill. I was seeing a Dr. McBride at the time and she told me that I was on the verge of having a nervous breakdown unless I took some time to repair myself and my mind. It was a great relief to have this opportunity. I spent a month in the hospital in Nashville, reading, resting, and writing, and best of all taking the time to pray. The nurses were very kind and my sister Bertha was working as a dietician at the hospital so I had lots of company. When I left the hospital, I was still very weak so Dr. McBride had me start taking pills for my heart. I had trouble walking the halls at school without needing to stop for a rest along the way. My sister Jannie came from Memphis to stay with me for a week, which was a great relief. Eventually, I grew strong again and was able to take care of myself. I remember when I returned to school one of my students asked me where the baby was because he had been led to believe I'd been having a child. I think it's important to take of ourselves, and to understand the impact that a healthy mind and a healthy soul have on a life. We can only be as good to the world as we are good to

ourselves.

From all my years of teaching, one of the things that I most wanted to communicate to the young people that I taught was a need to get more involved in their communities. I think something that often gets overlooked these days is the importance of togetherness, of having concern for people outside of ourselves and our immediate families. As I mentioned before, this was something that church was able to give me as I was growing up. My father was Methodist and my mother was Baptist. Every Sunday we would walk together as a family down to whichever church was holding the service that Sunday. These were Emery Church, Nelson Chapel, and Walnut Grove Missionary Baptist Church. At the time, there was only one black minister so he would take turns giving services at each of the different churches. It didn't matter which was your denomination, we would all come together and celebrate as one. I taught Sunday school for four years straight while I was in high school. We always lived nearby the church, so my mother had a key to the building, after they started locking the door and we would come by and clean up during the week. I also was a member of the choir. In fact, my friend who owned a Colonial dress shop used to have pictures of me singing posted up inside her store. When I was married, I was a deaconess in the church. Now, there's a story I haven't told yet, about my husband Robert and myself. Well, I didn't get married until I was forty-nine years old.



*My niece Delphia Mcknight*

Robert and I met through my eldest niece, Delphia, at a party. Robert had been married before we met and widowed for two years prior to our getting together. He had seven children. Two girls and the rest boys, although sad to say only one of those children is still living today. I never had any children myself, something I do

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*Robert and I*



regret, but I certainly had stepchildren and step-grandchildren aplenty. My husband worked as a banker and also for the board of education.

At the time of our courting, we were both poor. If we got a sandwich, we'd split it between us and so forth. It was nice in a way, being so close, sharing what we had. We dated for about a year before we got married, although two weeks into dating I remember Robert told me he was ready to get married. Not me, I told him, that was too quick.

My family loved him and his family loved me as well. I remember when his sister found out we were getting married she was just as happy as a bird. She kept saying, "Oh finally! My brother has a wife!" We were married at the First Baptist Church on Castle Street. The wedding itself was small, but the reception, oh the reception was quite big. There were lots of people, over 200 I would say. I was working at the Shiloh school at the time and I remember my students, my second grade students, they were the happiest things in the world. It was a wonderful time. I've got the pictures still. As poor as we were, that's something we spent money on, those wedding pictures. It feels good to have those memories now, still preserved and not just in the mind.

We didn't take a honeymoon because we couldn't afford one at the time but I did move out of my childhood home. I moved to the South Highlands and stayed there until 1992 when I remodeled this house here and moved back home, but that was after my husband had passed away.

I had a good experience being a stepmother to Robert's children. By the time we were married, most of them were already grown, but he had two boys, George and Leonard, who were still around the house. They were still in school at the time. I treated them like they were my own children, never thinking of them as stepchildren, but always seeing them as my own. They were very obedient children, did their chores and so forth. Both George and Leonard ended up going to MTSU. On Mother's Day,



*The Zachery family and the Rucker Family*





*Robert and my step-children*



the boys would wear both red and white flowers in their lapels to honor their mother who had passed away and myself. Leonard would play the organ at church. Boy, he could really play.

Robert and I were married for eleven and a half years. It was a good marriage. We did everything together. Grocery shopped, cooked, went to church together, just like my own parents. I think it is important to spend that kind of time together, to really be a companion to the other person, to be kind to one another. We were good together. It was hard to see him pass, to be alone again. I remember the day he suffered his cardiac arrest, I had a premonition that it was going to happen. I remember he wouldn't allow me to go with him on any of his errands, which was unusual. And that he went ahead and got all of his affairs in order with the bank and the insurance company, as if he knew himself what was going to take place. And then it happened. In the bathroom. He just fell over. He stayed in intensive care for twenty-nine days and then one day the phone rang, August 29th, 1976 and they told me that he had passed away. After he fell that first time in the bathroom, he never said another word, and all that time he was in the hospital, all I wanted was for him to say something else, one last thing, but he never did. It was the one thing I prayed for, but it didn't happen. Just let him say one more word, Lord, but no. He never spoke again.

I know I waited a long time to get married, longer than most, but I am glad of the decision that I made. One of the reasons I waited so long was that I didn't want to marry someone that I would have to support singlehandedly. I wanted to be independent, to be able to take care of myself. I wanted to have my education, to have my career, and I wasn't willing to sacrifice that for a man. So often nowadays I see young girls, pregnant or with children, unmarried, unable to continue their educations. And the young men are either unable to get a decent job or else they're in jail and the whole cycle just keeps going and getting worse as time goes on. Once you get stuck in that system it's so hard to break out of it. Society doesn't want you back,



*Robert and me*

so what are you supposed to do? The only kind of job you can get, if any, is so low paying it can't be called a living wage. As a teacher, I definitely see the link through education. When we don't care whether or not our students are actually learning anything, when we treat them like they're trouble-makers and they're going to fail, what options do we give them? We set them up for a life outside of the system. We set them up for a life of not being cared about. Yes, their parents need to be there to care about them but if they're not, what can we do to help? We can do something, can't we? What good does it do to push them outside of the classroom? What good does it do to tell them they don't belong in one more place in their own community?



*My mother and Aunt Willie*

I've lived through a lot of things in my life. A lot of struggling and a lot of surviving. I've seen many of the people closest to me pass away and there have been dark times in my world, as there are for all people. The death of my mother was one of the hardest times I've ever had to get through. She passed on May 14th, 1957. I came home from teaching and found her in the bathtub. I remember knowing something was wrong because she always used to meet me at the door, but that day she didn't. I had to search for her all around the house. I was devastated. I swore I didn't want to live anymore and my younger sister, Bertha, she told me I was going crazy. I couldn't bring myself to take care of myself. Cooking, cleaning, even washing, everything felt impossible. Jannie wanted me to come to Memphis to live with her, but I couldn't leave. I knew I had to stay here. I had to keep going. I was in school at that time, getting my elementary certificate and I think it was doing that which helped me get through. I didn't care about living but I knew I had to keep going, live each day out. You have to get over whatever happens to you when it happens. And so in time, I got over it. I got over the pain. It dulled as all pain dulls. Death is something that happens, as painful as it may be and as much as we love the people that are taken from us. John Eddie passed in 1925. Willie Prince in 1950. My father died in 1952. My brother Robert passed in 1987, sister Elizabeth in 1985, the same year Jannie was retiring. Bertha died in 1998 and Gracie died in 1991. All three of my sisters died of cancer, and I miss them still to this day. Now I don't mean to say these things to be depressing. Really, death is just a part of life and the longer you live, the more of it you see, and maybe the more blessed you realize that you are to still be alive.

I retired from teaching in 1981. At that point, I'd been at the Walter Hill School since integration started in 1968. It was hard to leave teaching; it was something I truly loved. I loved my students, both black and white and all the things we gained from one another. Yes, it was hard to leave doing something that I'd been doing almost all of my life. There's something inspiring about children. About how sweet they can be, how excited they get about learning, about the things you can teach



*Me at my retirement celebration*



*Blessed with another birthday celebration...*



*Some of my former students*

them. The way they get excited just seeing your face. It's a truly wonderful thing to have had the career that I had, even if it was difficult at times. It was all worth it in the end. At the church now, I always sit between two men, Nathaniel and Edward, who I used to teach when they were in the second grade. Now they're grown of course, and they're both deacons. Well, they sit on either side of me, and when it comes time to stand up during the service, they help me up, one hand on each arm. It's hard to describe the joy it brings to have been a part of so many lives. They were boys that I taught at the Shiloh school. That was a great place to work. Some of the best parents to work with. They would really step up a lot of the time, especially when the county wasn't giving the right funding. We'd have suppers and programs, all with the help of the parental involvement. It was really a wonderful group to be a part of, a wonderful sense of community coming together because they cared about the education of their children. The Shiloh PTA is still going strong to this day.



in photo: Elizabeth, Gracie, Bertha, Annie, Jannie



*Jannie's 25th Anniversary*



There used to be a drug store, Strickland and Griffin, on the square in Murfreesboro. And I remember, when I was in high school, they would always give us what we needed, whether or not we had the money at the time. You see, that kind of thing did exist. A real sense of community. Of people willing to help one another out in their time of need, and I can only pray that this continues, that people will keep this spirit alive. It is the only way to live, to try and make things better than they are now, because they are not where they should be. In many ways, things seem to be worse than they were before. When we lose community, we lose a chance to gain true equality.



*The Senior's group*



*The Better Living Club*

After I retired, I joined the Better Living Club, which is a community-run organization that sponsors all kinds of different programs. They hold meetings every second Monday during which they organize all kinds of different community-related events. We help out at daycare sessions, hold library reading groups, Easter egg hunts, work with the 4H club, put on flower exhibits, really all kinds of different things. It's a great way to be involved after retirement. I've served in a number of different ways throughout the years,

and held every position including president. I'm still a member to this day, currently serving as the vice-president. It was through the Better Living Club that I started painting. There was a woman, an artist named Pat Potgo, who helped get me started. Every year the club would go on a retreat with other chapters of the Club in Columbia at the end of May, and that's when I first started to paint. It goes to show, you can learn something new, or learn about something you didn't know you

loved to do, at any point in your life. I was over seventy-five when I started painting. I really enjoy painting flowers: roses, irises, magnolias. Pat was very kind. She never wanted any payment for her lessons but I would cook for her and she would work with me on particular paintings. One of my favorites is a picture of a country road. I have always considered myself a country lady and this picture, well I think it shows where I have come from and maybe also, where I have gone. Every one of us has a lot of experiences in our lifetimes and I think what is truly important is what we do with those experiences that we have. Do we learn from history? Do we learn from our struggles how to make life better for future generations? These words here, and this painting, the things we leave behind, the lessons we try and teach and the lives we affect each and every day, these are what matter in life. The only way to get through anything is just to keep going, no matter what. One day, hopefully soon, we can end these cycles of new slavery, with low-wage jobs, and poverty and jail sentence after jail sentence, but the only way to do this is to work together. We need to have community to get things done in this world. We need to have a coming together before we can get a chance to break the problems in this current system apart.



*One of my paintings*

7/28/2000

menu. 4559144

Baked Chicken

Swamp Green Green Beans

Stewed Corn

Fried Potatoes + Onions

Pinto Beans

Sliced Tomatoes, Sliced

Cuc

Raw Carrots

Sea H. Water Corn -

Bread

Peach Cobbler +

Ice Cream

In my lifetime, I have always been faithful in attending church and in return, I have received a good deal of support from both my faith and my community. In particular, there have been two ministers who have had a profound impact on my life and the person that I am today. They are Dr. J. A. G. Jordan and my current minister, Reverend R. W. Sibert. Each man served as my pastor for over twenty-five years, and in those years of service you could see that they were real, true men of God. They helped in every area of my family's life and in the lives of all the members of this community. I feel so blessed to be here at the age of 94, nearing my 95th birthday and the celebration that approaches and I know it is through the holy spirit and the strength of being a part of a loving and generous community that I have been so blessed to have lived the life I have. Gratitude, strength, and perseverance—these are the things I have spent my life aiming toward and in this way I have been rewarded. God Bless.



*I'm posing for a picture*



*With my grandkids*



*With my grandkids Lionel & Joanna*



*Posing on my 75th Birthday*



*In my lifetime I have found out that you have to watch as well as pray. Continue to pray and God will direct your ways.*