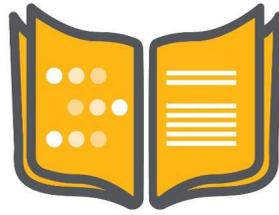




My Life, My Stories

THE LIFE STORIES OF:
Curry Senior Center Clients



My Life, My Stories

My Life, My Stories is a non-profit dedicated to preserving and sharing the legacies of older adults one story at a time.

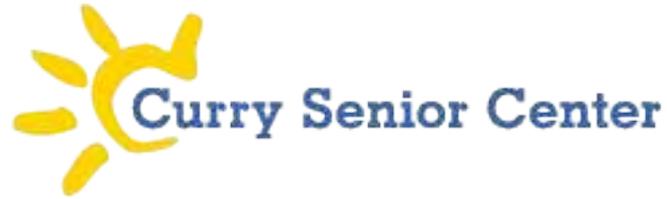
**Learn more at
mylifemystories.org**

Dream Keeper Initiative

The Dream Keeper Initiative is a new, citywide effort to reinvest \$120 million into San Francisco's Black and African American community over the next two years. Including programs that will support youth, families, seniors, and members of the Black LGBTQ+ community. The initiative seeks to address and remedy racially disparate policies and give the black community resources and support to thrive in San Francisco.

As part of the initiative, Curry will outreach to African American older adults and capture their stories from the community they live in, San Francisco. The purpose is to shift the narrative and stereotypes that affect African Americans and black communities so that people have a more holistic understanding of their lives and history. Stories will be recorded and written down and shared through the Dream Keeper Initiative.

Learn more at dreamkeepersf.org



Seniors hold the history of our society through their experiences, but without support, they are subject to isolation, diminishing health and housing insecurity. At Curry Senior Center, we create a nurturing community that provides all seniors with wellness, dignity and independence. We serve the persistent and urgent needs of low income seniors who are aging in place in the Tenderloin and South of Market districts of San Francisco.

Learn more at curryseniorcenter.org

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Angela



Moving to San Francisco in search of an adventure

I'm originally from Ohio but I moved to San Francisco in 2009 after I graduated from art school and my children moved out of the house. My mom was born in San Diego, so I always knew I would come to California. I just packed up my car and I knew I was going to go to either San Diego or San Francisco. It was just a luck of the draw that I picked San Francisco, and I'm glad I did. I think my life would be totally different if I had chosen to go to San Diego.

San Francisco was a culture shock for me—open-air drug use, open-air drug sales, people asking me for money. I knew I was going to be homeless when I came here. I knew I could get food stamps. I had my car and I figured that I'd quickly get a job. The only way I could get housing is if I moved into a shelter. So I did and that was an interesting experience. I found my own place after two months and I found a job within eight months of moving here.

I hated San Francisco when I first came here because of the homelessness, the people asking me for money, seeing drugs. It was fascinating. I would call my friends and family back in Ohio and tell them, "You're not gonna believe what I've just seen it. You're not gonna believe this" literally every time I left my apartment and walked along the streets.

I had lived in Ohio all my life and it was time for something new. I didn't know a single person in San Francisco when I moved. I thought to myself, "Well, hell, if I don't like it, or if it doesn't work out, I could always move home." But I've been here ever since.

My outlook on San Francisco

I love that San Francisco is a walking city. There are all of these little niches of community. You walk down one street, you're in a community. You walk down another street, there's a different community. One good thing I can say about the Tenderloin is that all races come together in this neighborhood. This is the only place I have found that you will see multiple races interacting with each other on a gut level. Usually, you have this pocket of culture over here, this pocket of culture over there but the Tenderloin itself is multicultural.

With the tech boom, and then COVID, a lot of artists moved out the area. The art scene has just become so white bread, just so blah. I have a theory. Whenever you see drag queens, and I mean drag queens, not transgender people. When you see drag queens with crazy outfits, you know there's a lot of art in the city. They're coming back to San Francisco but slowly.

It could be because of COVID but San Francisco seems bland to me these days. The only thing you see is the whole homelessness, the drugs. There is beauty in the Tenderloin, but you've got to look for it. There's a lot of community. There's a lot of closeness in the Tenderloin. But the drugs have gotten much worse. There is also a big mental health emergency in our neighborhoods.

To me, San Francisco has too many resources. I lived in Oakland for a while and Oakland has no resources. If the government could spread the San Francisco resources out, then I think people would take some advantage. But see, I'm from Ohio. I'm from the Midwest, where you have to work. You have to have a place. It would be very hard for you to be homeless in Ohio because we have winter.

I've used drugs, but I'm not on the streets because of drugs. I don't use drugs anymore. I've been clean for almost three years. People that use drugs, underneath all that, they're suffering from some kind of pain or loss. I was indulging too much, and I wasn't focused. Some people that are down and out don't have any hope. I had a lot of hope. When I saw that I was going downhill, luckily, through the grace of God, through the NA Program, I got turned around. I go home to Ohio to visit every year. I have a lot of core support. I think that's what's saved me. It's always saved me.

It's not easy for me to make friends here. Back home, I had plenty of friends, but I don't feel a trust level here. I've met a lot of flakes over the years. It's difficult because I haven't met a lot of people that are drug free.

My love for photography

A year after I moved to San Francisco, I found Sixth Street Photography. It's an organization for people that are living below the basic income level and live in SROs. My work has been featured

in a couple of shows. I'm still very involved. We recently opened a new gallery called 6th on 7th and it's on the corner of 7th in the Mission. I have a photography mentor and her name is Renee Jones. We met through the photography group at 6th on 7th and I've known her since 2010. We're getting ready to open a new gallery called Bamboo Community Center. The gallery on 7th is focused on photography but this new community center is going to feature all different types of art. I'll teach a couple classes and I'm really excited. My advice for others going on new adventures in life is to find an activity that keeps you busy. I had the photography group, so I created another family.

I bid my work today in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. I've sold some of my art and I've had work in the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. My mom is the photographer, so, I've been doing this forever.

I went to school for photography at Columbus College of Art and Design. I'm a fine artist. I photograph. I paint, I draw, a little bit of everything. My life sounds so damn good saying it like this. It sounds cool. Most of the time I think to myself, "What the fuck am I doing?" It sounds better saying it, delivering it.

I work on my photography every day. I bring my phone with me and use that camera most often because I only have really big cameras that are difficult to carry around. You never know what you're going to see. I like to pretend like I'm talking on the phone when I try to capture photos. In the past, I've been asked, "Are you an FBI or are you a CIA?" because I always have a camera on. Sometimes people tell me, "I don't want you taking my picture." So I have a lot of tricks.

My support system in San Francisco

I have therapy on Fridays, and it re-centers me. I think the services here are outstanding. It's just that you have to get in touch with them and utilize them. I'm just one that takes advantage of what's available. If I see something that's going to benefit me, I'm grabbing it with both hands. I'm different from the average Joe because I'm going to go find what I need. I'm not going to wait on it. I'm going to go find it. I've always been a go getter. So if you don't have that tenacity, then you get lost in the streets. And then you just feel hopeless.

I have a great doctor here. I have a nutritionist through my doctor's office. I have diabetes, so now I'm being referred to a diabetic specialist. Ever since I've been here, my healthcare has just been awesome.

I think that's the problem with San Francisco. It's not that people are not here to help. It's just that the people who need the help have to take advantage of it. This city is oversaturated with free food so you should see no one begging for money so they can buy food. You can go and get breakfast, lunch and dinner free at places like St Anthony's and GLIDE.

People have to address that black hole that leads them to addiction and drugs. Because if you have that black hole and you don't know how to climb out of it, they you'll never get out on the other side. The fact that this city offers so many resources to the homeless is a double-edged sword. A lot of people want to stay in the streets because they're free to do whatever they want. Nobody is telling them what to do.

People like to say, "Oh, there's no housing here." There is. There is housing, but you have to go for it. You have to follow these rules and still go forward. I think this open-air drug policy London Breed enacted is bullshit. If you allow people to use drugs outside, then that's what you're going to get. And that is a slippery slope.

I had never seen anyone shoot up before until I moved here. I was walking on the streets and saw people that had all their works out on the sidewalk, they were shooting up, and the police walked right past. I had no understanding of that. I'm not saying these people should be in jail. But what I am saying is that there should be some mental health hospitals available because I think the majority of drug problems stem from mental health issues.

These people out here, they have a mental problem and a drug addiction. In the '80s, Reagan closed all of the mental institutions. The United States used to have mental institutions. Now, they weren't perfect, because there was a lot of abuse, but it was some form of help. Now there's nothing to replace that system. Let's take care of the mentally impaired. Let's take care of the mental health issue. And that's going to decrease the drug issue.

My favorite days of my life so far

My best days were when I was still young and dumb, around 18 years old. Those were the best years. This was before I had kids and I didn't have any major responsibilities. I was living in ignorant bliss. I didn't know how hard the world was.

Getting Ginger at the SPCA is another best day of my life. I love her. She brings me so much joy. She's a big love bug. A few days after I got Ginger, she started staring at me like a Sphinx. Her eyes turned black. And I'm like, "What's wrong? Do you need some water? Do you need some food?" But she kept on staring at me. That night, she slept on my kidneys. That Monday, my doctor called me. She said, "Get your charger and your phone. You need to get to a hospital immediately." I was admitted into ICU later that day. The doctor said they had never had a person walk in there with my numbers. I was over a thousand. I was on the brink of death. This little thing, Ginger, sensed it. She knew something was wrong. I am so grateful for her coming into my life.

My journey to personal growth

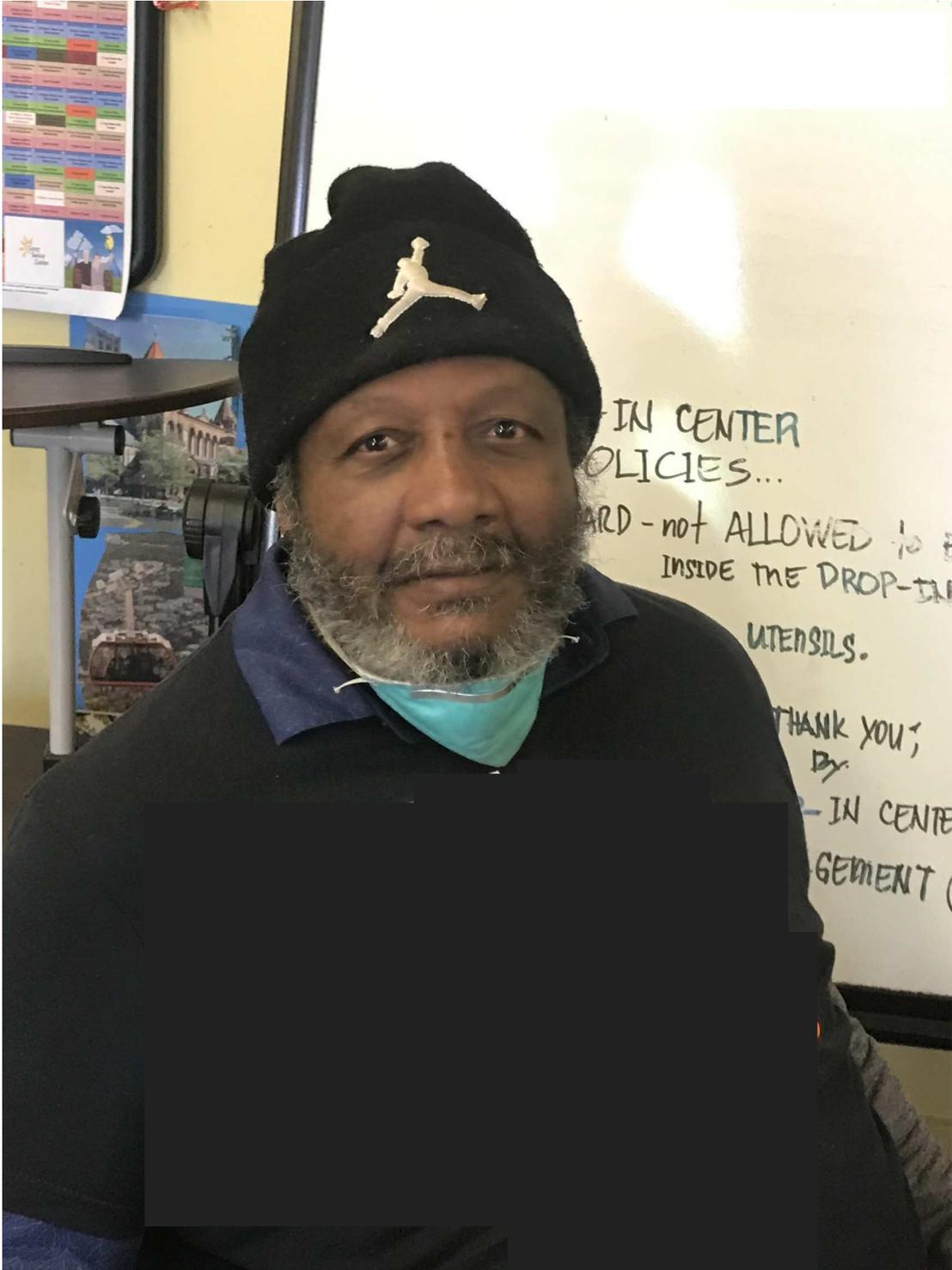
I'm always growing and changing. I'm learning a new way to live. So, that's where I'm at right now, is learning a new Angela. I want to face all my darkneses. I want to face all my flaws. I want to acknowledge all of the positive things in my life, but I don't want to sugarcoat anything anymore. I want to eventually get into a loving relationship. But I'm not there yet. I can't have a partner that drinks or does drugs. I don't want to taste liquor on another person.

My dream job is to work in healthcare doing therapeutic artwork. When I was in college, I wanted to be an art therapist. But I saw the traumas that people were dealing with, and when I was young, I couldn't handle it. I especially couldn't work with children because to see the traumas they've been through, I go hunt down their parents.

I would like to be remembered as a person that cares for others. I also want to be thought of someone who was always jolly because I like laughing. I'd like to be remembered for my artwork. I'd like to be remembered for being adventurous. Never stop exploring. Never stop.

I have three sons ages 39, 35, and 33. Two of them live in California and one still lives in Ohio. Two of my sons are about to have their own babies. One is having a boy and the other is having a girl and she's due any time now. I want to give my sons' families as much support as I can give. It's one thing to have support from just people, but it's another thing to have meaningful support.

Anthony



About me and growing up in Chicago

I've lived in Detroit, New York, and Chicago. I was born in 1939 and back in those days, you didn't have automobiles for Negro, colored, coon, monkey—whatever they were calling us at the time. It took me so long to realize that I'm just African American. Negro means need to grow, as far as I'm concerned. But Honorable Elijah Muhammad, used the word Black to get people away from this stigma of colored and the slave name game.

Of all the places I grew up, Chicago is my favorite because the city is so unique. I'll give you an example. One-quarter section out of Chicago is Black—the South Side. The whole state is a redneck state, and that's the reason that when you get 18 years old, you get a gun permit in Chicago. Everybody gets one. There's 3 million Black people, and there's like about 28 million White people in the state of Illinois, and all these people are rednecks. They're like, "I got a right to have my gun. I need my rights."

Life in San Francisco

I've lived in San Francisco for about four or five years. I'm never here permanently. Once, I went to Reno to visit and I wound up staying for two years up there. I was having such a good time up there. I stayed for a while. I won't gamble over \$20 in a day. I put \$20 down. If I win \$2 million out of the \$20, I'm still going to take my \$20 plus another \$20.

My childhood

When I was about seven years old, my mom took me to this place that people could abandon their children to. It wasn't foster care; it was like an institution. One of supervisors at the place I was living taught me how to swim. I've been a swimmer all my life. I also played Ping-Pong. I came in second place at a youth championship in New York State.

Growing up, my heroes were people like Harriet Tubman. The first woman to lead a regiment of soldiers. Total giant. She was badass. Even the actress that played her in a movie, Cicely Tyson was badass.

My advise to younger people

If I could give younger generations some advice it would be to never give up. Never give in. You can fix anything, you can turn yourself around. It's never too late.

Ms Billie Cooper



My childhood

I am Miss Billie Cooper and I want to bring light and truth to what it's like being in today's world as a 63-year-old unapologetically black transgendered, United States veteran, disabled, a long-term survivor living with HIV, and being a person in recovery for over 20 years.

It all started for me in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I was born October the 29th, 1958. Our family was poor, there is no other way to get around it, we were poor. But we got our basic needs met because my mother and father worked, sometimes worked three jobs, but most of the time, they worked two jobs each. We survived, and we were very, very dysfunctional.

Back in those days, my parents didn't have the privilege or the honor to take a day off as a mental health day. They had to work each and every day, no matter what was happening in their lives, and our lives. I didn't know at the time of all the segregation in American society. I saw it on TV as I was growing up, but I didn't know I was going through that segregation, and racism, prejudice, and white supremacy, and white patriarchy.

Understanding about my sexuality

And I grew up looking for myself, being confused, not knowing who I was, or what I was, or why I was. I always had a feeling that I was different, and as a child, I had a hard time accepting it, but I knew I liked it. I liked being different. I liked being the only one in the group being different. It was so confusing and it was so taxing at the time. I didn't know what I was going through. I didn't know I was going through growing pains. I didn't know I was going through life's pains. I didn't think anything. I never thought I would leave Philadelphia. I had no goals in my life back then, because it was just life as we knew it.

In elementary school, I started having feelings for boys. And I would chase them around and I would be their mother, and their sister, and nurse, Suzy homemaker. At the time I didn't know I was gay. Back then, we were all faggots and homosexuals, we were gay, or we were sissies. It's not like it is today, nobody sat in the room deciding what we should call ourselves. That's how it's always been, they always sit in the room. Those people always sit in the room and decide for

us. I would've thought by now, September 2nd, 2022, it would've stopped. We would be making all that decision for ourselves, we make a whole lot of decisions for ourselves, but a whole lot of decisions come from those people. I'm keeping it politically correct in saying those people.

Through junior high and high school, I was having more growing pains, and I was having more sexual feelings and more feelings of wanting to be loved, coming from a dysfunctional family, there were very small pieces of love floating around. My mother was a chronic alcoholic, and my father was a woman's man. He was always having girlfriends throughout the Philadelphia.

But I made the most of it, and in junior high school, they used to sit us alphabetically. I'm Cooper, C-O-O-P-E-R, and I sat next to this guy, James Carr, C-A-R-R, and I fell head over heels in love with him. I had to keep it hidden for years and years. In the eighth grade going into the ninth grade, I told him I loved him, and I rubbed his leg. And he hit me in the face and jumped up and made a whole scene, and I got in trouble. But I felt so good telling him that I loved him. And he hated me ever since, he hated me. He said, "I hate you, you faggot." And I was so embarrassed. But I got over it, I just moved onto liking someone else.

In high school, I was coming into really being Billie Cooper. Back then I was Billy Cooper, not Miss Billie Cooper. I was Billy Cooper, B-I-L-L-Y, because I didn't know about the changes in Billie. But I went through high school and graduated and decided I wanted to really find out who I was.

We had gay clubs in Philadelphia. We had a robust gay and lesbian community. Our community really wasn't as segregated as it has been for the last 20 years. We were all coming from disenfranchised families, and we were barely existing. We were coming from a place of hurt. Some of us, not all of us, we were coming from a place of not being privileged, being marginalized, being low-income, being poor people, black and white, and Spanish people.

Enrolling in the military

I saw these commercials throughout the years about "being all the man you can be" and so I thought about enrolling in the Army, the Marines, the Navy, or the Air Force. I wanted to go into the Navy and find me a couple of husbands. Back then it wasn't, don't ask, don't tell it was, don't even tell us because we don't care, all we need is a body.

I signed up for the United States Navy in '76 when I was about 19 or 20 years old and I got accepted. I said on my goodbyes to my block where I lived at, and people were saying, "Oh, that homosexual will be back, they don't want that queen there. Miss Billie will be back." And I said, "I'm not coming back. I'm gonna show you, I'm not coming back."

I lasted for almost eight years before I had an honorable discharge. First, I went to boot camp in Orlando, Florida. I went to A school in San Diego. I had a rough time in A school because I was still finding myself. I found all these different men from all over the world, and I was falling in love, falling in love and lust every other day. I met this one guy from Guam. I forget his name, but I fell in love with him and he turned me out, smoking weed and drinking. So, that was my first real interaction with marijuana and drinking.

I got in trouble a few times. I went to corpsman school to be a doctor or a nurse, but I screwed that up. But they still gave me a second chance, and I screwed up for a second time. When I went to captain's mess, they said, "Seaman Cooper, we know you have potential and we see it in you, but you just gotta buckle down and do what's required." So, they sent me to Pearl Harbor in Oahu, Hawaii. And I was there for six years, and I loved it. There was a lot of racism there, but it was safer being black and in the military. At the time, people were coming over to Hawaii to buy up Hawaiian land and to relatively steal the land from the Hawaiian people. Not only were the Hawaiian people angry at the white people coming over doing that, but they were also mad at the black people, they didn't want us there either. I learned skills of blending in and of acceptance, so people accepted me. And that's where I started getting into community activism.

My roots in activism

I got out in June 1982, and I came to San Francisco, where I met Miss Major Griffin-Gracy, and that was 40 years ago. We have been friends since then, and I love her so much. I landed in San Francisco and started writing and working with Miss Major doing advocacy work and activism, and building up the black community with black excellence, and black equality, and black equity, and black substance.

This was a time when it was rough for black people here in San Francisco. We were marginalized and we were low income, and we just weren't being afforded the opportunities that other people

were getting in the city. But we used to rally, and we used to fight for our rights through demonstrations and protests.

Eventually, starting in the '90s and in the 2000s, things were better. And now as we sit here in 2022, being an unapologetically black senior trans woman, we are afforded many opportunities, but I feel as though we're not afforded the opportunities that we so desperately need like housing for my sisters and brothers. We're still held back, but I'm grateful for how far we've come. I hope in my lifetime, I see things get even better.

My legacy and running for office

My life expectancy was only to 28, and I sit before you now 63 years old. I feel as though it's luck getting older, maturing into a senior citizen and having experience and having the privilege of growing in such a big metropolitan city. I've started a few groups. I've started a few movements and demonstrations. I'm a motivational speaker. I've traveled the world speaking, thank God.

I have a name here in San Francisco. After all these years, I've made up my mind to finally get into the political realm of things. And as I sit here, I'm on the ballot running for District 6 Supervisor here in San Francisco. Where we sit is the Tenderloin Curry Senior Center on Turk Street between Leavenworth and Hyde. This used to be District 6, but the powers that be redistricted this area so the Tenderloin is no longer in District 6, and that's a sad, sad state because with the redistricting, is it really helping poor marginalized people that live in this area? Is it really helping disenfranchise people?

My Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, if he sees fit for me to win. I have 40 years of my life in this city. I have advocacy and activism on my side, I have the community on my side, and I hope to win. My name is Miss Billie Cooper, and I am your next District 6 Supervisor.

The streets of the Tenderloin and South of Market have become horrible due to the drug use. It's really a way of life, and it's been going on for decades, and no one has really stepped up to the plate to do anything. But I do what can, and I speak when I must and I'm a face when I have to. I'm just a concerned citizen living here in San Francisco, in the Tenderloin/South of Market area.

I try to make as much of a difference as I can, and hoping to make even more difference as the years go on. I got more time behind me than I got in front of me, but I'm going to be resilient, and I'm going to be as powerful and strong as I can be to be a part of the change, to be part of keeping it moving forward, helping all the people whose shoulders I have stood on, and all the people who are standing on my shoulders to be all I can be in this metropolitan city, San Francisco.

Fighting for the rights of black trans women with HIV/AIDS

I was diagnosed with HIV/AIDS on May 15th, 1985. I've been a client at the San Francisco Aids Foundation for well over 30 years. When I first became a client, I noticed the disparities, and the segregation, and how it was different for black and white people. It was sad then, and it's still sad now because even though things have gotten a little better, things have gotten a whole lot worse. Because we're still oppressed, and we're still segregated, and we're still held down. And we're really still overlooked but we need to demand more respect and accountability. People need to stop bringing us into the conversation and the room after everybody else is in the room. We should be invited in the room at the beginning of the talks and conversations and discussions.

When I became a client of the San Francisco Aids Foundation, there was basically nothing there for black people, and that's the way it was. I'm not being racist. When my black sisters were dying in the streets of San Francisco, as the white boys were dying in San Francisco and in the Castro, we had no outlet to go to. We were last to get treatment, we were last to get doctors, we were last to be diagnosed.

In the early 90s, we had no one to rally around and to trust and believe in at the time. It went on like that for a long time, because even though I was a community activist and during my activism, I wasn't being heard by the powers. I wasn't being heard by the people in charge at the San Francisco Aids Foundation.

It wasn't until the early 2000s, people were taking me seriously and listening to me. I was talking more, and we were demonstrating and protesting. I would say 10 years ago, I came up with the idea to have a group for black trans people. I fought for it and talked to who I needed to talk to. I talked to people when they didn't want to hear me talking. I did whatever I had to do to create a space for black trans people.

And one day, seven years ago, I met a man named Bob. He was some kind of executive person at the San Francisco Aids Foundation and he tapped me on the shoulders and he said, "Ms. Billie Cooper, you have your group, and we're going to create this group, this vision you have." So trans life was created and we're still going strong in 2022. We're still part of the vast wide community. And I'm so happy to be the founder.

Carl



My outlook on San Francisco

I'm 67 years old. I've been living black for a long time. It's been hell even today. I'm going to start my story off by saying when they so called stopped slavery, every enslaved Black person was supposed to get 40 acres and a mule. We still haven't got that yet. And slavery, it hasn't stopped. It hasn't stopped. Different tactics, different things. What's going on today, what they're doing to black people is terrible. Silicon Valley is building to the sky with massive high rise apartment buildings, which black people can't afford and they got a movement and only white people know about it.

Walking down Market Street at nighttime is like walking in the rain. Little droplet things are wetting people up and causing sores and getting in their heads because they know most black people are homeless. They're pushing black people all the way out of San Francisco, and it's not just happening in the streets. It's happening in the places that we live in because we can't afford a sky rise studio that cost \$2,650 a month. We have to go to one of these roach motels.

I'm going tell you why they're poisoning us. They don't want black people in San Francisco and this is something that's true. Every time I go to file a complaint or go to a public official, they say bring proof. They're using cotton strings with a little knot that sticks to you and leaves rashes.

I have a prison record background. I've spent over 27 years in prison off and on. What I went to prison for was for marijuana. Today, marijuana is legal. So I'm thinking, "Well, don't y'all owe me some money or something?" Because how can something be illegal at one time and then legal? It's either illegal or legal. That's the law. I lost my wife, lost my kids, couldn't be a father to my kids because I was in prison. Today, they won't even arrest you for it. I'm just saying it's something about how they do black people, but we are survivors. We're going to survive regardless. It ain't because we're strong, or we're used to slavery. It's because I believe in a higher power, that higher power is not going to let it keep happening.

How I got to San Francisco

I was born in Charleston and spent most of my early years living in the South. 1963 was just a few years after segregation had ended. In South Carolina, I lived segregation. I went to an all-

black school. Everything I went to was black and you try to go where the white people were at, it was forbidden or you disappeared. We're not disappearing as much but it's still the same.

I've been in San Francisco since John F. Kennedy got killed and Martin Luther King got killed. Two things led me to San Francisco. My mom met a merchant seaman that was from California. The wages here in California, in San Francisco, were double what he made in Charleston, South Carolina.

I first went to a school called John Muir on Webster Street. From John Muir, I went to junior high school called Everett Junior High on Church Street. I went to high school at Polytechnic High School. I grew up in Western Addition, better known as the Fillmore. My favorite area of the city is the Fillmore, which is where all the black entertainers performed. When they came to California or when they came to San Francisco, it's like the Fillmore area is like our globe.

The city has these programs now where if you're homeless, they put you in a hotel for a minute. And then after you get your drug habit under control, they move you into a nice studio and I'm talking about a nice studio. I'm living in studio now that normally costs \$2,650 a month but the SSI—Supplement Security Income—allows me to pay one third. I was saying, boy, this is really nice. Full refrigerator, big old room. Before I got my apartment, I had been living on the streets for about 18 months. I wore my North Face jacket at night because it gets really cold sleeping on the streets. I would pull the hood down and pull up the collar so you could only see my eyes.

I love San Francisco. In the South, we have floods, hurricanes. Sunny California, it's always sunny. I mean, how can you hate a place like this? I'm not saying black people should be taken care of but give us a fair chance. Give us the fair respect. Trust me, if this kind of stuff was happening to white people, something would be done about it.

My childhood

Basketball was my favorite sport growing up, but I also played football. I was better at basketball than I was at football. We played basketball all the time at Hayes Valley Playground and the court is still there.

Back in the day, we had these dance contests and I mean, it was serious. We'd have dance battles for hours. We'd usually dance to rock and roll or soul music but it was called Pop Lock. That means you would lock and then you'd pop out of it. And then you'd do something again and you'd lock again, then you'd get really close to the guy on the other team. Oh man, it was serious. Some of that dancing went too far when people started pushing which would usually end in a fight.

My sister and grandmother

My sister, who was the oldest, was like my mother because my mother had five boys and one girl. Things were always hard for us. My sister raised me because my mom had to work all the time. She rarely denied me anything since I was the baby boy of the family. But that changed once I got a little older.

One day we were out shopping, and I said to her, "I sure like those pair of shoes." She looked at me and she said, "Oh yeah?" I said, "Could you buy them for me?" She said a word I had never heard her say. She said no. Huh? What do you mean no? And I said, "No, seriously, I want those shoes." And she said no. I asked, "Why?" She said let me tell you something about life. She said if you don't like the word no, then you'll always keep yourself in a position where you don't have to ask anybody for anything. Take care of yourself, go to school, be smart, take care of yourself. She taught me about finances and everything.

I learned from her that even though I'm black no matter what the situation is I always look for the good part. As I got older, my sister reminded me that, "People ain't gonna be as nice as me and mommy in the real world. She just taught me about life. My sister was my best friend. She passed with cancer. Her kids are just like my kids because my sister and I were so close. I lived with her even when I had kids so even though they're cousins, her kids and my kids grew up like brothers and sisters.

In addition to my sister, my grandmother also taught me a lot about life. She told me that no matter what the situation is there's a higher power and to always treat people the way you want them to be treated. I remember one time I lent this guy \$10 and that was a lot of money to me

when I was young. He was supposed to pay me back but every time I saw him he would run. One time I saw him when I was out with my grandma and I started chasing him and almost caught him, but he got away. I came back and my grandma said, "Why are you chasing that boy?" I said, "Grandma, he owes me \$10 and he won't pay me. Grandma, I had told him that I needed that money. Every time I see him, he runs. I'm gonna get him." My grandma said, "No. Let it go." I told her, "Do you know about street cred? I can't let that go. That means he just played me." She said, "Grandson, listen to me. First, never give somebody something that you might need. You gotta be able to take care of yourself first." The first law of nature is self-preservation, so never give somebody something that you can't afford to be without. But always help somebody if you can. So I said, "Okay, Grandma, I love you." I said I ain't never giving nobody nothing again. And she said, "Grandson, let me tell you a story. If you ain't never given anybody nothing that means you're gonna keep your fist and keep it closed." I said, "Yeah, Grandma, I ain't lending for nothing." She said every human, everybody has a hard time. Everybody hits a wall. Everybody goes through something. She said if you keep your hand closed, you're right, ain't nothing gonna come out. You ain't gonna lose nothing but guess what? Nothing can't come in by having a closed hand. She taught me to look at life like that. My grandma always taught me the things that I remember to this day. Always treat people nice, whether you know them or not. Then she said if they don't give you the same respect, don't treat you that same way, then you know you don't need to be around that person because that person don't mean you no earthly good.

My grandchildren

I have two grandbabies that live in Oakland and they are five and seven years old. I want them to see the part of me that didn't have the drugs involved. I want to live long enough to see them graduate. I have a little saying, I always tell them if anybody in school mess with you, you tell him you're gonna call Papa and you tell him that Papa don't take no mess. Their mother, she said, "You're gonna get these kids hurt." But no, I love my grandbabies. I'm 67 years old and have lived a hard life. I'd live it again, but I have aches and pains. It's my grandkids that keep me going.

They work me, they use me. Their mother, my daughter always tells me, "Don't be giving it to them because they're always going to expect it now." That's how my grandmother was with me

and that's what grandparents mean. Let me buy them one toy. She said okay. My grandkids remind me of me. I have always been known to be a good talker. I always found out some kind of way to go around, to keep me out of trouble.

I can't go to sleep without seeing my grandkids. My grandmother lived to be 102. My dad was 97. I'm trying to pass both of them up. The love for my grandkids and daughters keeps me alive.

Cassandra

About me and my childhood

My name is Cassandra Shepard. I'm the fourth of eight children. In our family, we had two boys, six girls. There's only four of us left. My older sister just recently passed, and my big brother just recently passed. I miss him so much.

My mom and dad were very hardworking. My dad was a cable car gripman, a conductor, and he had his masters. My mom was an accountant. She was busting her ass at the post office, to pay her way through college. We had a good upbringing. As toddlers, we wore our little white dresses and our white oxfords. I miss my mom and dad. They were really good people and raised us well. We were never spanked.

We lived in the Upper Haight and then we moved right across the street from San Francisco General Hospital. That's where my dad was killed. I was twelve years old. I don't know what he had or what someone wanted, but these white men busted in. He's been gone since June of 1970, and all these years, I still believe there's something in that apartment that he hid. White men in double-breasted suits and gangster hats followed us to school up until I was in high school for five or six years after he died. I miss him so much.

Some of my favorite memories were around growing up in Golden Gate Park. All the parks and swimming pools over in Fillmore. My dad took us swimming all the time. We had a pure German shepherd, her name was Lady, and we had a pure Alaskan Husky, and his name was Smoky. We loved playing music in our home. I can still remember the steps we made up for Psychedelic Shack.

Adulthood

I've been living in the Tenderloin going on seven years. When I came to this community, I felt a heavy, heavy weight, like something on my shoulder. I asked my stepson to get on his computer and bring up a map of the Tenderloin. And when the map came up, it was covered in big thumbtacks. I asked him what the thumbtacks represented, and he did his research and found out they represent child molesters and sex offenders. I can feel bad energy around me, and it is overwhelming sometimes.

I'm a licensed phlebotomist. I'm a CNA. I'm an ex-prostitute. For people who have known me for a long time, it's all they still see of me, and they look at me like I'm a piece of crap. Even some of my family members treat me like garbage. I have not touched a needle in almost a year and a half. I was on methadone. I detoxed from 210 milligrams. I wasn't giving myself enough credit for being as strong as I am. I've lived through trauma, but I think I still have a lot to look forward to in the future.

Charles

About me

My name is Charles Jackson and I was born in Vallejo and I've lived in the Bay Area my entire life. I was about 14 years old when I moved to Richmond, and I lived there for about 40 years. We had my sons and my daughters in Richmond. I was married but now divorced. Two of my sons are dead. My older son and my son's mother moved to Louisiana and that is where my son was killed. It took them a long time to let me know that my son was dead—I found out 10 years later.

My younger son got killed right in the Bay in Fairfield. Some kind of junkman stabbed him 11 times. I was in prison at the time, so I wasn't around, but his death hit me hard. There was nothing I could do about it. They never found the person who killed him.

I'm 75 years old and I've been homeless for some time, but I was able to find housing and have paid my rent for seven months now.

My work as an artist and poet

I'm an artist. I make angels out of soap. That's what I do for a living. I do it with my thumb, no tools needed. It's a gift God gave me and I love Him for that. I appreciate Him for that. I've been creating my artwork for more than 15 years. I was slow and not very good at the beginning but over time I've refined my craft. All of the people at St. Anthony's love the soap angels. My work made it into the local newspaper, "The Examiner" on January 21st, 2016. I sell my work at Clock Tower by the Ferry Building. My goal is to get a business license so I can open up a stand anywhere.

I also write poems. One poem I wrote is titled, "Beauty in the eyes of the beholder." It reads, "I can understand when God said beauty was in the eyes of the beholder because he must have been looking at you because you are a beauty. But here's something from me, and not from God, that the will of God will never leave you and the grace of God cannot keep you. Amen." They didn't teach me this in school, this is just strictly from the head. I'm a good thinker and I have a lot of patience.

Darryl

My name is Darryl Ian Brown. I'm a United States veteran. I've lived in San Francisco Bay Area my entire life—since 1950. My best childhood memory is probably riding on the bus with my mom when I was a child. We lived in Western Addition.

I learned so much about perseverance from being in the military. That got me through a lot of ups and downs. However, the best day of my life was leaving the military. I finally felt free.

I love to cook. My favorite dish to prepare is salmon croquette. I love that. I want people to remember my cooking and that I've always been a hard worker. I've always had a job since I was old enough to work. It's been difficult adjusting to retirement.

Dexter



About me

I consider myself a California boy, but I was born in Georgia. We moved to San Bernardino and continued moving up north after that. I've lived in the Bay area for 30 years now. It's a little slower pace than Southern California. Everyone down there is hustlin' and bustlin'. I didn't like Southern California. Too much concrete, and not enough trees. I also had a chance to live in Vegas for a while, but you get tired of the lights and whatnot, and you want some grass in your life.

Life in San Francisco

When I first moved to San Francisco, people were homeless, but people weren't homeless. There was always somewhere to go. I was staying with friends or at shelters for a while when I first moved out on my own. I currently live in Oakland but work in San Francisco. I mostly lived in the East Bay and I really liked Berkeley at different times. In the summertime, Berkeley's a good place. People there are friendly.

I recently started working in recycling but used to work at Target. Back in the day, I was just living. This is the first time I ever worked, really, to be honest. Through this job, I've learned that you have to pace yourself. Before I had a paying job, I volunteered for a drug program in Hayes Valley for about six months. They had CAT therapy, which I've been doing that all my life. It's done nothing to me.

I also worked in the kitchen at an old military base called Fort Meyers in San Francisco. Steven Spielberg and George Lucas have homes out there. I was making breakfast food: eggs, bacon, potatoes. My best meal I made was pancakes, eggs, and sausage with grits on the side.

My perspective on prison

I went to prison four times or more. I was going back and forth. I got out for a while and then violated my probation when I was younger. I haven't been back for eons. I got in trouble mostly when I was younger.

I learned that prison is inhumane. No matter what a man does, you shouldn't isolate him and put

him in a different community with armed security. Ain't nobody that bad. If you can live in a prison with a bunch of men, you can live in a community. They treat animals better. All types of people are in prison—you've got sons and fathers. That's not a place for nobody to be. You don't treat human beings like that. When I first went to prison, they had the single-man cells. That was kind of like realistic. Then they put three men to a cell. Come on now, that's getting to be too much.

I met Charles Manson when I was in jail. He didn't seem like a bad person. They couldn't let him out of there because he would've gone crazy. It's really a different world than it was when he first got to prison.

My memorable time periods

1972 was a great year for me. I was 22 years old. Life was great. It was still an adventure. You could go see different concerts and tickets weren't expensive. For \$5, you could go to pretty much any concert. I saw Jimi Hendrix, Smokey Robinson, James Brown, Funkadelics, Carla Wood, The Doors. I've been learning how to play the piano by taking classes at City College. It's difficult to find the dexterity but I enjoy learning how to play my favorite songs.

In the 1970s and 1980s, I would hitchhike and get rides up and down the coast of California. Anybody who's passing, going down in the same direction you wanted to go, you got a ride. You can't do it too much no more. I hitchhiked to Arizona and all the way to Colorado to the Parker Dam. I lived like every day was an adventure.

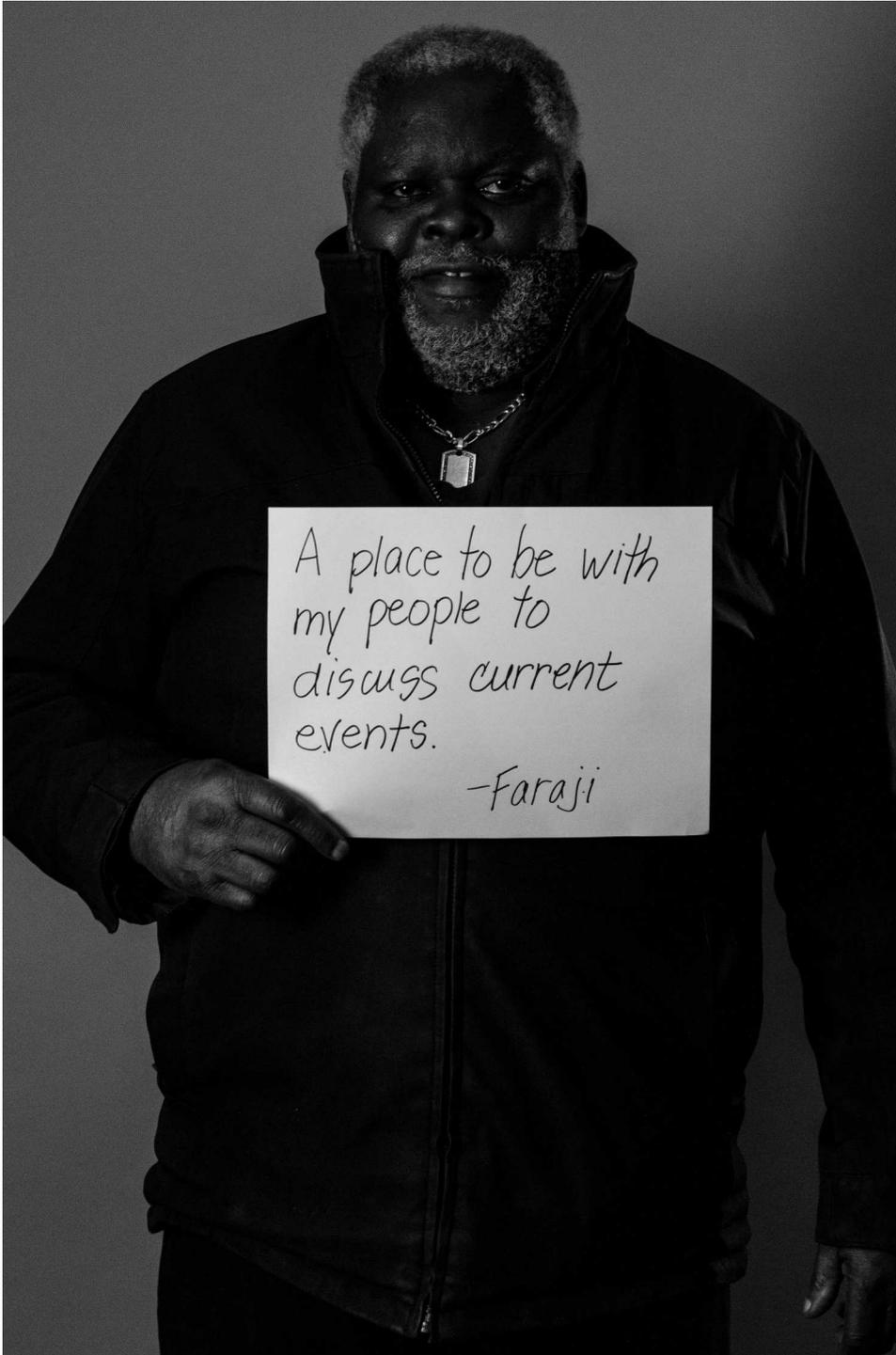
I survived the 80s—that was a decade to remember but not for the best reasons. It was like a shock but having fun at the same time. It was the cocaine era. People would come to San Francisco, and you thought it was a séance, a candlelight vigil but it was lighters, it was lighted up everywhere, people doing their thang. People started killing each other for the fun of money. I said man, it's got to be the mid-'80s. I can be married to your sister, but your brother looks at me as an enemy. I couldn't understand that. People were letting drugs and money divide their families. It gave me a headache. It got too complicated. I liked the 1970s better than the 1980s, which was when Reagan came in office. That's when stuff started ending when Reagan came. People start taking life too seriously. Before then, you could go anywhere. You didn't need a whole bunch of money.

My legacy

The best day of my life is when my first son, Dexter Junior, was born in 1972. I was 22 years old. I have fourteen children and most of them live in the Bay Area and Southern California. I want to be remembered as someone who just loves to grasp life, just live life.

I think people shouldn't be afraid to change, to make a change not just with themselves but step outside and have missions. A man cannot correct another man right. If it ain't worth killing, leave it alone and let him just burn himself out.

Faraji



A place to be with
my people to
discuss current
events.

-Faraji

Growing up in San Francisco

I was born and raised in Bayview which is a neighborhood of San Francisco. One place in the Bayview that stands out in my mind is Tic Tock Restaurant on Third Street. That was a nice restaurant and on Thursday nights they had races. Guys bring their cars, park in the parking lot and race down the street. The Bayview also had a lot of barbecue places. There is a lot more diverse food in the neighborhood now. They have Mexican restaurants, seafood, fried fish restaurants and a lot of clothing stores down there that wasn't there when I was living there.

Growing up, we didn't eat out that much because my mother cooked a lot. She's a good cook. She cooked a lot of steak with rice. She was known for this special casserole dish that had spaghetti in it with cheese on top. That was good. I just thought about that the other day, making some of that for myself. She also made a lot of cakes. Her church always asked her to bake cakes for them. I've seen one of her recipes in a Black newspaper called the "Sun Reporter." It was a recipe for either a fruitcake or a strawberry shortcake, one of the two.

My favorite time in my life was around 1990 when I bought a car. It was a Mazda and I loved driving it. I drove it everywhere, in the city, all around the Bay. I don't have a car right now but I'm going to get my bills paid and eventually buy a car.

When I was a young man, I used to go to the nightclubs a lot. I liked going out because there was always a lot of women. When I had a car, I liked driving through the city. My favorite club is no longer around but it was on Market and Van Ness. I also spent a lot of time going out in Oakland.

Somebody once got shot out the windows in my mother's living room. I think that was because of my brother? I don't know what caused that. It was a drive by shooting.

My childhood

I remember my father used to work all the time. He even worked two jobs at once—as a longshoreman and a custodian. He'd go to work early in the morning for the custodian job, get off about 4:00pm and then he went back to work at 5:00 or 6:00 that same evening. My mother was working in kitchens for the Unified School District but stopped working when she couldn't drive anymore.

I got along with my mother pretty good. There were no problems there. She was an easygoing mother. She didn't fuss at us too much unless we messed up in the house or something like that, but she was a good mother. Her and my father, they didn't get along that good but they got along well enough. We went to church on Sundays together as a family.

I have two sisters and one brother. My siblings and I didn't talk that much even though we got along pretty well. I was probably closest with my brother and when we did talk, we just joked around. My sisters still live in San Francisco and my brother passed away. I'm closer with my oldest sister.

I remember Christmas was always a lot of fun when I was really young. My father always bought us lots of gifts. I remember one time he bought a bike for me and that wasn't the bike I wanted. So he went downstairs and brought another bike up. He bought two bikes just in case bought the wrong one.

Living in Stockton and commuting to San Francisco

I used to be a Muni bus driver and I also had a lot of security jobs. I was 30 years old when I first started working for Muni. All the new bus drivers had to go to Washington High School to interview for some reason. I also worked for Tenderloin Housing Clinic and at three or four other hotels in San Francisco.

My favorite jobs were working at the hotels because they were sit-down jobs. You sit down there all day and check people in and out. If there was ever a problem at the hotel, I'd have to go upstairs and find out what was going on. It was a good job. I enjoyed it. But the transportation, getting to the job from where I lived in Stockton, that was the problem that I had, so I quit. I had to take buses and BART to get to and from work and leave my house between 3am-5am every day so I could get to work on time.

After a while, I got tired because when I moved to Stockton I couldn't get to work. It was hard to get to work from that far out of the city. I tried for a while but then I quit. I had Social Security so I didn't have to work.

Music

My father listened to blues a lot when I was growing up. My mother listened to mostly church music. I listened to Radio Spirit; it was KSOL then. It wasn't all over the house, I just listened to my own music in my room downstairs.

I saw Stevie Wonder and James Brown live when I was a child. James Brown attracted a different crowd than Stevie Wonder. After the show was over, they got gangs in the neighborhoods that want to fight each other. One gang on that corner and another gang on the other corner, I didn't get into it, but I just watched.

My best friend

My best friend was someone I went to church with, but he passed away last year unexpectedly. We went out a lot. We had a lot of laughs and we went to clubs and we did a lot of things together. He was talkative. He liked all the girls. He was a nice guy. He dressed nicely and had his own place. I liked that about him. There were times when we didn't see or talk to each other for about a year and then we reconnected again, just like old friends do. I don't have any other person like that in my life.

School and church

Church was a big part of my family's life. I grew up going to Sunday school every week. Our church also had a basketball team that I was a member of. My mother was a member of many of the women's groups and my father didn't participate as much but he was an usher on Sunday mornings.

I liked basketball a lot and played at City College for a while before my grades started to drop and then I had to stop playing basketball. I loved playing sports in general.

If I could give advice to my high school self, I'd tell myself, why you didn't find a girl or study harder. I should have studied harder, find some kind of way to study or pick a field to get into

and take off on that. I had goals of becoming a bus driver. I didn't have enough education to do nothing else.

My thoughts on the evolution of San Francisco

I am a native San Franciscan. I grew up in the Bayview area. I lived in Stockton for a few years, but I like San Francisco the best. I like the transportation system. I also know the city more than any other place in the world. I know my way around. I know where jobs are and I know how to catch the bus. The people are also pretty nice. I know where to go, where not to go.

But over the years, the city has changed so much. They changed the bus lines a lot. A lot of buildings look different downtown than they did a long time ago. Third Street, Market Street looks different. I've adjusted to that. It's no problem. There's not a lot I don't like about San Francisco. I don't like all this mess down here, these drugs.

My son

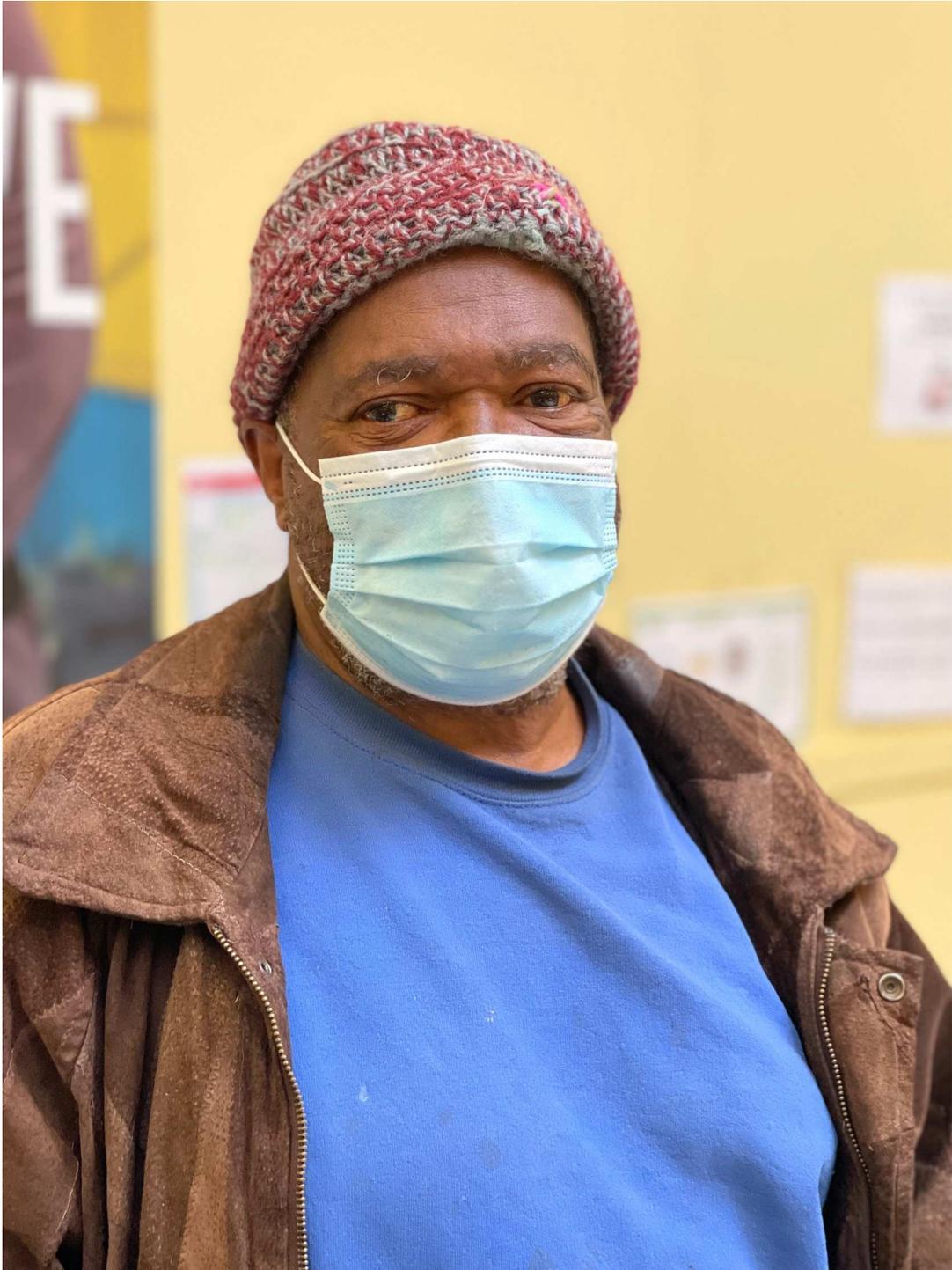
I had a son and he passed away in 1992 from pneumonia. He was about 30 years old. He was a nice kid. He just didn't mind a lot of times. He always did what he wanted to do. He was always getting high and hanging around Third Street. I should have got more into him than I did. I was working but I didn't work so much that I couldn't give him more attention. And I think about that today, but there's nothing I can do now.

I remember we used to play each other in Atari and he used to beat me all the time. We played this war game with tanks and he beat me at that. So that showed potential.

My legacy

I want to be remembered as a nice person. I treated people nicely. Yeah, that's how I'd like to be remembered by people.

George



I was born in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, which is about 47 miles from the state capital, Little Rock. I lived there until I was seventeen. My father was killed when I was around five years old, so I was raised by my grandmother. I lived with my biological mother for just one year of my life. My grandmother was an old-fashioned country lady, and I wouldn't be where I am without her. She was a very stern and strict woman.

I was old enough to start working at around 14 years old, so I quit going to school and picked cotton. When I wasn't working, I'd help my grandmother tend her garden. She had a big garden in her yard and grew all kinds of food like tomatoes, corn, and watermelon. We also had horses, chickens, and pigs that we would slaughter and feed the family. We sold the chicken eggs.

When I lived in Arkansas, I also worked in a place where this lady had a juke joint where they sold whiskey and illegal stuff. I'd go out there and make my little change too when I wasn't working in the field. It was a fascinating site to see as a young boy—people getting drunk, dancing, throwing money on the floor, and all kinda little weird stuff. Whenever somebody even cursed, they had to pay a quarter and I collected.

I left home when I was seventeen because I wanted to see more of life. Before I landed in San Francisco, I lived in a few other places like Milwaukee and in Ohio. I had an auntie and cousins that were living in San Francisco so that's why I chose to head out west in the mid-1960s. I lived with them for about six months, but their way of living is very different than what I grew up with in the south.

In San Francisco, I started getting on the wrong track and doing things that I wasn't supposed to indulge in and mess with. There was nobody around to really show me what I'm supposed to be doing or not doing; I was just a kid when I moved out on my own. So, whatever I wanted to do, I could always do it. I didn't have my grandmother to tell me otherwise.

Drugs, robbery, prison, I've experienced it all. It was strange because all the sudden, I ended up in this environment surrounded by bad people and I didn't know any better or how to get myself out of bad situations. I had no support or adults to provide guidance when I took wrong turns. I ended up in prison and felt like I wasted so much of my life. Looking back, if I would have

enlisted in the military as a young adult, I think my life would be very different. I would have learned about discipline, structure, and community.

Over the years, I've learned how to deal with the punches life throws at me. I'm 72 years old and I know right from wrong now. I stay to myself now and don't trust many people. Being by myself brings me joy. I don't like to be out on the streets because things are weird and complicated now.

When I'm by myself I can take my own advice. That way I won't get into trouble. Being out in the streets fumbling and messing with the wrong people can lead to bad things. I spend my free time watching TV, reading, playing games, and doing puzzles—things to occupy my mind so I don't get bored and tempted to go out in the streets. My favorite genres to read are westerns, mysteries, and horror. One of my favorite authors is Stephen King. His stories suck you in. I also like Jackie Collins.

These days as a grown older adult, I don't like to give people bad advice. If I don't know, I'll just tell them I don't know, instead of leading them down the wrong path, sort of what I had experienced. I try to be a good person and lead by example, because it's easy to be led the wrong way. I learned the hard way that you can suffer the consequences of your actions for the rest of your life.

Gus

About me and giving back to the community

I'm originally from Cleveland, Ohio. I did the Vietnam thing, did the college thing and the work thing, the whole American thing. And I'm a cancer survivor, and they said I should be dead, but I told them it wasn't the time, so here I am.

I work for the Institute On Aging and I help seniors that have ADA challenges. They really don't have a lot of people to help assist them in any way. There is a lot of mistrust in seniors, rightfully so because so many people try to take advantage of them. I do my small part in trying to prevent bad things from happening to them. I once stopped a rape.

I work with many Asian elders—Korean, Chinese, Filipino. I don't speak their languages, but I've formed a trust with each person, so we have a bond and are able to communicate that way. I'm one of the few men who work in this area at IOA and I drive many seniors around to where they need to go in the city, which keeps them safe.

I've been a part of this community for about seven or eight years now. I started out as a volunteer looking for a way to give back. A man named Paul used to work at IOA full-time and told me one day, "I got an application for you if you're interested." I said, "Sure." I just filled it out, I wasn't thinking nothing about it, and boom, they called me. I went to the interview, and I just talked, and I became a fixture ever since. I'll go out of my way to try to help somebody.

Moving to San Francisco

My mom wanted to move out of Cleveland, but I didn't want to move. She came out here by herself at first and convinced me to follow her soon after. But I hated it in San Francisco and moved back to Cleveland. And then suddenly, she says, "Well, I want my son to come back out here." I came back and I wound up going to school out here. I finished junior high here, went to high school in San Francisco and then I enrolled at UC but dropped out after four years of college. I dropped out because the last patient I had during my class had gotten to me, and I walked off the floor and I hung my coat up, and never went back. But I look back on things like that and I say, "Damn, I don't know what the hell I was thinking." I should've just stayed—I was

so close to graduating. I'd have been all good and retired, and somewhere in the mountains, just doing my own thing if I had stayed in school. But I don't have regrets, no complaints about any of that. Life is a roller coaster ride, but it's fine.

I studied to become an oral biologist, which is someone that helps people that had cancer of the face, and making prostheses for them, examining them. It got to be a little technical. On my last day of school before I dropped out, I came into the hospital and this guy came in and had a gauze stuck in his mouth to keep his mouth from closing and sealing. The reason being, he had tried to commit suicide and he shot himself with a double-barrel shotgun under the chin.

I was to examine him and chart it out and make the necessary applications for his face. We had to reconstruct his mouth, nose, ear, half of his face. I don't know what was on my mind that particular day, I know my friends and I were supposed to play some football later, but when I looked at him, I walked in and did the cordial thing. When he pulled the gauze from his face, something just hit me, and I just turned around and walked out, and never went back, never went back. I just couldn't deal with it, I couldn't do it. I had four years invested, but couldn't finish.

I could have played pro ball here and didn't want to do it. I could have graduated from UC but got spooked off. There are things that I've done in this city that most people would probably never do until way long after I'm dead. I have walked this city more than 10 times. I love walking and think it's much more productive than sitting at home alone watching television. I spent a lot of time in Chinatown, North Beach, Fillmore, Pacific Heights, everywhere, everywhere around here that people talk about, I've been there.

My love for theater

I've been working on a few plays but because of the pandemic, everything just got off-kilter. My partners are putting on finishing touches, doing this, that and the other. I try to get my hands on everything from building the sets and the stages to reading lines. I used to do a lot of music, but, after certain things happened in my life I just stopped. Now, I'm just behind the scenes.

I've always loved music. It's helped me escape the crazy world we live in. I was playing instruments for a while, but my hands got broken when I was a kid playing ball, so that stopped

the instruments. So, then I started vocalizing, people started hearing me and I joined groups. I could have been a professional if I wanted to, but, for me, it was just an outlet. I'd stress out or be super upset about something, and didn't want to act out so, I would sing. Over time, I got better and better and better until people started noticing me and I actually got onto a few stations. I did a few things out at City College where one of the music teachers wanted me to instruct a class.

Getting into theater came about on a whim because I know cats in the theater. We were sitting around having dinner and at a meeting, and it came up about, that they were doing a few shows. We were critiquing and they got my input, and from then on, I was connected.

Leading up to the debut of the show is a lot of work, it's a lot of work. But it's fun, a lot of fun. People are asking when we're going to get back into it, and a simple question, just a simple answer, "Hey man, this doggone pandemic thing, it screwed up everything." So, now, things are starting to get a little bit more relaxed and I can't wait to get back out there.

Kim

A little bit about me

I was born and raised in Hayward but I've been living in San Francisco for the past 22 years. I had a good childhood with great parents. We weren't the richest, but we had what we needed and a little bit of what we wanted for seven kids—six boys and one girl. I'm the baby of the family. By the time my parents had me, they were tired. I had lots of friends that I considered family and we still keep in touch today.

I had a brother who played with the Raiders for 11 years. I've been to two Super Bowls. I played baseball. I could have been a professional, but I was too hard. I was full of potential, but just, I didn't have that mentality of a respectable role model. If I could give my younger self some advice, it would be to listen. I would give that advice to any young person now. I'd tell them, "Listen. If you don't listen, you can't complain about what happens to you. If you don't listen, don't complain about what happened to you."

My favorite musicians are Prince, George Clinton, Parliament. I like a good entertainer.

Moving to San Francisco

I moved out of my parents' house when I was 22 years old. I had met a girl and we started living together in Oakland. I was with her for 12 years. After we broke up, I moved to San Francisco.

I came to San Francisco for one reason, for the lifestyle to live of just do what I do. No care in the world. There's more acceptance. I also like how everything is so close. You don't need a car.

I'm an ex-criminal. This city gives you chances to redeem yourself. Other places don't and that's why I felt comfortable here. There is more forgiveness here. I did things when I was young and the consequences of my actions followed me everywhere I went. I didn't listen to my parents. I wasn't raised the way I lived, but you get out to the streets you see things, they tell you don't do that.

I think the crime in San Francisco has gotten worse recently because so many people have moved here from other places. It seems like all of the black sheep have ended up in this city. But this is San Francisco, and you can't do this nowhere else but San Francisco. It's getting worse because₅₉

there's no respect anymore, as you can see on these streets. There is so much elder abuse. Back in my day, you helped the old woman cross the street, carry her bags. Yeah, they'll carry her bags, all right, around the corner. It's different. It's a dog-eat-dog world.

Life on the streets

I used to live on the streets. I lived in a cardboard box for a refrigerator in a doorway on 11th and Mission. I've been homeless for most of my time in San Francisco.

Once my hip went bad, I couldn't do the things on the streets, so I decided to get some help. COVID was the best thing for me. I got off the streets, started to clear my mind. It's easier to control myself around drugs and drinking if I have a roof over my head. I got me time and a place to rest.

If I still had my health, I would be out on the streets. I just like the dark side of life. Now I live in a condominium on Post Street. I got a one-bedroom condominium on the 15th floor. I've lived here for the past six months. The city first housed me in a shelter hotel for COVID and that's how I first got off the streets.

I wasn't raised like this. I had a good upbringing, morals, respect, hard-worker. And I worked. I got older, I started doing more and more and more, because I was turning into a man, I didn't have to listen when I left my parents.

I got tired of doing the 9:00 to 5:00, showing up, just being responsible for things and still being mistreated because of the color of my skin. I got older, the more you go to work, you pay your bills, and shit still seem to be happening to you. But then, I'm looking at the dark side I'm living, things happen for me great. I'm mad every day, not getting respected. I said fuck it. If I'm gonna get blamed for this, I'm going to start doing shit. If I'm going to get blamed that I was stealing, I'm gonna start stealing. Fuck it.

I believe in the Lord, he wakes me up. I don't want to go to church because I'm doing things you're not supposed to do in church. I'm not going to pray to the Lord and go out there and fuck somebody up.

In looking back on my life, I think I've come a long way. I should be dead or in jail but I'm here, I'm alive.

Lawrence



Growing up in the East Bay

I graduated from Berkley High. I moved to San Francisco and got to work right out of high school. And I've been over here ever since. Growing up in the East Bay was okay. It wasn't that strange. I have three sisters, but they grew up in New Orleans. I came out to California and to live with my grandma.

Growing up, I loved gymnastics. I took a liking to it and competed for two years in school. My favorite was the bars. I was pretty good at it. I had really strong arms. I remember my coach, Mr. Duffy. He was really hands-on with his coaching. He took time to illustrate things for us. He never screamed at us athletes which I liked.

I also played in the school band. I wanted to play the trumpet, but the band leader, had me play the clarinet. I was like, "Okay, I'll try it." So, I did that for one year. I liked making my own music.

I also played baseball and basketball in school, but I liked baseball the most. I thought it was fun to catch the ball with a glove.

I loved listening to jazz when I was a kid. We saw performances at a place called The Birdcage. My favorite musicians are Earl Klugh, Ronnie Laws, and Philip Bailey.

My career in sports officiation

I got a job in San Francisco as a sports official. I officiated baseball, basketball, and football for nine years. I refereed for mostly elementary school kids. My favorite part of my job was watching the kids just have so much fun. I loved supporting them and watching them grow not only as athletes but people. My favorite sport to officiate was baseball because the players need good hand and eye coordination. I always worked games at San Pablo Park in Berkely. I got a lot of running and exercise in while on the job which I liked.

I knew I wanted to officiate because I enjoyed watching talented kids grow up and become stars. I watched several children become pros in their sport which was really cool. I learned how to be

patient and not to take anger or frustration out on children because they often don't know any better. Now I just watch sports for fun.

About my life now

I've lived in the Tenderloin for about seven years now. I like to walk over to a peaceful garden in SOMA. I hang out at Curry Senior Center mostly to eat.

I'm a pretty easygoing person. I keep to myself. I try and get along with everyone. And I don't like to be picked on. I was bullied in high school. I learned not to let it get to the best of me.

I was with a friend of mine, Earl, and we were playing basketball, and he was on the court, and he fell down and started having a seizure. When I saw him collapse, I thought, "What's wrong with him? What happened? Is he going to be okay?" It shook me up because I didn't know if he was going to survive or not.

He ended up being okay but it was scary to see a friend in need of help. We became friends in high school and have stayed in touch since then.

Leslie

My name is Leslie Elliott. I was born in Harrisburg Pennsylvania. I am 69 years and 8months old. I grew up in A military family, I cannot remember all of the states and schools I attended.

Now I live in San Francisco California.I really enjoy the Curry Senior Center, The Center let's me be more social with people that are in age category and I do not feel self conscious about having to be concerned about having to getting up in a senior manner and I have maybe and connected with people that I have known for many years.

I feel that my life has not been easy, I also have been married. It lasted for 17 years,I still think about him at times.I have good and bad thoughts about my being married to a white male.

I recall seeing black men hanging from trees while visiting my grandparents when I was a child in Pickens Mississippi, my mother said not to look but as a child of four years old ,I feel that it made an impression on me.

As of now I'm not in contact with my family, They are on the east coast and a sister in Houston Texas.I would like to leave my assets to family. My twin passed and left his house and jags to a girlfriend that we never knew.

As of now, I'm looking for a new apartment and hoping to start a new life as I will be 70 years old in three months.

Linda



Moving to San Francisco and finding sobriety and my partner

I'm was born and raised in Sacramento and moved to San Francisco in 2012. At the time, I was desperate to get help for my addiction. Before I decided to move, I had heard of Harbor Light, a residential adult treatment center in San Francisco. I've been part of their programs for a good seven years and through Harbor Light, I've learned a lot about myself, other people, and different cultures. Eventually, I became a dorm leader at the residency. At first, I didn't consider myself someone that can manage conflict resolution as a dorm leader but the staff at Harbor Light taught me to become a confident person that can take charge in stressful situations.

I've had relapses over the years—sobriety is a constant struggle for addicts—and I ended up spending my 60th birthday in detox. But I've been sober for two years now. I'm still struggling in other areas, but that I wanted solid sobriety. I'm off that bottle because that's what takes me down. And I only smoke one cigarette a day and I've smoked since I was 13 years old so it's big. I can go most of the day and not even think about smoking. My partner, Robert inspires me because he doesn't drink or smoke. We've been together for about 16 months.

Robert and I met at Wycombe Hotel which is a safe space for homeless people that are hoping to transition into a long-term apartment, which I eventually got. I live in the apartment that was provided to me through this program. I just happened to be at the right place at the right time, and ba-da-bing, ba-da-boom—I got a life partner and a permanent place to live. I love him to death. Robert is four years older than me. When I look back on my life, the men I admire most or have the most fun have always been just four years older. Always that four-year thing. And it just gives me an extra connection.

My favorite things about San Francisco

I love the diversity of San Francisco. That's huge. Really, it's cool. I've always loved San Francisco. Me growing up in Sac, all I had to do is see that sign on the I-80 highway with all those arrows. I would just light up like a Christmas tree because I'd get so excited. And I've always had fun here. I love the Giants. I love my recovery friends, they are just wonderful. I love it here, I just don't like the hills, so I stick to the flatlands. I used to live in Lower Nob Hill. If I

lived a few more blocks north where it's hilly, I wouldn't have made it, especially now that I have severe arthritis. I'm waiting to get an operation to help with the pain.

San Francisco has so many resources for less fortunate people. I think that's what I love more than anything. Everybody has a chance—from the poorest of the poor to the grandma living in Nob Hill. Everyone can get the help they need. Nobody must starve. Nobody must be alone. You just have to reach out, that's the hardest, is asking for help. I found help through Harbor Light and they really helped me get my footing.

I just did the footwork, and I believe God did the rest. He gave me direction and I just stepped up to my own plate. Boom, boom, boom, and got in. My apartment is on the corner of Ninth and Mission. Now that I think about it, I should have picked a place a little farther away from all the action, but I was scared. Harbor Light is really close by, my doctor is right down the street and Walgreens is right around the corner. I justified moving right there. I'm just so proud to be in my apartment. I pay \$200 per month in rent and it's so clean and nice and we have a nice rooftop garden.

I like to take pictures from my roof. I love photographs. I'll also walk around in my neighborhood, and if I see something I like, I'll take a picture of it. I love doing that. And there's some people across the street and most of them are black, and now they're my friends, and they hang out outside on the street. Some of them are homeless. I've gotten to know them, and they trust me. It made me feel good yesterday when I told a few of them, "If you need a place to store something, because the weather is going to turn really bad, real quick, you could always store it in my place. That's fine." They replied, "Oh, that's so sweet." I'm trying to support my small community in whatever ways I'm able to.

It makes me feel good that I'm doing these small acts of kindness. I may not be rich and can't donate to organizations but I make a difference by doing something small like that every day because being an alcoholic and a drug addict, we're notorious for being narcissistic and self-centered with the mentality, "As long as I get mine, I don't care about you." It's so important for us to be kind to each other. I told the homeless people living near my building, "You trust me, I trust you. And if you ever need me, you know where I am."

We're more alike than different—that's one thing that recovery teaches us. To look for the similarities instead of the differences. It's so important, and it's easier said than done, but that's what I'm trying to achieve.

Now I've got to share my favorite restaurant in San Francisco, which happens to be right around the corner from me. AK Subs on Eighth and Harrison is phenomenal. If the cops go there, you know it's a good place to eat. They have the best breakfast sandwiches, the best pastrami, the best burgers. It's reasonably priced too. The owner is a sweetheart. She's really nice. They live upstairs above the deli. They close early, though, so you got to get there early. My favorite thing to order there is the cheeseburger.

My careers

I worked for the state for years. That was the best job I had. I've also been a caregiver and a security guard. Those are the three main jobs I've had.

I worked as a data entry operator for the Department of Justice. That was a good job, but I was in my addiction during that time, and things just happen. You make poor choices when you're high. I hate to say it, but that's usually how it works.

I worked a lot of jobs. I'm glad that I have downtime now. I don't have to worry about getting up at the crack of dawn to be disrespected by a bunch of customers all day long. Customer service is hard. I worked for Target for three years but working for state was my favorite career because each day I went into an office full of people and didn't have to deal with the public.

My cats

I grew up with two cats, Sapphire and Pearl. Pearl outlived my parents and lived to be 22 years old. When I was eight years old, my sister and I were at the park and saw somebody throw Pearl out of the back of a station wagon. We brought the cat home and asked, "Mom, can we keep her?" That night, Pearl bunched up in the bathroom carpet and in the middle of the night, our mom got up to go to the bathroom, slipped on that carpet, and cracked her ribs.

Our other cat, Sapphire hated people. She was my cat, but she didn't like any of us. Sapphire died of throat cancer when I was about 12, but Pearl lived on another 10 years.

After I moved out on my own, and I got my own big cat named Joey. I named him after my dad because I got him on Father's Day. He was a tuxedo kitty. Joey wasn't a fat cat but his body was long. My boyfriend at the time had a pit that would come over to my apartment occasionally, and that pit walked through my front door and Joey was just staring at him and went, whack. I scolded him, "You gotta be a good kitty, good kitty." I was laughing.

My sister, Laurie

My sister also lives in California and we talk on the phone all the time but haven't seen each other in person in more than fifteen years. For some reason, this kind of relationship just works for her and I.

Laurie is also an alcoholic, but she's been sober. She pulled herself out of a really bad way. I thought she was going to die at one point. She sold her home and pulled herself up by her bootstraps. One year, she had to put two dogs down, and that alone would send somebody to drink, but she's tough. Her children don't talk to her much which is sad.

She gave birth to three girls through all natural deliveries. I told Laurie once, "That's the thanks you get, they don't even talk to you. Where's the love? Where's the forgiveness?" We grew up in a family that brushed things under the carpet. We don't talk about these things. Laurie is still kind of hush-hush about stuff, but I'm not. I tell Laurie everything. I try to be very transparent and respect her because she's like a life coach to me. Laurie and Robert are my best friends.

The power of creativity and its impact on my life

One of my hobbies is repurposing things. I try not to spend too much money, so I go to Target to buy acrylic paints and brushes and paint during the day. To get festive for the holidays like Halloween, I found gourds and a little pumpkin. I painted them with the acrylic paints and a sharpie Sharpie. And I just thought it was the cutest little thing.

I created a hand-made tiny curtain for the window adjacent to my bay window. I just love doing stuff like that now. I never thought I would. When I was living in the hotel, I started doing more arts and crafts. And throughout the COVID pandemic, I've gotten really, really creative since I'm bored. I don't have much spare money and I thought, well, what could I do to keep busy? So, for example, I'd take an old shirt, and turn it into a curtain for my bathroom window, so all kinds of things.

You'd be surprised how creative you can be. I was just blown away at what I was able to create with my bare hands. I go on Pinterest to get different ideas and I'm proud of the stuff I've created. My sister once told me, "That's pride in ownership. That's why you're keeping everything so nice and neat and clean. That's pride in ownership, Linda. That's a really good thing." And it made me feel good.

I recently painted a picture, and I couldn't believe how well it turned out. I call it "Don't Fence Me In." And it's supposed to be my version of the beach. My dad was an artist so maybe that's where I get it from. I showed my painting to my sister and she said, "Linda, that's really good." I couldn't believe she said that. I'm so proud of it. I could just and stare at it all day. What I've recently gotten into the habit of doing is making lampshades out of scarves.

Michael

About me

My name is Michael and presently, I am 66 years of age. I am a Navy veteran where I was an aircraft electrician. After the military, I worked with several different companies, civil service. I traveled extensively for work while in and out of the military. I was stationed at Pensacola and after I got out, I moved back to Dayton, Ohio, and worked with different companies, and it allowed me to travel. I traveled all across this country to different air force bases. I've lived in Panama and Guam, and modified airplanes with Lockheed Martin.

I fell 25 feet and broke my neck and back on 6/17/99 in the Columbus Ohio Airport. I moved out here to receive Botox in Dayton at Sanford University.

My childhood

I was born in Philadelphia and grew up in Dayton, Ohio. My parents built a house in Ohio, and on each end of the street there was a park and one had a swimming pool.

My father had a gas station. He was a Shell dealer, and I worked there, and he paid me 90 cents an hour. That's how I was able to buy a pony. One of my favorite memories of my childhood was my pony named King. He was bay, which is black and brown. I got my license when I was 16 and I bought a car. We were middle class but, shoot.

My family

I have a twin sister and just recently I lost my brother-in-law to lymphoma cancer from Roundup, the fertilizer. He had no idea that he had cancer, and he went to the hospital for what he thought was a bad cold and end up staying there for six days and on the seventh day he passed away. He was 68 years old.

I've been married three times. My first wife was my high school sweetheart, and all of my children are with her. I met my second wife in Panama. As soon as I saw her, I told one of my coworkers, "That's going to be my next wife." My third wife and I moved out to Mountain View but that didn't work out too well because had an affair.

I have three children. My oldest daughter, only daughter is 48. I have a son, and he's 46. But my youngest son was murdered in a carjacking three days before his 19th birthday in 1999. I'm thankful that I had a chance to see him the day before he passed away. My sister and her husband were stationed in Fort Ord, Kentucky so, I'd gone there to visit them. Then, after being there one day, my son called me and told me that my youngest son had been murdered in a carjacking. Someone tried to take his car, and they shot him in the chest. So, I had to run and be back in Dayton the next day, and the first place that I stopped was the coroner's office. I wanted to see the body but they said, "Well, he's not cleaned up." And they brought a Polaroid snapshot of his face.

My legacy

I never imagined living this long because my mother died at 54 of lung cancer, and I never imagined that I'd be this far along in life. I've worked hard my whole life. I have a beautiful family and I thank god I have 15 grandchildren. And 12 great grandchildren. I want future generations of my family to learn to enjoy yourselves. No days are guaranteed.

I'm thankful that I've been able to enjoy myself throughout life. Even though I had lumps and bumps it's okay. I've managed so far. I'm proud of what I've been able to accomplish.

MJ



About me

The first time I came to San Francisco, somebody told me, "Go to San Francisco, they'll get you." So I came, they didn't get me. I called back home to see how everything was going, and my sister who was tough as nails was crying and I said to myself, "Oh great. I gotta go see what's going on back home," and I was stuck at home for 13 years. I finally made it back because I told my best friend on her death bed that I would move here. She was important in my life.

I was born in Terre Haute, Indiana and raised in Chicago. I eventually moved permanently to San Francisco. I've also traveled a lot—Central America, Japan, Mexico, Canada. My favorite time in my life was visiting in Japan because I didn't have to worry about trying to understand people and vice versa. I was able to completely relax.

My community in Chicago

It has been difficult finding a community in San Francisco, mostly because of the social status that people have against our group, Black lesbians. That's something that we didn't have in Chicago. In Chicago, I knew of two young Black lesbian women who until they met me didn't know there was such a thing as an older Black lesbian. These women were a mess and kept saying they wanted to meet other Black lesbians. I told them they needed to put a group together. One of the women replied, "Well, I don't know how to do that." I said, "Well, I'll do it for you." So I created a group called the Black Lesbian Rep group of Chicago. We had prominent people like Audrey Lauren, Pat Parker, Beverly and Barbara Smith as members of our community. We had a standing rule that if somebody had a major problem, whatever the topic was for that particular day, they would be suspended. We had some things come through that door that I will never forget. I met a woman who said she had just come back from visiting an inmate at Cook County Jail. She went to see the man who had raped and killed her four-year-old daughter. We all looked at her and said, "You did what?!" She said, "I had to go and tell him that I forgave him." We repeated, "You did what?!" She said her daughter was all about smiles and happiness, and she just couldn't have that hanging over the memories she had of her child. So, she had to get that off her conscious. There were so many incredible women like her who were part of our community.

Smaller groups formed from our larger group. One of those was a book group, another was a social

group where they hosted parties. We had a very loose definition of what it means to be a Black lesbian. Anybody who wanted to claim African blood was considered a Black lesbian. We had women from Puerto Rico, South Africa, Liverpool, England, who were all members of the group. At one of our annual meetings, we had 102 women. I worked with that group for about three years until I was too tired. That's when I backed off and they took 90 days to dissolve because nobody understood how much work goes on into trying to keep a group going.

My thoughts on San Francisco

What do I think of San Francisco? Highly overrated. They told me it was liberal here. Chicago is a whole lot more liberal than San Francisco. San Francisco is racist and in the most surprising places. In Chicago, this certain kind of racism just didn't exist. I'll give you an example. There was a contractor who was working on one of the major expressways in Chicago, and the contractor was from outside of Chicago. The Urban League, which is a Black organization called the Hispanic organizations, Mexican organizations, African organizations, called Chinese organizations—all of the different people who had contracting jobs within the city of Chicago and found out they didn't have any work.

The Urban League hosted a huge brunch for these organizations to get everyone together. They could eat all they wanted, but then when they were finished, one of the leaders of the Urban League said, "Hey guys, guess what? They just gave a huge contract to some white dude out in the suburbs. What are we going to do about it? We're going to shut them down. That's what we're going to do." Monday morning, they shut them down, by Wednesday everybody had a piece of the action. They don't have anything like that here in San Francisco.

I don't get how much people don't understand, how much people disrespect others. I'm gay. I've been openly gay my entire life and life has not been fun for me many times. I get angry when I hear people say dumb things like calling me a bi-lesbian. There's no such thing as bi-lesbian. Either you're bi or you're lesbian. You can't be a bi-lesbian.

There are many things I do like about San Francisco. This city has some usual things like the Academy of Science light show and the sea lions that hang out on the beaches. I'm turning a corner walking down a street and there's all these sealions. I said, "Where the hell did they come

from?" It's neat to see how the city accommodates them. Leave the sea lions alone, put your boat someplace else. My favorite part of the city is probably Dolores Park. It gives you such a beautiful view of the city in all directions. Plus, it has a Spanish feel to it.

However, there are a lot of things about San Francisco that need to change. Its relationship between the Black community as a whole sucks. The relationship that the city has with the Chinese community sucks. The relationship the city has with the Latin community sucks. The only folks I think that really get along with the city are the Irish. I don't get it. The folks who are most responsible for building this country and making it what it is are the people who are least respected. Makes no sense.

College

I went to college at San Francisco State and studied fine arts cinema. If you were sincere and you wanted to learn, the teachers were there for you. They helped you in every single way. I had a teaching assistant who took one of my quizzes and gave me a D-. I said, "D-?! this is a A- paper." I took my paper to the professor and the professor said, "This is an A+ paper." The person who graded it didn't know all the terms that I used. The teaching assistant immediately apologized. But I learned a heck of a lot about film. I learned a heck of a lot about the sexism involved in movies. Oh, geez.

I chose the major after they told me I couldn't go to law school. They wouldn't let me in law school and I said, well, if I can't change society by being a lawyer, I can surely show society how fucked up they are, and they were going to change by looking in the mirror.

Giving back to my neighborhood

I started working at The Safe Passage Program when I noticed government officials weren't taking care of their residents. I had this idea that we should get fathers, uncles, brothers, grandfathers together out on the streets to watch out for the children as they go to and from school.

I started getting worried about the kids in the community. These kids are so fantastically resilient. When I was at San Francisco State, I was forever running into kids who used to be in the daycare centers when I was trying to keep folks from shooting drugs in front of the daycare center. The kids had gotten their own four-year scholarships. I was proud.

My mother and grandmother

My brother committed suicide after he came back from fighting in the Vietnam War. My sister and I were trying to put together his obituary and service, and my mother came and stood up over me and with tears rolling down her cheeks, said to me, "That should have been you, not my baby." My sister rolled her eyes, looked up on my mother, got up and moved away from the table. My mother stood over me and said again, "That should have been you, not my baby." My sister stood just there and looked at my mother. Finally, my mother said for the third time, "That should have been you." I said, "But it wasn't. It was your baby. So that's the end of that. Now go away, I'm busy." My sister said, "I thought you were going to hit her." I said, "For what?" She said, "For what she said." I said, "That's not going change what she said." My mother had been doing stuff like that to me all my life. I knew how to handle her. I knew she was very upset when she said these things.

When I was getting ready to move across the country, my mother asked me, "Why are you moving to California? Why are you moving to San Francisco?" I said because I hate snow. She said, "You never told me anything about it." I said, "What were you going to do?" I'm just now coming to peace with the fact that my mother couldn't be a mother. Period. I realized that she resented me, and I didn't understand why she resented me. Then I found out why, and then I said, "That's the reason she resented me? Fuck her, man." That was not on me. That was on her. So, I quit trying to win her attention and her approval. I really wanted my grandmother's attention and approval because the first four years of my life I thought my grandmother was my mother. We called her mother and we called my birth mother Maryanne.

Maryanne had Alzheimer's before she passed away. My sister called me from Chicago and said, "Mother dear is in hospital. She has Alzheimer's." I said, "Oh, that's too bad." She said, "When are you coming back here?" I said, "Coming back where? To Chicago?" I said, for what? She

said, "You ain't got no kids so you can take care of her." I said, "Hey, wait a minute. You had the same options as I did. You didn't have to have kids." She said, "Well, you ain't got no reason to stay in San Francisco." I said, "You don't know that." At some point she said, "Well, I can't take care of her. Just don't put her in a nursing home." I said, "I guess that's where she's going to have to go." She said, "Why don't you want to come and take care of her?" I said, when I was a kid she did a lot of horrible little things to me, and I'm no saint. She might get on my nerve one day and I might start thinking about all those little horrible things she did to me, and she'd get in trouble. I said, "No, I don't want the temptation." My sister said, "But she did horrible things to me too." I said, "No, she didn't. Don't even try." My mother died and my sister didn't speak to me because I didn't show up for the funeral. I didn't show up for the funeral because somebody stole my identity and cleaned out my bank account. By the time I got some money it was the day of the funeral, and I couldn't get there on time. I felt terrible. I tried to reach out to my sister, but she lives in a fairy tale world.

My beloved dog, Diva

I live in a building in The Haight and it's specifically for gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual seniors. When I turned my back and focused my attention elsewhere, somebody changed a whole lot of the stuff that we fought for as residents. The leadership of the organization changed, and the new Executive Director accepted federal grants so the building could no longer be open to just LGBTQ seniors. It's not exactly what I wanted and it's not exactly how I wanted it. My favorite part about where I live is that it's within walking distance from the best dog park in the city.

Diva passed away so I don't have a dog anymore. It's going to take a long time for me to get past her death. She lived with me for 13 years of my life. For 13 years Diva was with me 24/7. The three days she wasn't with me over that time period—the day she got sick and I had to take her to the vet hospital, and they kept her overnight.

On another instance, I went to the doctor, and my doctor thought I was having a heart attack, so she called an ambulance and I had to stay at the hospital. Diva got placed overnight in what they called animal control and care. A nightmare. They didn't want to give her back, but I fought for her. This happened twice to us!

Diva was diagnosed with cancer and I think it's from all of the junk they put in dog food. Towards the end of her life, she lost most of her hair, she lost a bunch of weight. She completely lost her sight in one eye. Every night I thought she was going to die. I was down on the floor sleeping next to her. The biggest loss of my life is still Diva. Dogs give you unconditional love no matter what. This may sound really strange, but I've never felt unconditional love until I had a dog.

My love for reading

I had epilepsy and my mother wouldn't let me go and play. So to keep me from embarrassing her by going out and having seizures, she got me into a book club. I read books so fast that my mother couldn't keep up with me. And I still do that. In fact, at one point I used to read three books simultaneously. My eyes aren't that good anymore, so I can't do that. But that's what I loved to do. I used to love reading.

Monique



About my birth and early childhood

I was born in Boston and I grew up in L.A. area. My mother brought me to Hollywood when I was five years old because she was a singer herself and wanted to get started in the business.

Unfortunately, I was born prematurely at only six months because she had a severe drug and alcohol problem. I weighed about four pounds at birth. Her doctors didn't think I would live, but now I'm 83 years old and I've survived a lot which you'll read about later. They didn't have methadone then and doctors didn't know to kick heroin for a baby. They didn't have anything. And my mother also had an alcohol problem. How I even got to live through that, I don't know.

From a young age my mother sold me to guys downstairs. She worked in this club downstairs from where we lived on Gower Street, next door to Desilu Studios, where they produced, "I Love Lucy." She started bringing guys up to pay to have oral sex with me so she could buy more heroin.

Sometimes, she'd take off and be gone for a couple of weeks at a time and the neighbors would give me some cornflakes and I ate them with water. I washed out my little dress and I went to school every day even though my mother wasn't around. That dress was a horrible mustard color, and I'd rinse it out the best a five-year-old can. It never was completely dry, but I'd put it on again and go to school. I had a pair of Mary Jane shoes with a buckle. But they was so fucked up from wearing them so many times that I cut the buckles off. I used cardboard for the bottoms of my shoes and whenever it rained, I had to change the cardboard. Kids in school would be so cruel and make fun of me for wearing the same thing every day.

Escaping foster care

I fully believe in the saying, "what don't kill you, makes you stronger." I was eventually taken away from my mother and put into foster care with a family that lived in Compton, but my foster father abused me. Social workers would stop by every three or four months to make sure I was doing okay, but it was a joke. One time I told the visiting social worker what was happening to me, and she patted me on the knee and said, I quote, "Now, now dear, we don't talk about those things."

My foster father always wore a belt with a gun when I lived with him because he worked as a security guard at a market. Every night after he came home from work, I'd hear him take his belt off and slam it on his dresser. After that, he would come into my room. I could hear that sound every night. I'd be lying in bed waiting for it. To this day, because of that traumatizing experience, I have a really difficult time sleeping.

Years later I was looking through this newspaper and there was a little tiny article about a security guard that had been murdered by a burglar. The security guard was my foster father, Mr. Jordan.

I remember the day I ran away. I was twelve years old, and it was Halloween. My birthday is November 10th so I ran off just before I turned thirteen and never looked back. I jumped in this cab with a guy named James. It turned out, he worked for General Motors where he drove a cab on the weekend, and I ended up married to him. He was 36 at the time. I remember I lied and told him I was 16. I must have looked young because I had no makeup on, my hair in braided pigtails.

James took my virginity. I remember he took me to his home, led me to the couch and put a pillow over my face. I was screaming. He said to me angrily, "You're going to wake up my roommates." Well, I found out much later that his "roommates" were his wife and two teenage daughters.

But anyway, we ended up marrying in some stupid little ceremony where he had a friend of his that was a pastor supposedly, but who knows. We did go get a license at the Hall of Justice in Compton.

My career at the DMV

I had only four years of education but somehow, I beat 3,000 other applicants to get a job at the DMV and it's the best thing I ever did. At the time, the DMV didn't accept GEDs, so I had to fake a diploma to apply.

It's a very difficult application process. You first must show up to a government building to take a written test. They narrow candidates down after that, and they continue to narrow the list down with a math test and vocabulary test. Next, you have oral interviews in front of a panel and then in front of three people and then in front of one. It takes a year to get the job because it's such an involved process.

I knew that this one high school, Fairfax High School, had burned down the week I applied. And so, I on my application, I said that I went to Fairfax High School. Of course, the transcripts were kept at the school and back then, we didn't have computers, so I got away with this fib.

The DMV had eleven positions open and had 3,000 some people apply. With only four years of school, I got one of those eleven positions. That was one of the most important things of my life. I don't know how I even passed the mathematics portion. I just winged it.

I got to work at the Culver City office which was very lucky of me because I lived in Culver City at the time. The DMV could have sent me anywhere in California and you wouldn't have a choice. I worked at the DMV for 20 years.

The Culver City DMV was down the street from MGM Studios. We saw famous people all the time. Going to the DMV is one of the few things you can't make an assistant do. You have to show up to get your own license. We had a rule, a special rule for that office which was no autographs.

Using songs to face my trauma

I'm a singer and songwriter. I'm a legend in my own mind anyway. I've written about 400 songs, but mostly they're in the form of poems. I was thinking the other day about one of the pieces I wrote when I was really young and I thought, "God damn, that is so sad. No child should've been writing about something that sad." I wrote a song called "L.A. Nights" which was published in a book called "An Anthology of San Francisco Poetry."

Nighttime might be the right time for living fantasies. This one and that one who never hold the keys. Maybe they too are searching as people do in this L.A. nighttime for you. Like a stage with all the players dressed up for their parts and all the men and all the ladies hurt by them, something, searched for long lost hearts. And say, get your hat and get your coat. Wait, and I'll get mine. And then we'll go to a place I know in L.A. nighttime. And make love in L.A. nighttime.

I wrote that around the same time I ran away. I wrote another poem at the same time which was just as sad. It says:

Oh, things are changing much too fast. Oh, maybe I'm lucky you going so slowly because I'm probably going in the wrong direction. My life has never been my selection. Maybe I'm lucky you're going in the wrong direction. My mind is confused beyond detection. Again, I know I'm going in the wrong direction. Things are changing much too fast. And sometimes, I wonder if it's all gonna last. The world is on an erratic spin. When did it start and how does it end? Changing times and people and places. Distrustful minds and unsmiling faces. Yes, things are changing way too fast. And I ask you, my friend, do you think it'll last?

Thirteen-year-old girls should be playing with Barbies. I shouldn't have been thinking about shit like that. Distrustful minds and unsmiling faces? The fuck is writing that. I shouldn't have had any experience in my lifetime to even think of that. It's not normal by any stretch of the imagination.

Children and families have so many more resources now than they used to have for runaways. When I was a child, they'd just arrest us and take us to McLaren Hall which was like a juvenile hall but for children that didn't commit any crimes.

I had gonorrhoea in my throat when I was six or seven, and a trained professional should see that

and recognize the type of living situation I was in. Yet, this nurse, not only was she mean, but she was stupid. She said, "You should have kept your legs closed." "What the fuck has that got to do with me having gonorrhoea in my throat, you stupid woman?"

I feel like I've spent my whole life trying to survive some insane something. And being a survivor is wonderful. But I want to just live. Just let me live. I've remained a positive person despite all of these experiences, because you know why, because you have to. I've had to. There's been so many horrible things that sometimes you gotta laugh to keep from crying.

Surviving cancer with the lucky help of my son

I've had cancer twice. I survived that too. I wouldn't be alive if I had never gotten pregnant. When I was in my late 30s, I flew to Las Vegas for the weekend and I was eating breakfast and threw up, I remember, on the way back to L.A., and I just knew I was pregnant. I had never used any birth control. From the age of 12, I had never used birth control, so it was quite surprising.

I just had a normal pap smear six months before I found out I was pregnant, but when I went in for my first pregnancy check-up, they discovered I already had stage three cancer. If they hadn't caught it then, I would surely be dead by now. I wouldn't have gotten my next pap smear for another five years.

My son, Jason, is 47 years old and he's something else. He provided my life. He lives in San Jose right now with his mother-in-law and girlfriend. They've been together for almost seven years. I had so many sparkly gowns when I was younger and when Jason was still little, he was so cute. He said, "Mommy, you're so sparkly. Mommy, you so pretty and you mine too." I love him so much. He is my everything.

Robert



My family

I came from a nice family. I'm the baby of seven kids. We moved from Alameda to a nice house in North Oakland when I was 10 years old. My daddy started the first Black cab company in the Bay Area called City Cab. I never drove a cab but two of my brothers did and then they sold the cab company, but they got good money out of it. They got good money. They mostly drove in Oakland but whenever he'd get a chance to take a fare to San Francisco, good money. They had a lot of rides to the airport. When we first moved to San Francisco, we lived on Turk Street.

When I went to the state basketball championships in high school, I wasn't very tall, about 5-10. There were at least dudes on the team that were bigger than me. Me and Rickey Henderson rode up together. We played baseball and Rickey always told me, "If I go to the Hall of Fame you can come be there with me." When that time finally came, I was in the San Francisco county jail and I missed his induction into the hall of fame. I just watched it on TV. I said, "Oh, I should've been there. I should've been there." But he's still my homeboy.

I moved to San Francisco with my baby's mama in 1985. The only thing they were selling on the streets in 1985 were late-night transfers. The first time I saw that, I said, "You can't ride a bus in Oakland for free. They don't give you no transfer." But they did. I didn't know what they were talking about. Then over the years I said, "Everybody in San Francisco rides the bus for free."

I have two sons and two daughters. Crystal and her brother got the same mother—a white woman from St. Louis. My firstborn son's mama is from West Oakland. My second daughter, worked for Macy's for five years but now she spends most of her time going to church and singing. I'm also proud of her. She doesn't get along with Crystal because Crystal isn't religious.

In 1985, one of my daughters, Crystal, won a beauty contest. Crystal, she won big time. She inherited her mother's looks but otherwise, she is just like me. We're both tall, she's about 5'11" or six feet tall. I played basketball myself, and she played basketball in Oakland at Castlemont, and they went to the state championships. I played at Oakland Tech and I went to the state championships. But my sons, they don't play no sports.

Crystal could've made it to the WNBA, but in high school, she tore a ligament in her knee, so that knocked her basketball career out. She's such a hard working person. Now, she works two jobs to support two kids, and she's independent. I'm really proud of Crystal. I love her so much; when she was a baby, I carried her around like the mother would. Crystal was born right down the street, but my parents didn't have an address in Oakland, and she liked Oakland schools better than San Francisco schools.

I have a leg injury from playing basketball. I have a cane, but I don't really use it that much. But, I can still play basketball. My daughter, she's been so proud. She said, "Daddy, there's not too many dudes that are as old as you and can move like you. Most can't even walk, can't even talk."

Crystal was going to marry the father of her baby but he was killed. She was saying, "Daddy, I got a baby on the way, no daddy." When she comes around the Tenderloin, even though a lot of people think she's from Oakland, she know the Tenderloin better than any of them.

My sons are named Robert, and Marcellus. I'm proud of Marcellus. He's a good mechanic and knows how to fix cars but he drives too fast. I don't like riding with him.

San Francisco

San Francisco has treated me pretty good. It's such a unique city; With San Francisco, you could meet a millionaire on one block and meet 10 homeless people in 10 steps. I might wake up, have \$5 in my pocket but I can go eat. I turned 67 this year and I kind of mellowed out. My kids, they see that. They said, "Dad, you're kinda mellow." I said, "No, I'm not mellow. I learned through the streets of San Francisco." To me, this is the best city on the West Coast, and I've been in a lot of cities. This is better than Los Angeles, better than Seattle.

One day I was walking down the street with my daughter and some kid from GLIDE saw my baby and I said, "Well, my baby's a newborn. We're thinking about moving over here." Within three days they got us an apartment, they got us food stamps. I didn't even know what GLIDE was. They paid the first and last month's rent and moved us in. I tell a lot of my friends, no matter what, San Francisco, regardless of the drugs, regardless of the people on the streets, it's the first place that you can get shelter and food with no problem.

My favorite Bay Area artist is Keyshia Cole. I know her mother. Her mother used to stay right out there. I met her mother when she was 15, I was 20, and that's my friend. And I used to see Keyshia singing as a little girl at church, and then when she got famous, her mother, Frankie, she used to be walking around the Tenderloin, saying, "That's my daughter." People didn't believe her. Now Frankie's got her own little show in Atlanta, but she still comes back to visit. She's doing good. She's been in rehab. When Frankie visits the Tenderloin she gives away money and food. The last time Keyshia had a concert in the Oakland Coliseum, Frankie bought tickets for about eight people in the Tenderloin. I was one of them.

I also know the guy from the Allstate commercials. Good dude. He shocked me because I was looking at him like, "Where do I know this man from?" You'd be surprised how many famous people live here. I met a dude that plays for the Oakland A's at St. Anthony. I was looking at him and I said, "Brother, you play for the A's?" He said, "Yeah. I was second baseman."

I can get along with everybody. I ain't met too many people that I didn't like. Yeah, I don't mind, I like them, I can live with them, I can play with them, I can laugh with them, cry with them. Me and my daddy have the same personality. I know everybody used to like him. They said, "Man, your daddy cool." Now I can see he is now. I can see how cool he was because I can see how I am. I said, "I'm glad."

Sheila



Growing up and my family

I was one of six children and second youngest. I had four brothers and one sister. My daddy was a postman and retired after 32 years from the Post Office on Jackson Street in Oakland. We moved to the Bay Area from Orange, Texas which is by the border of Louisiana near Lake Charles. I still have a lot of kinfolks out there but many family members moved to the West at the same time. Along with my family was also my dad's sister, her husband and my other dad's sister.

After we moved to the west coast, my parents bought a camper and all of us would fit into it and travel around the South. We'd get out of school and drive back to Texas, Austin, Houston, Louisiana, where my mother's family lived. I was raised on Southern food. That is all I know how to cook is Southern food. I miss the boudin. I miss all that. They call it blessed sausage. There's a certain way you make it, but it's so delicious. We had fun. We'd go fishing and I love to go fishing and crabbing.

I have a good doctor. She's very excellent. I can't ask for nothing more, for the simple fact that she cares. I remember when I was younger, doctors used to come and do house visits, but my doctor now doesn't do house visits. When she calls you, especially after you take a test, and it's not right, she tells you what her concerns are and what you need to do. She takes the time to explain what's happening and that shows she cares. A lot of doctors just know you by a number, as an individual. I have lots of healthcare professionals in my family. My uncle was a doctor. My mother was a RN. All my aunties were nurses. I just didn't have the stomach for it. My mom worked for a maternity ward. My uncle was the president of the Medical Association in Oakland. He also had a private practice and worked in Yountville. My aunt and uncle had a 17-acre ranch in Scotland Hills. When my parents were out of town, we'd stay with them and go horseback riding.

We had a good childhood, I know that. We were considered middle class and had a three-bedroom house in Oakland with a living room, a dining room. We had a huge backyard, like three levels. My mom used to have chickens back there, and they loved to go get the eggs.

My brother had a big old pigeon coop that he raised pigeons. He had tumblers. They were trained. But we had this man called "The pigeon man" that would stop by and buy the baby pigeons. I didn't know until I got older but he would eat the baby ones.

I grew up learning to love animals. I have a cat at home, BJ. He is my heart right now. I've always cared about animals all my life. I can't see myself without one.

I named BJ after my grandson who was murdered. He was only 18 months old. That's my oldest daughter's baby. She was staying with this lady in the Sunnysdale Projects, and they both were in a homeless shelter. They made a deal—whoever got the first place, the other one would come live with them. They would take turns watching each other's kids when they all had to go to an appointment or do something, but it was always hard to watch both kids. So this time, because Tina had to take Tiffany, my granddaughter, to the doctor, and she left BJ with the lady. Well, the lady had a son we didn't know anything about. He was 18 months old. He beat my grandson to death because he wouldn't stop crying. It was all in the news and everything. They thought my daughter did it, but she didn't do it. She wasn't even there. It still gets me today.

I have other grandkids but BJ was my first grandson, first grandbaby, and he was my little heart. After his death, I found myself shying away, trying not to get too close to my other grandkids, because I didn't want to be hurt like that again. Still, to this day, I put myself at a little bit of a distance, so I won't get so emotionally involved. But I love them, I treat them good. I do the best I can.

My husband

I got married in 2003 and my husband was a truck driver. We've been all over the United States. I traveled with him while he worked—I was like his sidekick. I like the South the most. We'd go and pick up loads, drop off loads. We stayed at truck stops so we had to take a shower at the truck stop. That's the only part I didn't like. I told my husband, "I need a bath." He said, "Well, baby, we gotta get this load at a certain time." So I had to deal with that. We'd use the truck stops to wash our clothes and eat dinner. We had two beds in our sleep-in walker.

My husband is 13 years older than me so he's retired. Before he retired, he also drove cement trucks. One time, he had a bad accident. He was delivering some cement in San Francisco so he was fully loaded at the time. And he kept writing in his suspension book that his air pods of his brakes were not acting right.

The brakes came out. He was driving on an incline, and his car toppled to the side. He couldn't stop the truck. He came all the way down the hill and then flipped 5 feet down a big old ravine.

It was a blessing that he didn't have his seatbelt on, because if he had of, he would have been dead, because the whole side of his cab where he sat was smashed in. So what saved him was, when the cement truck was flipping over, he bounced with it. He was very muscular at the time and I remember him telling me that the paramedics told him, "Mr. Wheeler, next time, would you lose a little weight?" Because they had to carry him out of the truck.

He won't admit it, but I know he was a little fearful afterwards, and he messed up his back a little bit. He uses a walker, but he still gets around. It's just that I think I spoil him too much. I'm trying to get him to exercise more. I'm his caregiver. Curry Center helped me get in to be his caregiver with unlimited stays. I'm not technically a live-in caregiver, which is fine, but I'm there pretty much every day.

I just applied for Section 8, again. And they put me on top of the list because I'm disabled. If I'm selected, my husband can move with me. Out of 27 years together, we've never been separated except when we were at the shelter. We had to fight to get this, because they don't let couples stay together in an SRO.

My health and appearance

We're both on oxygen and I was given an electric wheelchair, but the building I'm currently living in is not handicap accessible. I called Mobility Plus and they said the only reason they couldn't install a temporary ramp is because it would be unstable due to the very steep incline, and if I come out my wheelchair, I might fall. So, I've never ridden the wheelchair. It's difficult because I have to make sure not to move around too much to affect my oxygen levels, but I can't minimize my movement without using a wheelchair. But I deal with it.

People stare at my trach and it's awkward. People stare, wondering what happened. It was a freak accident. I had vocal cord surgery seven years ago and scar tissue grew over my air hole so I wasn't able to breathe. I had an emergency trach and I'm stuck with this for the rest of my life.

I got the idea after watching a baby eat with a bib. I went to my seamstress and asked her to make me an adult bib that could cover my trach. I have seven of them and they're washable and very comfortable. I have plain black and decorated versions. I was surprised that the hospital didn't offer anything similar when I asked.

I just don't believe in giving up. I was used to doing something every five minutes, and I can't live like that anymore. I can't talk and walk at the same time.

I cut my hair real short because I'm not a big fan of hair. I have good hair, but it grows right back. I shaved it bald. I have three daughters and one son. My daughter with the grandkids said, "Mom, you look like a cancer patient." I said, "I'm not a cancer patient." "Why you cut your hair all off?" "Because I don't want to deal with it." All I have to do is, when I take a shower, wash my hair, boom, I'm going. And look what you guys do, go to the shop, you gotta get it braided. I'm not going through all that. I'm too old for that. I've also never worn makeup. My daddy never allowed it. We were Catholic, and we used to have to go to church every Sunday. No fingernail polish, no lipstick, no lip gloss, nothing was allowed.

My careers

I worked at Kmart and designed layouts for the stores. It was fun but challenging. Everything was designed and placed in a certain way to make people buy things.

I also worked for the warehouse at Stanford University. We kept all the merchandise for students in this warehouse—textbooks, computers, jewelry, you name it. I used to drive the forklift and I would have to load all of these books onto the scale, weight them, and they ship them off or have an individual box if they order something. My other responsibility was to deal with UPS and RPS. I had to go through every package slip, but I had my own system. I was a fast worker. My manager once told me, "You need to slow down, because you're making me look bad." I said, "This is my pace. You like it or you don't." He was kinda chubby, just sat there all day.

One day, I was picking up a box, and I turned my back the wrong way and ended up getting three herniated disks and a slipped disk in my neck. I had to stop working because it was too painful, so now I'm on disability and social security. I would prefer to work, but I know I can't, because I just don't have the energy or the breath to do it. I'm not the type to sit behind a cash register. I gotta have movement.

I also worked for a Marriott Courtyard in Hackenberg and I started off in housekeeping. I worked my way up to become a housekeeping supervisor. From there, I wanted to work the front desk, because I was tired of doing 12 rooms a day. There were 183 rooms in that hotel. I wanted to learn how to work the front desk. So what I'd do, I'd go behind the front desk employees and watch how they did things on the computer. I told one of the managers, "I wanna work the front desk." He said, "Okay." I ended up being PIC (person in charge), and when the manager left, I ran the hotel.

I had to settle any disputes whatsoever. Management converted an old hotel in Fisherman's Warf into a Courtyard, so I had to go there and train new employees on our computer system. I've had a lot of different type of experiences.

The Courtyard in Hackenberg is a business hotel, and so I'd get men from out of state working, and they would go home on the weekends. They were very nice. One went to the Olympics and he brought me back a pin from the Olympics. You meet a lot of interesting people working in hospitality. I kind of miss it and wish I could do it again, but I can't. I'm accepting of my situation.

Since I can't work, I volunteer. Sometimes, when I cook too much food, I bring it down to the Tenderloin and give it to the people that are out here on the street. If we can get these people housed, off the streets then it will make a big difference in this neighborhood.

Sheldon



Moving to San Francisco

I'm originally from Markham, Illinois but I moved to Pacifica, California in August of 1981. I was only 23 when I moved across the country, so just a kid. When I first moved, I was living in Pacifica with my friend, Barbara. A few months later, I found a studio apartment in Daly City.

The only person I knew was Barbara and her husband, Constantine because they had a house in Broadview, Illinois. I met Barbara at Columbia College in Chicago. Her husband, Constantine took over a dental practice for a dentist that committed suicide in South San Francisco. I watched over their cats in Illinois while they looked for a house in California. When they finally found one, Barbara talked to me and said, "Sheldon, why don't you move to California? It's much better here. The food is better. The weather is better."

My parents were going through a divorce at the time. I told my parents about my plans to move and my mother said, "You don't know anybody out there. Why are you going out there?" I said, "Well, Barbara's out there." My father was proud, but my mother was really scared of me to come out here.

My diverse careers over the years

I got a job at Shakey's Pizza in Daly City. I don't know if it's still there, but I made pizzas. I then got a job at a Rolling Pin Donuts, which was a factory. I worked there to pay for rent.

I was there for a while and then when I got tired of that job, I started working as a security guard at Dixon Security and I worked in the Montgomery Building on Montgomery Street in San Francisco. I clearly remember the day Natalie Wood, the actress had drowned. I listened to the radio while I was at work, and they announced it during the news. She was one of my favorite actresses.

I think the people in San Francisco are nicer than people in Illinois. When I first visited San Francisco after I moved, I went to Powell Street and people seemed very laid back and friendly. Downtown Chicago is much different than downtown San Francisco.

While I was working security, I got to know this Japanese Hawaiian guy who was a courier, and delivered bags at the Montgomery Building that I was working at. He always made a point to stop and chat with me whenever he dropped packages off at the building. We became acquaintances but then he started asking to borrow cash and I told him no. He said his car had broken down and he needed a car to do his job.

He told me, "If I don't have my car, I won't be able to go to work." I was so naïve when I first moved to California. I believed everything and thought everyone was a good person, so I started loaning him money. Eventually, I found out he was taking the money to gamble in Reno. He was around the same age I was, but he was a con artist. I learned a few lessons from that experience.

Years later, I started working as a salesman at a telemarketing place and I moved to San Jose. I ended up being the top salesman. I got six trophies and six bonus checks. I was their top salesperson in San Jose for that company. I like people and I knew how to talk, I think that's why I did so well. Other salesmen that were working there started asking me if they could borrow money because they were on commission and they weren't making as much as I, so I started loaning money them. Everybody said, "Sheldon, you're too nice. You shouldn't be loaning everybody your money." I was still naïve.

I got a different sales job at RainSoft Water Purification Company. I had to work to get people to buy water softeners for their homes. My supervisor, Laverne and I became friends. A few years after I started working there, the company was moving their headquarters to Dublin. I didn't want to move to Dublin, I had no idea where it was. Laverne's daughter was working at Memorex Telex which was based in San Jose where I was living at the time so she got me a job there instead.

I worked at Memorex Telex for four years. I had a lot of good friends there and I had my own cubicle. I was doing well. But after four years, they had layoffs, because Silicon Valley was going through a lot of changes at that time.

After the first round of layoffs, they wanted everyone remaining at the company to move to Tulsa, Oklahoma. I thought, there was no way I am going to Tulsa, Oklahoma after I came out to

California from Illinois. I ended up getting laid off, but we all got severance pay. When the layoff happened, around the same time my father was getting sick and he died of lung cancer in Chicago. He was only 57 years old. I was 30 years old.

At the same time, I was dating this Filipino lady named Estella and she passed away of an asthma attack around the same time my father died so it was a tragic period of my life.

I had three brothers and three sisters and they were still at home. My older brother partied a lot when he was in high school so my parents made him enroll in the air force. After I lost my job at Memorex Telex, he tried to talk me into joining the air force. I don't think it was the right lifestyle for me.

I got a job as a security guard at the IBM building and a few other buildings for big tech companies. It was boring work but easy. I checked people's IDs and stuff like that.

My horrible roommate stories

After my dad died, I moved to Sunnyvale and had a roommate. He was a white guy and liked drugs. He was really smart, I think he was a software engineer but he was also really awkward and I think the drugs helped him loosen up and feel more normal. He offered his cocaine to me, and I tried a little bit but all it did was make me more talkative than I already am. I got a little hooked but was able to stop myself.

When I was his roommate, he tried to commit suicide because he broke up with his girl. He drank a bottle of antifreeze. I took him to the hospital and brought him home. He moved back into his childhood home with his mother after that.

I found another roommate who was a Taiwanese guy going to college. After his exchange program ended, he moved back to Taiwan. I got a new roommate and his name was Russ. He was from Louisiana. He ended up being a complete nut. He was a pathological liar. I think he was involved in a satanic cult in Louisiana because his personality would change. I got out of that living situation as quickly as I could. I bounced around a little bit after that. For a while, I lived

with a Greek family in a big mansion but the couple as getting a divorce so I had to find a new place to live. I eventually ended back up with Barbara and stayed with her and Constantine until I found a more permanent home.

Meeting my idols

One of the most memorable days of my life was when I met the actress, Elizabeth Montgomery when I was about 19 years old. It was Valentine's Day. She was always my favorite actress from "Bewitched". After "Bewitched", she did a lot of TV movies that were excellent. She was beautiful and intelligent. I met her when I was still living in Chicago before I moved to California because they were filming "The Awakening Land" in Springfield. They were having an event for her at the Holiday Inn Mart Plaza. So, I dressed up in my suit and I went down there. Lucy Salinger was responsible for having them film the movie in Illinois. I asked her, "Can I stay here and meet her?" The event was for just the actors, but she let me stay.

I was so, so happy. They played the movie, and afterwards, Elizabeth Montgomery went up on stage and talked about what it was like filming the movie. When she finished, I walked up to her where she was standing with her husband, Robert Foxworth. I had bought her a Valentine's card and a rose, and I asked her if I can kiss her, and she said yes. I kissed her on the left cheek. I was always so infatuated with her. I went to work next day where I had a job at a restaurant, and I told all of my customers that I met Elizabeth Montgomery.

I met Elizabeth Montgomery a second time in 1991 in California because she did a play called "Love Letters". I reminded her that we met many years ago in Chicago. She was so nice. And that time I had a picture taken with her because I had my polaroid camera. She ended up passing away in 1995 of a colon cancer.

I've met a lot of stars. I met Helen Reddy, the singer. I met John Travolta when I was 19 because I had a friend in Chicago who was a freelance photographer. She would take me around with her sometimes and I got to meet a lot of different people.

My love for music

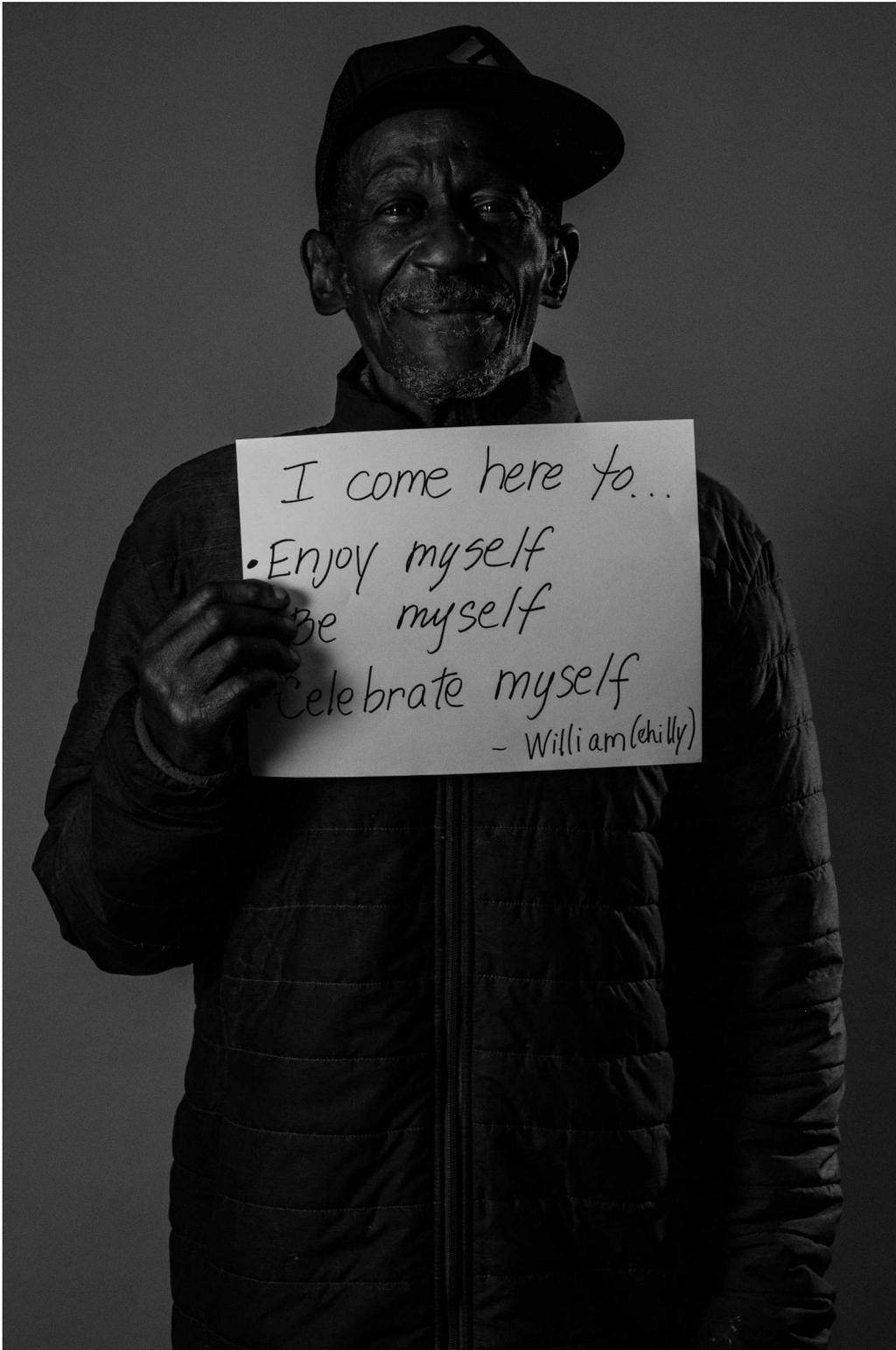
I love music. One of my favorite singers was always Judy Garland. She's my favorite female singer of all time. I had a lot of records of her. My mother sang in church all the time so we always listened to recorders. All of my siblings loved Elton John, especially my brother. He had all the Elton John albums. My sister liked Cat Stevens. All of us loved music and we each had our own taste in music. We always had a lot of records in our house. I had a lot of different musical tastes. Later on, I liked Whitney Houston and Olivia Newton. When I was a student in Chicago, I would take my girlfriend, now my wife, to blues bars. It was marvelous. The musicians would just make some magic happen. Their songs would transport you to another world.

I remember Helen Reddy was performing in Chicago at the Conrad Hilton and it was a show for invited guests only. Somehow, I was able to talk myself into getting a seat and I saw the whole concert. I used to bring my tape recorder and I taped all her shows. Every time I saw her concert, I snuck my tape recorder in and I would tape the show. I wouldn't sell the tapes, I would just listen to them on my own.

My parents

My mother just turned 90 years old, isn't that amazing? I mentioned earlier that my father died when he was 57 years old. He had lung cancer because he started smoking when he was just fourteen. He was very smart. He was a boss of a construction company. It was impressive for a Black man to be manager back then. He started as foreman for a steel company and then he became a contractor. That's why we always had money and we had a big house in Illinois. They always called us a rich family because my father added onto our house.

William "Chili"



About me

My name is William White and I was born in Pensacola, Florida. My nickname is Chili. I have two brothers and two sisters; I had one older sister and I'm the oldest boy so I had to lead the way. We had a close-knit family. We moved to San Francisco when I was 6 months old which would have been 1943 and I've been here ever since.

1943 was a whole other different world compared to today. We were at war. We got rations; you couldn't just go to the store and spend your money to get what you wanted. We moved to San Francisco for the opportunity to have a better life.

In San Francisco, I grew up in the neighborhood called Bayview-Hunters Point. We were remote, very remote. We didn't have a big grocery store nearby so we had to go to a mom-and-pop store to buy our daily essentials.

It took my family 10 years before they could build enough capital to move to a better residential environment and that's when we relocated to Daly City. That's where my mother lived for the rest of her life.

My favorite vacation is when we traveled back to Pensacola, which is where I was born. We visited my grandparents and my cousins for about two weeks. It was a long drive from California, but it was worth it. My grandmother, Angela White, was everything to me. We couldn't afford to take the trip often but we'd try to go back every ten to twelve years. Maintaining strong bonds with my family is important with me.

High school and college

I went to high school at a public school called Jefferson High School. I was a bit of a loner when I was a kid. I just wanted to kind of be left alone. I don't want nobody trying to invade my space. If I wanted to hook up like that, I joined a partner or two, and I'd be affiliated with one or two people. Jefferson High School was a pretty good high school but there was a lot of racism. That's the only sad part. They made me feel like I was beneath them. It was about 80% white, 10% black, and 10% Mexican, and 2% Asian. I just had to adjust. My athletic and musical talents certainly helped me during school.

I was fortunate because I was blessed. I was an athlete coming up—football and track and field were my primary sports. I broke a lot of school records including the 100-yard sprint, long jump, and high jump. I was an outstanding athlete. I was blessed.

I was a running back in football. They used to call it scat back because I was the same size I am now, which is smaller than what you would think when picturing the size of a football player. But I was very quick. After high school, I went to junior college and I was still good enough to compete. I wasn't the record-breaking guy, but I was right in the money with them. I got an education there for two years and then went to San Francisco State.

In college, I studied business and music. I knew the piano, organ, keyboard. I'm basically a musician. I mean, I'm a semi-businessman but a musician on the real. I still play and they got pianos over at St. Anthony's. I was able to stay sharp even during the pandemic. So, I've been a blessed guy.

My wife and children

I met my wife when she was in high school and I was in junior college. She was going to a YMCA and I just happened to cruise by in my car. She waved at me because I think she liked what she saw. And I liked what I saw. I remember I had to prove to her family that I was a good guy before I could take her out.

We got married a few years later in 1964. Even though I didn't graduate from college, I had enough knowledge to carry on. My daughter, Andrea, was born in 1965, a year after we got married. And from then on, we were the White family.

Andrea lives right here on McAllister right now. That's my oldest girl. I have four daughters, but only two by my wife. I have to keep it real. I had two daughters with my wife—Andrea and Lisa, and then two stray daughters if that's what you want to call it. They love me and I love them and that's all that matters. It's a close-knit family. I know they love me. They say I'm the patriarch to all of that.

My careers

After college, I got my first job as a porter, which is like an orderly in a hospital. I did that for two or three years. After that, I decided I need to be in my own business, so I got into the vending machine business—candy, coffee, soda machines, different places, gas stations, restaurants all around the Bay Area. And I was self-employed with that for 15 years. I was steady. I had a good income, a family. I was doing okay.

In the early 1980s, my business went bad, something happened. I caught a misdemeanor, shoplifting and I had to go to jail for nine months. I left my business in the hands of my younger brother. When I was released from prison, everything was gone. I was back to square one all over again.

I felt frustrated, angry, disappointed when I learned what my brother had done. I wanted to tell my brother, “If you couldn't do it, man, let my other boy do it, the guy who's working with me. Don't take over like you're a big guy who handles everything and then deliberately pull the rug out from under me.” The lesson I learned from that experience was that I can't be so trusting of anyone because if you do, you're only going to blame yourself. If you bend over, at your ankles, so to speak, you have to expect the worst. So, it's your fault. So, just eat it and get over it and carry on.

I started all over. I started driving for a medical company and did that for about three or four years. By then, I was ready to retire and I've been coming to the Curry Senior Center since then. San Francisco has a lot of resources for seniors like me. You can't go wrong in San Francisco. All you got to do is come here, follow the format, and you're going to be okay regardless. You'll be okay. So, I've been blessed to be here.

My love for music

I grew up listening to music. Even when I was young, I started with classical music and then I went back to the blues. I got into Muddy Waters, Elmore James kind of guys, Lightnin' Hopkins, Herbie Hancock. I could visualize where they were coming from and that opened up a whole

world, man. I loved female blues singers like Big Mama Thornton and Koko Taylor. The music is just wonderful. That music is something else. I don't know what I'd do without it. I'd be empty and lost without music. I relate to it, and it's what I do. I can interpret it and then I can run it through this and put it down like it's supposed to be. That's what I live for.

My favorite memory

If I could pick one year to re-live I would choose 1955. I was 12 years old that year. I was growing into manhood. I felt good about myself. I was growing up and becoming a man, learning who I was. When I was twelve, I knew I was ready, boy. I was ready. I knew where I was. I knew where I wanted to go. I had my musical and my athletic ability.

