

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Blaine Davis (Mike) was born in West Philadelphia on December 8, 1957. Raised in the shadows of poverty, pain, and perseverance, he emerged from the concrete jungle with a blueprint built by struggle and a future fueled by determination.

Michael spent over three plus decades in corporate America, which included a celebrated tenure at Deloitte, where he rose from humble beginnings to respected leadership. His professional success was matched only by his devotion to his family. He is a proud husband of 35 years, a father to four extraordinary daughters, and a grandfather who wears the title "Pop-Pop" with honor.

Through his memoir *From Quicksand to King: Mike Davis – The Man, The Myth, The Truth*, Mike lays bare the truth of his journey—from sleeping on floors, life in the projects to walking into boardrooms with dignity, from being "the man of the house" before he was a man, to becoming the man of his legacy.

*The extraordinary journey of a man
who rose from quicksand to his throne*

He's Not a Statistic.
He's a Survivor, a Builder, a Protector, a Provider.
He is the Dream Fully Realized.

And now, he leaves that dream for others to build upon.



From Quicksand to King
MIKE DAVIS: The Man. The Myth. The Truth.



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FROM QUICKSAND TO KING

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From Quicksand to King

Mike Davis —

The Man, The Myth, The Truth

By Michael Blaine Davis

*"If you don't tell your own story,
someone else will re-write
your 'his'tory for you."*

*"That truth has always stayed with me—
and it's the reason I wrote this memoir".*

*"This is my chance to finally
put my life into my own words.
Others may have their opinions,
but this is my life, my story, and my voice.
I speak for myself."*

Mike

I Dedicate this Memoir to:

My Beloved Wife of 36+years,
Deb;

My Children,
Ayana, Yasmeen, Amira, and Aisha;

My Grandchildren,
***Nevaeh, Ethan, Xavier, Rylee, AJ, and
Dream—***

This memoir was written for you.
You are the sole reason I rise and strive.

It is also dedicated to the foundational people
in my life:

***My Mother (RIP), /My Aunt Wilma (RIP),
"My Big Brother" Robert (RIP),
and the many family members
who lifted me when I couldn't lift myself.***

And to those few friends who stayed solid when it
mattered most—this story is for you too.

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PREFACE - The Assignment

*"I was born by the river, in a little tent.
And just like the river, I been running ever since...
...It's been a long time comin',
but I know a change gonna come." —*

Sam Cooke, "A Change Is Gonna Come"

I wasn't literally born by a river, but the poverty I entered felt as primal, vast, and inescapable. From my first breath, I felt that my journey would be a long, dusty road across unyielding terrain. Music became my roadmap—a faithful companion that helped me navigate every struggle along the way.

Now, as I sit and reflect—closer to the end than the beginning—the truth has settled deep in my bones: I wasn't put here just to leave behind *generational wealth*, though Lord knows I tried. I chased every opportunity, measured my worth in dollars and cents, and treated my ability to provide like armor.

Growing up, the term "*generational*" anything was not part of my vocabulary. That concept didn't exist in our world. Still, when I began to hear talk about generational wealth, I wanted that too. Like any man who loves his family, I dreamed of leaving something behind—something they could build on and expand.

What no one ever explained was the *foundation*—the part that comes before the wealth. Before you can build anything lasting, you need solid ground to stand on. That means breaking the cycle of poverty to stop the sinking.

The truth is there's a brutal, invisible labor just to reach that solid ground. And when I was born, I wasn't standing on firm soil—I was dropped into *quicksand*.

Poverty wasn't just something I experienced—it was the very terrain I entered life in. It pulled at your ankles the moment you stood up. It gripped your every step, always threatening to drag you under. There were no boots, no ladder, no blueprint—just instinct, struggle, and sheer will. I had to fight just to stand, let alone climb.

What I've come to understand—with the clarity that only time and hindsight bring—is that my true mission in life wasn't to hand over riches. It was to lay a *generational foundation* one strong enough to bear the weight of dreams. One deep enough and dry enough to keep my children and grandchildren from sinking into the same *quicksand* I was born into.

I bore that weight so they wouldn't have to. I laid brick after brick—through hard work, sacrifice, pain, and persistence—so those who came after me would have something firm beneath their feet.

FROM QUICKSAND TO KING

This memoir is part of that foundation, my record, my offering. A personal and historical blueprint of what it meant to come up the way I did, in a time and place where survival took everything you had—and then asked for more.

"I've got a long dusty road ahead of me..." —
Art Reynolds Singers, *"A Long Dusty Road"*

FOREWARD - by Mike B Davis

From Quicksand to King, Mike Davis – *The Man, The Myth, The Truth* — is not a memoir in the conventional sense — it’s a declaration of survival, purpose, and legacy. It’s the lived scripture of a man who came into this world with little more than his breath and a burden—and who turned both into blessings.

This is not history written by others.

This is a report from one who lived it.

This is not just a story. This is ***My Testimony***.

It is a declaration of where I began, what I endured, what I learned, and what I ultimately overcame.

I, Michael Blaine Davis, wasn’t born with a silver spoon. I came into the shadows, beneath a sky that offered no stars, into a world that never made room for me—a world that told me I couldn’t—and wouldn’t—make it. *And yet, I did.*

- *I made it without a blueprint or a father*
- *I made it while carrying a title I never asked for—
“man of the house”—before I was even a teenager.*

And still, I dreamed. I dreamed beyond the rodents, the cold nights without heat, and the empty cabinets.

I dared to believe I was more than my ZIP code, more than my circumstances, more than what society expected of a little Black boy from West Philly.

FROM QUICKSAND TO KING

Within these pages, I do more than recount events — I lay them bare. I allow you to feel the sting of poverty and the steady climb toward the quiet, hard-won comfort of my suburban home. I take you from the loneliness of early responsibility to the profound pride of raising four beautiful daughters — three college-educated and one equally accomplished in her own right.

From being overlooked in corporate spaces to becoming a force of leadership, consistency, and integrity in one. This memoir isn't just about me. It's about every person who's ever been told they wouldn't make it.

- *Every child who's had to grow up before his time*
- *Every man who's ever counted coins for bread.*
- *Every Black soul who's had to fight for joy like it was something stolen.*

This is a love letter—to the people who shaped me, the family I built, and the generations I labored to lift. It's for my wife, my daughters, and my grandchildren.

And it's for you, the reader—because if you picked up this book, something inside you is searching too: *For Truth, For Proof, For Hope.*

This book is all three.

So before you turn the page, take a breath. You're not just about to read a story—you're about to walk through a real life, shaped by dust, pain, scars, faith, pride, music, and miracles, a journey from *Quicksand* to *King*

PROLOGUE - A Legacy Forged

The burdens I carried, the pain I endured and the sacrifices I made weren't random — they had a singular purpose. I bore those burdens to break the cycle of poverty I was born into, to shatter a pattern that had defined too many generations before me — a pattern I utterly refused to pass down. I wanted more for my children... and for their children... and for the children still to come.

Life didn't offer me the best it had, but I never expected it to. I just knew I had to make it work with what little I had and everything I dreamed. What I leave behind — the path I walked, the choices I made — wasn't about being a martyr. It was about setting new boundaries. Rewriting the blueprint — not merely to survive, but to build something stronger than struggle: a solid foundation.

In many ways, that has been the story of my people in this country for generations — being handed the scraps of opportunity and expected to make something of what others discarded. But history has shown that we have always found ways to transform what we were given. What some believed would break us often became the very thing that strengthened us.

I've made many mistakes. I ask for no forgiveness, and I make no excuses. I carried those mistakes. I lived through them. The pain they've caused has been more than enough for one lifetime.

There are things I've done that I'm not proud of — choices I look back on now and don't even like about myself. But the truth of my story isn't defined by those moments. It's defined by the progress I made. That's the real proof — not perfection, but the relentless climb.

Even in my lowest moments, I refused to stay down. I kept rising — not because I had all the answers, but because I couldn't afford not to.

But what I'm asking for now isn't sympathy — It's understanding. A chance for you to step into my shoes and see the world as I saw it. To feel the weight I carried. The battles I fought. The quiet pain I masked with pride. To understand not just what I did — but why I did it.

Everything I did — every choice, every struggle, every sacrifice. I placed on the altar of fatherhood — was never just about surviving. It was about building something meant to endure.

But before I could offer a foundation for others to stand on, I had to find my own footing.

After leaving West Philadelphia and being told I had to join the family in South Philadelphia, I wasn't happy with whoever made that decision. I had been content staying at my aunt's house on Irving Street—sleeping on the floor and trying my best not to intrude. Even though no one made me feel unwelcome, I carried that feeling inside of me. I had learned early how to survive without rocking the boat.

So when I moved to South Philadelphia, I often found myself sitting in my bedroom for long stretches of time, staring out the window and wondering how I had somehow ended up back in the same kind of environment I had been trying so hard to escape.

From that bedroom window high up in the project building, the city stretched out in front of me. And from that height I could see something that people on the street below could not.

To the left was Center City — the tall buildings, the lights, and the movement of people going somewhere important. In my young mind it looked like the Emerald City from ***The Wizard of Oz***. That side of the skyline seemed bright, almost glowing like gold, full of promise and hope.

To the right was what I already knew — the projects, the row homes, and the same streets where people struggled every day just to survive. That side felt darker and damp, almost dank, like a jungle with no clear path and no end in sight. Families lived there, worked there, and made the best life they could. I never believed I was better than anyone who lived there. But I also knew that it represented the quicksand I had spent my life trying to climb out of.

Looking back now, I realize something else. My vantage point mattered. From that high floor I could see farther than someone standing down on the street.

I sometimes think about how different things might have been if my mother had gotten an apartment on a much lower floor — say the sixth floor — where my view might not have stretched far enough to see the skyline the same way.

From that height I could see two worlds at the same time. One full of opportunity, the other full of survival.

What I didn't fully understand at the time was that the road I was looking at had always been more than just a street. Broad Street had long been the spine of Philadelphia, running straight through the heart of the city toward the towers of Center City where the banks, law firms, and corporate offices stood. For many people, it was simply the road that led downtown. But for a young Black boy growing up in the projects, it represented something much bigger. Walking north on Broad Street meant moving toward the center of economic power in Philadelphia — toward the buildings where decisions were made and opportunities were created.

Back then, those towers felt like a world apart. During the years I was growing up, many Black neighborhoods in Philadelphia had already been shaped by policies like redlining that limited where families could live, where they could borrow money, and what kind of opportunities were within reach. The skyline was visible, but access to it was another story. Many of the people who looked like me who worked in those buildings were maintenance workers, delivery drivers, or service staff — rarely inside the offices where power and advancement lived.

Yet that skyline was never just something I saw from a distance. I passed through that part of the city every day riding the bus on my way to work at Philadelphia General Hospital in West Philadelphia. Each trip carried me past those same buildings — close enough to see them clearly, but still feeling like they belonged to another world entirely.

That's why, in my mind, the left side of Broad Street moving north became what I called my Emerald City. It represented opportunity, ambition, and a life that felt just within reach, even if the path to get there wasn't clear yet. I didn't know how I would ever enter those towers, but I knew one thing for certain: the road that led there was the same road I was already standing on.

And without realizing it at the time, Allah had already placed a choice in front of me.

But seeing a choice and reaching it are two very different things. I could see the skyline, but I had no roadmap for how to get there. No education that opened doors, no connections to pull me through them, and no system designed to help a young Black boy from the projects cross that distance. What I had was a vision — and the determination to find a road that would lead me there.

To the contrary, everything I had been taught — directly and indirectly — suggested that those high-rises were not meant for someone like me.

Whether through redlining, unequal schools, or the quiet but powerful expectations placed on young Black boys growing up where I did, the message was clear: those buildings were not our destination. They were something we were meant to look at, not enter.

Back then, that skyline might as well have been a forbidden land. For a young Black boy from the projects, it represented a world that existed just close enough to see, but far enough away to feel unreachable. For many people who were already inside those towers there may have been a glass ceiling limiting how far they could rise — but for me, standing outside and looking up, it felt more like an iron door. A door that stayed shut unless someone on the other side decided to open it.

And for a long time, I didn't know anyone who held that key.

So if that door was ever going to open for me, I would have to find another way in.

And that wasn't easy. I had to carve out stability in the middle of chaos — through storms I didn't create, through systems built to hold me back, in a world that was never designed for someone like me to succeed. The truth is, the world had structures in place to break me before I could ever rise.

And yet — I rose anyway.

I didn't inherit a blueprint. There was none handed down to me. I had to draw one by hand, sketching it in real time on the quicksand of poverty that served as my only foundation. I was constantly seeking footing where there was none. My design didn't come from what life gave me — it was shaped by what I never had. It wasn't born of inheritance. It was born of absence of hope and of fight.

I came into a world that didn't want me — a Black boy born in 1957 America. There wasn't just no place for me — there was no intention to make one. I had to build where nothing was meant to stand. Just like Langston Hughes wrote:

I, Too, Sing America

I am the darker brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen when company come

But I laugh, And eat well, And grow strong.

Tomorrow, I'll be at the table

When company comes.

Nobody'll dare Say to me,

"Eat in the kitchen," Then.

Besides,

They'll see how beautiful I am

And be ashamed—

I, Too, Am America.

Getting here was always a struggle. Nothing ever came easy. And yes, I made mistakes along the way—but even in those moments, my heart was set on doing right, on becoming. I always felt like time wasn't on my side. And truth is, it wasn't.

When I was born in 1957, the life expectancy for a Black boy in America was barely 61 years—and if you were born in the inner city, like I was, that number dropped even lower.

In neighborhoods like Mill Creek, the odds were even worse. Poor healthcare, Poor housing, Poor schools, Lead in the walls, rats in the basement, stress in every corner. That's what the world gave me —

The system didn't just expect me to fail—it expected me to die early. Not much time, no blueprint, no safety net. Just survival, if that.

So no, I wasn't supposed to make it to 30, let alone 67+. I wasn't supposed to raise four beautiful daughters, or retire with dignity from corporate America, or write a damn book. I was supposed to be a statistic. Another buried name. Another unspoken eulogy.

But here I Am. Still Standing. Still Glory Bound.

I had no roadmap. No safety net. No direction. All I had to pull from was the underbelly of society — poverty, pain, and a system built to break people like me.

So when I made the decision to do better — to be better — I knew the road would be long. I knew it would be dusty. But I also knew it was the only way out.

FROM QUICKSAND TO KING

And no, I didn't finish everything I dreamed of. I didn't get it all right. I failed — in some areas, I failed hard. But in others, I succeeded beyond what anyone expected, including me. I'm not asking for forgiveness. I lived with the consequences. I carried the weight. But what I am asking for — is understanding. A little grace.

To be seen — not just for my faults, but for my fight.

To those I may have hurt along my journey — I'm sorry. To those who gained something from knowing me — You're welcome. It was all part of the same journey. The same road. The same man trying to find his place in a world that was never meant for him.

I always dreamed of being the man with the traditional family — a wife at home, me working hard, raising children under one roof. Divorce wasn't even in my vocabulary.

But sometimes life doesn't care what you planned. And when my marriage fell apart just three years in, I didn't just feel like a husband who failed. I felt like a man undone.

I spiraled. For nearly two years, I turned to drugs and alcohol — not to celebrate, but to escape. Because when you're high, you don't feel the ache. You don't feel the silence in your house. You don't feel the weight of what you lost. Not in the moment, anyway.

I was still working, still functioning. But inside, I was collapsing. I ended up living on my mother's couch.

Rock bottom. One night, after another binge, I looked at her and asked through tears, “*Mom... what’s wrong with me?*” She didn’t flinch. She looked me square in the eye and said, “*Boy, look — you may not always be a husband, but now that you got them girls, you’ll always be a father.*” That was my turning point.

I didn’t check into rehab. I didn’t go to AA. What I did was tell myself the truth. And from that truth, I made a vow: *Anyone who got me from that day forward was getting two beautiful daughters too.*

That promise became a compass. It didn’t erase the pain. It didn’t fix what was broken. But it gave me something solid to stand on — a foundation to start building again.

This book is that story. The journey from brokenness to purpose, from quicksand to concrete, from the dream I carried to the man I became.

That promise helped guide me.

When I look back on it all—the pain, the perseverance, the progress—I know what’s true in the deepest part of my spirit: “*I never would have made it...*” without Faith, without Fight, without the Strength of the Women who Raised and Loved me, without the Grace of Allah.

Had it not been for: My mother, Mollie Davis... My aunt — my second mother — Wilma Taylor... and my wife, Deborah Davis... “...I never could have made it...”

If you really want to understand me—listen to the music that carried me. As **Sam Cooke** sang,— “*I was born by the river, in a little tent — and just like the river, I’ve been running ever since.*” *It’s been a long time coming,* but I always believed deep in my bones that “*A Change Gon’ Come.*”

Even when I didn’t know where the road was leading, I kept walking. Because as the **Art Reynolds Singers** said: “I got *A Long Dusty Road* ahead of me... I’ve got unfinished stories to be told.”

There were times I felt like I was breaking.

But then I’d hear **Aretha Franklin** remind me: that my life was a “*Bridge Over Troubled Water*, I will lay me down.” And I’d find the strength to keep going. I climbed the “*Rough Side of the Mountain*” like Rev. F.C. Barnes sang about — because for a man like me, that was the only way up.

I leaned on **Al Green**, whispering in my ear: “*Everything’s Gonna Be All Right...*” — even when nothing around me looked like it would be. I reached for **Mahalia Jackson**, singing out to the heavens: “*Precious Lord Take My Hand, Lead Me On, Let Me Stand...*” And somehow, in the darkest moments, He always did. No, I didn’t finish everything I dreamed. I didn’t grow up the way I wished I had. But I pray that every life I touched — I left something better behind.

Even if it’s just one brick in the foundation they now stand on — it’s still a better road than the one I had to walk.

And sometimes, when I sit with it all — the joy, the regret, the fight, the cost — I hear it in **Bob Marley's** voice:

“Redemption Song”

Old pirates, yes, they rob I
Sold I to the merchant ships
Minutes after they took I
From the bottomless pit

But my hand was made strong
By the hand of the Almighty
We forward in this generation
Triumphantly...

What I leave you now, as I leave this world, isn't material wealth. I gave you that while I was here. What I leave you now is something deeper — A stronger foundation to stand on. And if you could see the ground I started on – *or lack thereof...* You'd know: This is a legacy Worth Leaving.
This is my redemption son

SECTION I:
FOUNDATIONS OF A DREAM

CHAPTER 1 - Early Life and Family

"I'm Comin Up...On The Rough Side of the Mountain..."

Rev. F.C. Barnes - *Rough Side of the Mountain*

I was born into a world that didn't merely overlook me — it intentionally left me out. There was no place prepared for a Black boy like me, no system designed with my success in mind. From the very beginning, my existence was labeled — a threat, a burden, a problem to be managed rather than a promise to be nurtured. I entered that world within a family navigating economic instability, generational transition, and the uncertain terrain faced by many Black Americans who had migrated north in search of opportunity, only to find new forms of struggle waiting on the other side.

Before I could walk, before I could speak, the message was already written on the walls around me: You are not welcome here. You are not safe here. You were never meant to thrive here.

I was born on December 8, 1957, on a Sunday morning; the weather outside was about 30°F with light drizzle and fog - *often referred to as smoke fog from coal and industry* in the air, contributing to hazy conditions. That day wasn't freezing—but it was damp, gray, and bone-chilling in its own way.

You'd have felt the moisture settle in your bones, the fog swallowed the street corners, and the air carried the hush of winter settling over the University of Pennsylvania Hospital in West Philadelphia.

Outside, America was trembling under the weight of change it didn't want. Segregation was law, racism was fact. My arrival happened in a nation that made no promises to children who looked like me — especially boys.

Earlier that fall, in Little Rock, Arkansas, nine brave Black students were escorted by federal troops just to attend school because mobs of white Americans threatened their lives. That same year, the so-called Civil Rights Act of 1957 passed — the first since Reconstruction — but it was more paper than power, giving us almost nothing.

Meanwhile, cities like Philadelphia clung to their own quiet, practiced version of segregation: redlined neighborhoods, underfunded schools, and unspoken rules that defined where you belonged and where you didn't.

At the center of my beginning was my mother, Mollie Janell Lunce. She was just 20 years old when she left her family home in Hazard, Kentucky, carrying nothing but a high school diploma, the weight of being one of thirteen children, and a deep yearning to escape the limitations of the Jim Crow South.

Her world had been shaped by poverty, church pews, coal dust, and obedience—but she chose possibility. She didn’t make that journey with my father, Julius William Davis, Sr.

He was in the military at the time—the Navy, I believe—but I never got the full truth about his service or where exactly he was when I came into the world. I often wonder how my mother ended up in Philadelphia without him. Was he stationed overseas? Out on some ship in the middle of the ocean?

Sometimes I wonder if she got pregnant while still in Kentucky and came north to escape the weight of being a young, unmarried mother.

With my grandmother’s strong religious beliefs, I can only imagine the shame and whispers. The deep pain must have followed her wherever she went. Whatever the reason, her decision to leave couldn’t have been easy.

Considering the circumstances, one truth remains: *she was alone, pregnant, and determined*. And that reality became a cornerstone of my own vow—to *never leave a woman to carry that burden alone*. I never wanted to father a child outside of marriage and disappear, leaving the mother to face the weight of it all without me.

Philadelphia in 1957 was no promised land for Black folks, but it offered a different kind of fight—one not bound by hollers and hills, but by redlining, union lines, and street signs that didn't need to say "Whites Only" for you to know exactly where you didn't belong. Still, it was north.

It was different. And she believed in that difference. When she stepped off the bus in Philadelphia—into the noise of trolleys, corner stores, storefront churches, street vendors, and the layered rhythms of a Black city alive with both hope and hardship—she began writing a new chapter not just for herself, but for me.

She taught me—before I could even understand it—that survival is an act of defiance. And that love, real love, often begins with sacrifice.

They named me **Michael Blaine Davis**, my middle name coming from my uncle Jessie Blaine "JB" Lunce — one of the many aunts and uncles who defined our family legacy. My mother came from people who knew how to endure: her parents Mae Lunce (BigMomma) (RIP) and Jim Lunce (Grandpa) (RIP), her brothers — Elbert(RIP), James(RIP), JB(RIP), Simon(RIP), and Don—and her sisters — Mattie(RIP), Wilma(RIP), Eva(RIP), Sadie, Von, and Lillie(RIP). We were survivors. We had to be.

And May Their Memories Forever Remain a Blessing.

I never knew where that name originated in the family, and like my uncle, who just went by JB instead of using his full name. I too never used my middle name until I started writing this memoir.

I spent my earliest years at 5113 Irving Street, which was much more than just a home; it was a bustling, vibrant place, a house packed with love, struggle, and resilience. From the moment I was born in 1957, and for my first few years of life before my own siblings arrived, this house was my world.

I lived alongside my mother's sister, Aunt Wilma (RIP), and her husband, Uncle Robert Taylor (RIP) — a Navy Chief — and their children, Robert Jr. (RIP), Linda Joyce (RIP), and James Aulmond (RIP). Born in 1950, 1953, and 1955 respectively, they weren't just cousins to me; they were my first siblings.

Until my sister Donna was born, I was the baby of this boisterous household. That house was full — full of laughter, noise, food, prayer, and purpose. It was our cocoon against a world that had no use for us.

Irving Street was a close-knit neighborhood where everyone knew each other, instilling in me the values of perseverance, resilience, and connection—lessons I carried with me throughout my life. From 1957 to early 1960, we all resided there together.

We were surrounded by the sounds of Black Philadelphia: gospel choirs ringing out of storefront churches, jazz drifting from open windows, and doo-wop groups harmonizing on corners. The culture was rich — but we were still poor. And the poverty wasn't just financial; it was Systemic, Designed.

In November 1958, my parents got married. After which, we moved into an apartment on the 4900 block of Reno Street. By early 1959, my mother gave birth to my sister, Donna “Sis” Denise Davis.

The nickname “Sister” came directly from me; as a child, everyone referred to her as “your sister,” and it became easier to just say “Sister.” Over time, it stuck, eventually shortening to “Sis,” a name that followed her for life. Later that same year, in December, my brother Julius “Bill” William Davis Jr. was born.

We were now three children, close in age, raised under one roof by a woman determined to do right by us with whatever she had.

The Black experience in America is not a single thread—it is a tapestry woven with survival and spirit, pain and promise. It's the hum of gospel on Sunday mornings, the pulse of jazz echoing through smoky basements, the rebellion of hip-hop rising from city streets—all set against a backdrop of oppression, activism, and resilience.

It is redlining and resistance, marches and miracles. It is the quiet strength of a grandmother holding the household together with faith and grit.

The quiet strength of a mother who led without saying a word. And the unshakable fire in a young Black boy who wasn't expected to live past 25 — but did anyway.

I've witnessed the rise and fall of the housing projects, the devastation of the drug wars, the soul of Philadelphia music, and the spirit of Black enterprise. I've lived through assassinations and uprisings, Reaganomics and mass incarceration, the migration from analog to digital, and the endless hustle of trying to make a way where there was no way.

My story is rooted in my mother's bravery, in her decision to run toward something when she had every reason to stay still. It's about more than hardship—it's about resilience. It traces how my siblings—and I—navigated a world of limited resources and even fewer promises. It celebrates the quiet heroes of our lives: the elders who showed us how to endure, the friends who became brothers, and the moments of unexpected grace that kept us going.

You'll meet Cliff (Tina's father), my Uncle Robert Sr., the first father figures I knew, and Robert Jr., the cousin I called my big brother—both of whom shaped my earliest ideas of manhood and loyalty.

As the story unfolds, you'll see how my journey stretched from the sidewalks of Southwest Philly to the conference rooms of corporate America, from pushing carts to pushing through barriers no one thought I could overcome.

You'll also see the scars—the broken bonds, the betrayals, and the burden of always being the one expected to carry the load. And yet, through it all, I never lost the spark.

This memoir is more than a personal account. It is my testimony. A living record of how I loved, lost, stumbled, learned, and eventually rose.

It's for the children who were told they came from nothing. It's for the boys who watched their fathers disappear. It's for the girls who had to grow up too fast, and the sons who were never allowed to feel.

It's for anyone who ever questioned whether their story mattered. Through vivid storytelling, I retrace my steps—from the familiar stoops of Irving Street, where my life began, to the dimmed and dank halls of Markoe Street, where I first tasted struggle. I recount the joy of childhood games after the rain, the laughter shared over simple meals, the early lessons of work and responsibility, and the heartbreak of watching my community carry burdens we never asked for.

The 1964 Columbia Avenue Riot, the rise of Black Power, the birth of Philadelphia soul, the echoes of Malcolm and Martin—these weren't just headlines. They were the backdrop of my becoming. I didn't just witness Black history. I lived it. In the corners of every neighborhood I called home, in the warmth of Sunday dinners, in the silence of being unseen, and in the thunder of standing tall anyway.

To be born a Black man in America is to be born into contradiction: visible but invisible, strong but unsupported, celebrated but criminalized. My life began in the shadows of segregation, and now, in 2025, I write these words as a free man—scarred, seasoned, and still standing.

This is not just a recounting of dates and places. This is a record of becoming. A chronicle of what it means to be forged in fire and still walk with grace. Of what it means to carry pain but choose joy. Of what it means to have been the baby of the family and now, all these years later, to be the last of that original Irving Street generation still standing.

Every life is a collection of moments. Some are filled with light. Others are lessons wrapped in loss. All of mine led me here. And so I share this story for my family, for my children and grandchildren, and for every soul still striving to rise.

This is my story: *From Quicksand to King: Mike Davis the Man, the Myth, the Truth.*

Fragments of Memory -

Some of my earliest memories still surprise me.

I can remember the summer Sis and I spent in New York—around 1960 or '61—just the two of us. I'm not sure where he was, but he wasn't there. We stayed with my godparents, Aunt Martha and Uncle John, in their big Brooklyn brownstone. That house felt like a dream made real.

I had my own room—four walls that were entirely mine. Inside waited an army of full-size G.I. Joes with real uniforms, lace-up boots, and bendable joints. I lined them up like soldiers reporting for duty, marching them through imaginary missions only I understood.

I also had a Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Robot that I loved, but the one toy that stayed with me was a shiny chrome robot. Its chest would spring open and two tiny cannons would swing out—press a button and they sparked and crackled like they were firing. I couldn't have been more than two or three years old, yet I still remember thinking, WOW. That robot didn't just feel like a toy—it felt like the future.

I don't know how all those toys got there, especially since it was the only time I ever visited. Maybe Aunt Martha and Uncle John—who never had children of their own—wanted me to feel special, to feel like I belonged, even if only for a summer.

I remember being taken to Macy's in downtown New York—it felt like a palace. At FAO Schwarz, I rode a train inside the store. That memory is stamped in my mind like a photograph. And beyond the toys and the excitement was something even more unbelievable: my own television. A TV just for me. For a little Black boy from West Philly, that kind of space and access was

unreal. It was the first time I felt what it meant not just to survive—but to have.

One day Uncle John took me to his job at Grand Central Station. It was packed—people moving in every direction like pieces on a living chessboard. Businessmen in suits, women in heels, travelers rushing toward trains. It was constant motion, alive with purpose.

I didn't understand what it meant to "run a station," but I knew it meant something. He belonged there. He was in charge. And for a brief moment, standing beside him and looking down from the offices above the terminal floor, I felt like I belonged too. Then there were the summers in Kentucky—a completely different world. Raw, real, unforgettable.

The trip itself was an adventure—eighteen hours by car or Greyhound bus. We packed fried chicken, snacks, and soda—"pop," as they called it down there. No fast food, no fancy stops—just homemade meals wrapped in wax paper and the hum of the highway beneath us.

When we arrived, everything changed. Dirt roads instead of pavement. Outhouses instead of bathrooms. Baths in tin buckets filled with cold mountain water. Meals came from the land—chicken, rabbit, fish, squirrel, turtle, whatever Grandpa hunted or caught. Bigmama had a garden full of everything—greens, potatoes, tomatoes, lettuce—and fruit trees out back. She canned it all into jars that lined her kitchen shelves like trophies of survival. Nothing was wasted. That was the code.

And those mornings—fresh biscuits with homemade jelly melted into butter—that smell and taste still live with me. I spent a week alone with Grandpa on his houseboat on the Tennessee River. We laid troutlines, cooked what we caught, and slept to the gentle

rocking of the water. I even drove the motorboat to shore. I couldn't have been more than seven or eight, but Grandpa believed in learning by doing. As he'd say, "I'm gonna learn you, dadgummit."

He handed me a .22 rifle and even let me fire a .30-06 like I was grown. For a boy raised in concrete and chaos, that houseboat felt like my kingdom—quiet, sacred, free.

In town, everyone knew you by your family name. "That's Jim's kin," they'd say, or "Janell's boy." My grandmother made sure we were in church every Sunday—no exceptions. Grandpa had earned the right to stay home, but the rest of us knew better than to question her authority.

It was also there that I first encountered racism, though I didn't yet have words for it. At a local baseball game, the bleachers were split—whites on one side, Blacks on the other. I didn't understand the rules, but I could feel the invisible line.

Country life had its own rhythm and its own chaos—snakes in the grass, pigs breaking loose, chickens scattering. I watched Grandpa wring a chicken's neck, pluck it clean, and hand it to Bigmama to fry. We bathed outdoors under open skies. It seemed normal then. Looking back, I see it for what it was: survival, not choice.

Sometimes we went into town to see movies—old shoot-'em-ups with cowboys and outlaws. Sitting in the cool dark theater with popcorn felt like stepping into another world, if only for a little while.

Between Brooklyn's brownstones and Kentucky's dirt roads, I was being shaped by two very different realities.

New York showed me comfort, structure, and possibility.

*Kentucky taught me grit, patience, and survival.
And Philadelphia taught me how to navigate both—where
concrete met current, and survival became strategy.*

*Those early memories are scattered like broken glass—sharp,
vivid, glowing when the light hits just right. Each place gave me
something I would need later: structure, resilience, vision, and
faith.*

*Even then, I was learning something I wouldn't fully understand
until much later:*

I didn't belong to just one world.

I was born of all of them.

A Unforgettable Memory Etched in Time

It was the early 1960s, a time when the world seemed to sway between the simplicity of family life and the chaos of change. For me, it was the beginning of a journey shaped by a memory so vivid, yet wrapped in the fog of a child's understanding. I was maybe three or four years old, and the apartment on Reno Street was the backdrop of one of the most defining moments of my young life. But what looked like a family coming together was already falling apart.

I can still see it—like a faded photograph, edges curled with time. My mother stood in the kitchen, strong and unshaken, an apron tied at her waist, stained from the task at hand — cleaning fish. In her grasp, a butcher knife caught the light. It wasn't just for cooking — it was a symbol of her will, her warning, her readiness.

The air was thick with tension. Voices rose and clashed, filling the room with heat. My father — “*Shorty*”, as everyone called him — stood across from her. They were locked in a battle of words, and though I was too young to grasp the reasons, I felt the storm in my bones.

The shouting rattled the walls. Then I heard her — my mother's voice, sharp, unwavering, ringing out with a threat I'll never forget. Whether she said, “***If you don't leave, I'll cut your throat,***” or something close to it,

I can't say for sure. Time has blurred the words, but not the meaning. Not the moment.

That was the last time I saw my father ; he walked out of the door, and with him went a piece of my childhood. I didn't know it then, but that moment marked a shift. It was the day my world began to take on a new shape, one without the man whose presence I barely knew but who was a hallmark of the family that had been as familiar as the walls of our home.

Not much long after my father left we returned to 5113 Irving Street for a short period before relocating to the Mill Creek Projects in West Philadelphia. By then, the strain on my mother was growing heavier. Raising three children on her own, she did what so many Black mothers had to do — adjust, adapt, and survive.

The high-rises were cold and cramped, and the stairwells often smelled like urine. Rats and roaches were part of the furniture, and the elevators didn't always work — if they worked at all. But that's where we were. Mill Creek wasn't just a place we lived — it was another test of endurance, another layer in the story of what poverty looked like for Black families in Philadelphia.

It was there that my youngest sister, Christina LaVonne "Tina" Davis, was born on May 3, 1961. We again were there for a short period about a year or so before returning to Irving Street.

At that time, the household was full, almost bursting at the seams.

It included my Uncle Robert, Aunt Wilma, and their children—Robert Jr., James, and Linda—along with my siblings, Donna (Sis), Julius (Bill), Christina (Tina), and me.

By this time my Aunt and Uncle had two additional children, Lisa Michelle Taylor born same year as Tina but in February of the same year and Victoria “Vicky” Regina Taylor born two years later in Feb of 1963, being there at the same time. I don’t know how or why all of us ended up back under one roof, but those are my memories, however fuzzy they may be.

But I would come to understand that mine wasn’t just a birth—it was the beginning of *a long, dusty road*.

The world I was born into didn’t have a place for me. But I wasn’t going anywhere. I knew from the beginning...I would have to climb the *“Rough Side of the Mountain”* to succeed.

Early School Years: Samuel B. Huey Elementary School

In the fall of 1963, at the age of six, I began my formal education at Samuel B. Huey Elementary School in West Philadelphia, where I attended the first grade. Huey Elementary marked my introduction to the world of learning, and my earliest memories of school are filled with the excitement and curiosity of those formative years.

I can still remember carrying my Quick Draw McGraw metal lunchbox with the Thermos inside. I don't recall what I had for lunch—but I still remember the smell not a bad smell but a memorable one.

By this time my aunt Sadie had come to Philadelphia and was living in an apartment a few doors down the street. The house felt like it was overflowing with life, with noise, with history still in the making.

Uncle Robert and Aunt Wilma were there with their children—Robert Jr., James, Linda and Lisa—who felt more like siblings than cousins.

My siblings were there too—Sis (Donna), Bill (Julius), and Tina. And then there was the baby who was born earlier that year—Vicky.

But our return to Irving Street didn't last long.

The Fire That Changed Everything

I remember, my Aunt Sadie was helping me with my homework at the dining room table when the smell of electrical smoke in its smell filled the room, next I know the closet was engulfed in fire. We all rushed outside.

A fire tore through the house not long after. Flames don't just take wood and walls—they steal the illusion of safety. I remember the thick smoke, the panic, the way fear clung to every breath.

I also remember Uncle Robert running back into that burning house to rescue baby Vicky. What stands out most vividly from that period is the fire that destroyed our home on Irving Street.

It was a traumatic and chaotic event that left an indelible mark on me, but it also became a defining moment of family strength and resilience.

My Uncle Robert, who was a Navy chief and every bit as determined as he was strong, became a hero that day. When the fire broke out, the house quickly became engulfed in flames.

Despite the efforts of the fire department and police to keep everyone back, my uncle refused to stay on the street. With the strength of a bull, he pushed past them and ran back inside, through the smoke and flames, to the back bedroom where my youngest cousin, Vicky, was asleep in her crib.

Moments later, he emerged, carrying her safely in his arms, untouched by the fire. The neighbors of our close-knit community gathered around to offer comfort and support. Everyone was safe, but the house was destroyed.

That moment is carved into my memory like stone. That was love in motion. That was courage with no second thoughts. That was family—real and raw.

Howard Johnson's and Moving to Markoe Street

After the fire that destroyed our home on Irving Street, we stayed at a Howard Johnson's hotel for a brief period. I distinctly remember the meals there—a small detail that stuck with me through the years. It wasn't long before we relocated to 1237 South Markoe Street in Southwest Philadelphia

Chapter 2 - Markoe Street: A Childhood Etched in Memory

*“Precious Lord, take my hand
Lead me on, let me stand...”*

Mahalia Jackson, *“Take My Hand, Precious Lord”*

That line spoke for me. In those early years, I didn't know how to say what I needed, but Mahalia's voice carried it. Her words echoed through homes like ours—where struggle and strength lived side by side, and Black mothers prayed over boiling pots while their children were made to grow up too fast.

Music wasn't just sound back then—it was spirit. The radio sat in the corner like a member of the family, humming out hymns that held our hearts together. Gospel was our therapy, our language when words failed. Every note felt like a hand reaching down from heaven, reminding us that even in the projects, we weren't forgotten.

By 1963, we'd finally found a sense of stability at 1237 South Markoe Street. After years of moving between Reno Street, Irving Street, and the Mill Creek Projects, Markoe Street felt like a place we could settle into—a place that began to feel like home.

Markoe Street was a narrow stretch of Southwest Philadelphia, tucked between 46th and 47th, just off Woodland Avenue.

It wasn't tree-lined—there were no trees on our block—but it was the kind of place where front doors were left cracked open in the summertime, and neighbors spoke to one another across stoops.

On one side of the street were porches; on the other, where I lived, there were only stoops.

For the first time, I began to understand what it meant to have a community of our own. It became the backdrop of my childhood until 1968. It was a community built on connection and care, and it left an indelible mark on my early years.

If I close my eyes, I can still hear the sounds of that block—the laughter of kids playing double-dutch, the gospel coming from open windows, and somewhere, faintly,

Sam Cooke's voice drifting through the summer air. "A Change Is Gonna Come." Those words would follow me for years, long after I understood what change really meant.

This was the texture of Black life in the 1960s—gritty, warm, vibrant, and rooted in survival. We didn't have much, but we had each other. Supplies were scarce. People weren't in a position to lend or borrow everyday necessities. Everyone was doing the best they could with what little they had.

And through it all, the music never stopped. **The Art Reynolds Singers** told us we had "A Long Dusty Road," ahead of us and my mother would hum along as she cooked on that little hot plate.

The radio gave us something the world couldn't take—joy in small doses, faith in four-four time. That house on Markoe Street was a small, tired home—held together with prayers and patches. It was more than just shelter; it was the backdrop of my formative years, a place where hardship and resilience intertwined.

Between 1962 and 1968, the world outside was shifting in ways I didn't fully understand, but inside that house, the struggles of daily life were clear and ever-present.

We landed there after a fire forced us out of our home on Irving Street. The place we moved into was rundown and infested—rats and roaches shared space with us like uninvited roommates.

In the beginning, we had gas and a working stove. But after about a year and a half, something happened. My mother had an incident trying to light the pilot light. She waited too long, the gas built up inside the oven, and when she opened the door, the match ignited the gas. Flames engulfed her hair.

After that, we never had gas again—or at least none that I remember. Later, I understood it wasn't just the accident; it was also the gas bill we couldn't afford.

That's when the two-burner hot plate showed up—perched on a wooden chair near the kitchen doorway. It became our stove. It boiled our water, cooked our meals, and heated water for our baths and laundry. It wasn't much, but we made it work.

I can still hear the sound of that little pot rattling on the hot plate, the hiss of steam mixing with the hum of Mahalia's voice on the radio.

Somehow, that became music too—the rhythm of survival. Even then, I was learning that every struggle had its own soundtrack. We had no running hot water, so everything had to be heated by hand. There was no central heat either.

Warmth came from a furnace powered by coal, when we had it. When we didn't, we layered up and waited for the sun. The house was cold, dark, and damp.

But in those cold mornings, my mother would sing. No microphone, no choir—just her voice, soft and trembling, filling the house with something holy. That was my first understanding of music as power—not the kind that makes you dance, but the kind that keeps you alive.

The coal furnace lived in the basement, and shoveling coal became my first taste of “manhood.” The sound of the shovel scraping against the pile, the weight of it, the fear I felt in that basement—it's something I'll never forget.

That space didn't just feel cold—it felt alive. Mice, roaches, and who knows what else lived down there, and it was my job as the oldest to face them. I'd shovel as fast as I could and run back upstairs, scared every time.

Sometimes, sleeping on the floor was warmer than our broken beds. We had mattresses with springs pushing through the fabric—unsafe, filthy, and uncomfortable. My brother and I shared one. We covered the exposed coils with old clothes just to survive the night.

The linens rarely changed—not out of neglect, but necessity. *Pillows?* We didn’t have real ones. We used old pillowcases stuffed with dirty clothes. That was our version of comfort.

The bathroom held a claw-foot tub, where we washed ourselves—and our clothes. No washer. No dryer. Just a scrub board, hot water from the hot plate, and hands that worked until they ached. Drying dungarees, our thick denim jeans, was its own battle. We’d iron them to help them dry and get the stiffness out. Most days, they finished drying on our bodies while we walked.

The hole in the ceiling above the refrigerator—caused by a leaking toilet or sink—was just another reminder of how fragile everything was. The kitchen had mice and roaches. The refrigerator barely worked—more ice than food, and half the time the light didn’t even come on. But it didn’t matter. There was nothing in it to see.

Behind the kitchen was the “shed kitchen”—an add-on that felt more like the outside than part of our home. It was cold, drafty, and reeked of the metal garbage can we kept there. Back then, “garbage” meant food waste—and that can stunk like hell.

The living room had no real entertainment. A console that housed a Muntz TV sat on the floor, though the screen was more like 13 or 15 inches.

There was an old couch by the window and a tired chair in the corner. We couldn't afford to replace broken things, so the TV, once it died, just became a piece of furniture.

The dining room? It was full of "stuff"—not furniture or decorations, but just... life's leftovers. Things piled on top of things, with no clear order. The floors were hardwood, but not the kind people boast about now. I constantly had to pull splinters out of my feet.

The bedrooms were as bare as they needed to be. My brother and I shared a bed. My sisters shared one in the next room. My mother had the front room. We used what we had—things we inherited, things we found, or things we made do with.

Clothes came "on time" or not at all. Stores offered payment plans that lined up with when government checks came in. Most of what I wore came from my cousins—Robert and James (both gone now)—who were like brothers to me. Pants were always too short or too big. We'd pin them or patch them. Patch kits were common—little iron-on squares you bought from the store. Nobody thought twice about seeing patched-up pants. That was just part of growing up poor.

Sneakers? I got mine from the grocery store — “Bobos.” Kids had a song for them:

*“Bobos, they make your feet feel fine...
Bobos, they cost a dollar ninety-nine...”*

It was humiliating—but the truth is, most of us were wearing the same shoes.

And still, my mother fought to bring normalcy into our lives. I remember coming home from school every day at noon. Like clockwork, there’d be a sandwich and a bowl of soup waiting. She’d be watching her “stories” on the TV, and I’d eat quickly to get back outside before the Wilson whistle blew at 1:00. Sometimes I’d stop by **Leon’s Market**, right across from Alexander Wilson Elementary. You could turn in soda bottles—2 cents for a 16-ounce, 5 cents for a 32-ounce.

That change bought me a few pieces of penny candy. That little bit of sweetness? It carried me through.

Saturdays were clean-up days, everybody had a chore and you couldn’t go outside the house until it was all done. Sunday dinners were sacred. No matter what we didn’t have, we had that. My mom would sit in the dining room, breaking and cleaning string beans while gospel music filled the house: Local radio DJ Louise Williams played, Mahalia Jackson, Sam Cooke, The Sensational Nightingales, and James Cleveland to name a few.

Even with nothing, we had joy. We raced popsicle sticks down rain gutters. Played tag under streetlights. Imagined better worlds in the cracks of the one we had. On good days, we had music. On great days, we had laughter.

Outside, the rhythm of our neighborhood beat loud and familiar:

- ***Fruit Man*** (horse drawn carriage open back), *yelling*, “Freestone Peaches! Come get your freestone peaches!”
- ***Fish man*** with his big cooler.
- ***Fuller Brush man*** knocking on doors.
- ***Encyclopedia Salesman*** on the stoop.
- ***Surplus Truck*** with discounted goods on the corner.
- ***Milkman***, delivering bottles to those who could afford it.

But at night—after all the movement stopped — I’d sit quietly outside my mother’s door and hear her cry. One night, I remember hearing her whisper:

“But at least they’re fed...”

That moment still lives inside me. So when I say I breath her breath this is one of those moments that resonates with me.

“This is what I mean when I say...”the compass you placed deep in my soul, still guides me steady toward my goals...”

It's strange how certain memories never fade—they hum beneath the surface like a low baseline. Even now, when I hear certain songs, I'm right back there on Markoe Street. Mahalia Jackson, Sam Cooke, the Art Reynolds Singers—those voices weren't just music, they were memory. They carried the weight of everything we couldn't say out loud.

That's why I say *we all came from the same mother, but we all bear different scars*. I guess that's one of the curses that come with being the first—you see all of the worst.

You hear it too—in every cracked gospel note, every soul record spinning on a dusty turntable, every echo of a prayer whispered through tears.

She wasn't crying because she had nothing. She was crying because she had given *everything*, and still felt it wasn't enough. And yet, she praised God. Even when she was empty, she gave thanks. Even when she was struggling, she pushed forward.

Nobody came to help. Not my father, Not the city. Not the utility company. Not the government. But my mother didn't fold. She adjusted. She endured, and so did we.

When I finally got a little job at Leon's Market, it changed things. Frank would let me eat while I worked, and that meant there was more food left at home.

Later, when I started working at Philadelphia General Hospital (PGH), I ate most of my meals there and even brought food back when I could.

One of the reasons I stayed at my Aunt's house so often was because it helped. It was one less mouth for my mother to feed. It gave me a break. And it gave her one too.

But more than that, it helped me escape the label that had been put on me before I was even ten years old: *"Man of the House."*

Nobody told me how to carry that title. Nobody said, *"You don't have to."* So I carried it.

Because I thought I had to, Because I was the oldest.

Because they looked to me—even if they won't admit it now.

Why else would I sleep on someone else's floor? Why would I eat last, or clean my plate only after everyone else was full—if not because I believed I was making things better at home?

That's how I justified it.

That's how I survived it.

My Aunt's place wasn't perfect, but it was cleaner and calmer. It gave me a chance to breathe. And just as important—it lightened the load back home.

Markoe Street was the hard middle ground between innocence and awareness. It wasn't where I started, and it wouldn't be where I ended. But it's where I learned what struggle looked like. Smelled like, felt like. That house wasn't just falling apart—it was holding me together.

And even now, when a certain song comes on—a gospel hum, a soul melody, a rhythm from back then—I can close my eyes and see it all again. The walls, the warmth, the worry... and my mother's quiet strength, still singing beneath it all.

“Man of the House” – A Title Too Heavy, Too Soon

Early on at seven or eight years old, I was already wearing a title I never asked for — one that would cling to me like a shadow for the rest of my life: *“the man of the house.”*

I hated that phrase, hated it with the small, stubborn intensity of a child who doesn't yet know how to carry a burden. Yet somehow, I wore it anyway, like a uniform stitched with expectation. Because I believed I had to.

That title became a curse—it made me feel that everybody's problems, the ones brought to me, were mine to help fix. I'm not sure how I connected that responsibility to myself, but I always felt I was better equipped to handle everyone else's struggles while quietly ignoring my own.

And yet, in those quiet moments, music became my lifeline. **Sam Cooke's** *A Change Is Gonna Come* would play on the radio, and for just a few minutes, I could breathe.

That song meant a lot to the older folks. At the time, I didn't fully understand why or how—but I knew it resonated with me too. Somehow, I could feel what they were feeling, even if I didn't yet have the words or life experience to explain it.

That song carried me forward. It reminded me that change was possible—that I could survive, and maybe even find a way out from under the weight I carried.

Gospel, jazz, and soul weren't just background noise; they were the soundtrack of my resilience, the invisible hands that kept pushing me ahead when everything felt too heavy to bear.

To me, being the man of the house meant constant vigilance. I watched over my brother and sisters as if my small eyes could see dangers that even Mama couldn't. I listened for every sigh, every whispered worry, every knock at the door that might bring trouble. I worried when she didn't have time to, tried to hold the pieces together when she felt herself fraying.

Most kids my age were learning to ride bikes without falling. I was learning to balance a family. The weight of groceries, bills, and Mama's stress pressed against my chest like stones.

Yet in the middle of that heaviness, I found strange lessons. Strength I hadn't asked for, awareness I didn't fully understand, courage that tasted bitter yet kept me moving.

But those lessons came with scars — quiet ones that would follow me, etched into my shoulders and my heart, through every chapter of my life.

Looking back now, I see clearly: it wasn't just responsibility they handed me — it was a curse, a mantle that clung even when I became a husband, a father, a worker, a leader.

Even as a grown man armored with experience, that little boy's burden whispered in the corners of my mind, reminding me of what had been demanded before I even had a choice.

And maybe that's what shaped me most of all—learning, before I ever knew it, that *staying*, not leaving, not giving up, was the real work of a man. That early weight taught me strength, but it also left me with scars. Scars I carried—quietly, dutifully—throughout my life.

A World Shifting Outside Markoe Street

At the same time, the world outside on our small home on Markoe Street was unraveling, mirroring the internal chaos of my own childhood.

In 1965, the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles went up in flames, a stark rebellion against systemic oppression.

By 1966, **Huey Newton** and **Bobby Seale** had founded the **Black Panther Party**, rising to provide protection and a sense of pride in places where the system offered nothing but neglect. In 1967, the simmering frustrations of the inner cities exploded again, as Detroit and Newark erupted in widespread rebellion.

I was just a kid when **John F. Kennedy**, **Malcolm X**, **Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.**, and **Robert F. Kennedy** were taken from the world, their assassinations sending shockwaves through every Black household.

Their deaths brought a wave of sorrow that rippled through my neighborhood, as though someone in each family had died.

I remember standing by the train tracks with others from the neighborhood as their funeral trains passed by, moving slowly so people could see.

Grown men and women wept openly, and while I didn't grasp the full significance of these men then, I could feel the immense weight of those moments.

It wasn't until later in life that I came to understand the profound impact of those leaders and the void their deaths left behind in the fight for civil rights.

The Struggles of the Time

Markoe Street wasn't just home to us; it was a place where the roaches and mice lived freely, where poverty was a constant companion, and where dreams often felt like distant fantasies. Everyone in the neighborhood was just trying to make it, finding their own ways to escape the weight of their circumstances.

For some, it was the booking numbers—the precursor to today's lottery—which could land you in jail back then.

People would rush to buy the 8-cent *Daily News* just to see “what Nancy was saying today” in the comic strips, hoping her words might hint at the day's lucky number.

One of my daily hustles was running to the store for the older ladies on the block to pick up their newspapers.

The *Daily News* came in two versions: the **four-star**, early edition with news from earlier that day or the day before, and the **eight-star**, which came out in the afternoon.

Either “star” would do—what mattered was checking Nancy and the other comic characters for a possible clue. For many people, that little ritual wasn't just habit—it was hope.

Then there was what folks called the “colored paper”—the *Philadelphia Tribune*—the Black newspaper that carried Black news, Black voices, and stories that spoke directly to our community.

But the struggles weren't just financial. One day, our house became the center of commotion when a local cop was killed. **Bobby Hazard**, Gary's uncle and someone suspected of being involved with the killing once lived in the home we were now living in, and it brought the wrath of **Frank Rizzo**, Philadelphia's police chief at the time to our door. Rizzo's racism and bigotry were legendary, and I grew to despise him for it. That day only confirmed my feelings.

He and his officers stormed into our house, dragged everyone out, and even threw me in the back of a police car. My mother, who had been down the street at Times Café, came running when she heard. Her presence was enough to get us released—but the memory of being treated like a criminal in my own home has never left me.

School Days and Early Memories

After leaving Irving Street, I enrolled in **Alexander Wilson Elementary School**, my time at Wilson, holds many fond memories My first-grade or second-grade teacher, was **Mrs. Washington**, stood out with her striking Snow White hair. She was both kind and, inspiring.

Wilson also introduced me to the joy of music through instruments and performance through plays. I learned to play the **autoharp, flute, and bells**, which added to my growing sense of creativity and curiosity.

Singing in the school choir was another joy. We performed nearly the entire soundtrack of *The Sound of Music*. To this day, hearing those songs brings back memories of pride and camaraderie. I still remember every word of classics like “The Hills Are Alive (with the Sound of Music)” and “Do-Re-Mi.”

Another standout memory was playing **Chicken Little** in a school play at Wilson. I vividly recall running around the stage, exclaiming, “*The sky is falling! The sky is falling!*” It was nerve-wracking yet exhilarating, and it sparked a love for performing that stayed with me.

Those moments on stage, singing and performing with my classmates, filled me with pride and joy.

It was here at Wilson where I was introduced to **Black Pride** and the richness of Black literature and music. I sang “*Lift Every Voice and Sing*” – the Black National Anthem with everything in me—not because I fully understood it, but because for some odd

reason it resonated something in my spirit that was so profound. I also learned and performed “*I, Too*” by **Langston Hughes** and felt the pride in those words even before I could name it.

Another influential teacher was **Mrs. McGerald** she was strict and demanded respect she was also my first black teacher and she received my utmost admiration she introduced me to Spanish, sparking my curiosity and interest about the world beyond my surroundings.

I was a poor kid, though I didn't realize it at the time because most of the kids in my neighborhood were in the same boat.

My clothes were mostly hand-me-downs from my older cousins, **Robert (RIP)** and **James (RIP)**, who were like brothers to me. I didn't think much of it back then—what I lacked in material possessions, I gained in love, laughter, and the camaraderie of my community.

Looking back, my time at Alexander Wilson Elementary School gave me more than an education. It gave me experiences that shaped my confidence, sparked my creativity, and taught me the value of perseverance and community.

Even as a child, I was always in survival mode. Though I was called "the man of the house," I still needed an escape—and Irving Street was always my safe haven. It was a place where I could go and have some type of childhood, always trying to balance multiple things at the same time.

A Memorable Father's Day: June 21, 1964 – Connie Mack Stadium

One of my earliest and most vivid memories is Cliff taking me to a baseball game at Connie Mack Stadium. I was maybe six, though time has a way of bending. I remember getting off the bus, the crowds moving fast around us, the smell of hot dogs and peanuts in the air.

We found our seats, and I sat wide-eyed as names like Johnny Callison, Rick Wise, Cookie Rojas, Tony Taylor, Dick Allen, and Jim Bunning were called over the loudspeaker.

Years later, I realized that game had been on Father's Day in 1964—a no-hitter pitched by Bunning. My very *first* game, and it was history. I'll never forget that Cliff gave me that moment. Cliff wasn't perfect.

I didn't understand why he didn't live with us at the time. But looking back, I realize he had an ex-wife and two other children to care for — Earl and Pat. He chose to be in our lives anyway, especially for Tina, and that meant everything for me. Sitting there with Cliff, it was more than just a baseball game; it was a perfect outing in every way imaginable.

Lessons from Leon's Market

Growing up on Markoe Street had its share of ups and downs, but one of the brighter spots was my first job at Leon's Market when I was about 8 or 9 years old. Frank, the owner, had a kind heart and a soft spot for me.

He gave me an apron—my “uniform”—and I wore it proudly, feeling like I truly belonged. Since I was too short to wear it full length, he taught me to fold it up “half staff,” joking, “Stop using your apron to sweep the floor—use the broom!”

Frank also knew we didn't always have food at home. Whenever I was hungry, he'd say, “Go get a roll.”

He'd slice some cheese and bologna—sometimes liverwurst—and hand it to me to make a sandwich. I'd grab a bag of LG's chips and an orange or grape Ade, then sit in the back to eat. I didn't care what it was; to me, it was food—and that was enough.

Those moments felt like little pockets of comfort in a world that wasn't always kind. I remember the simple joy of sitting there, eating my makeshift lunch, and feeling like I belonged.

That store wasn't just a job. It was a lifeline. A place that taught me work ethic and community.

Leon (not the same from the store) another neighborhood guy who lived on May Street was around 14 or 15, and I looked up to him like a big brother, trying to emulate everything he did.

My main job was simple but felt important: stocking shelves, doing inventory, selling penny candy, cookies, and comics. Back then, every task felt like an adventure, and I took pride in being part of the hustle and bustle of the market.

Leon's Market was more than just a job—it was a place where I started to learn responsibility and independence, even if I didn't realize it at the time.

I remember back in 1967 when Frank got himself a brand-new car. He was so proud of it — a bright red Mustang, the coolest thing on the block. He parked it right on the side of the store on 46th Street, close enough to admire it through the window.

That was the first time I'd ever seen something *brand new*. Up until then, everything in my world was used, borrowed, or handed down. I'll never forget sliding into that car — white leather seats, black carpet under my feet, everything gleaming and smelling fresh.

It wasn't just a car to me; it was a glimpse of a whole new world. I sat there thinking, *one day, I'm going to get one just like it*. But that day never came.

I was never much for cars — I always wanted the simple life instead.

More Than a Market, a Hub of Trust

Leon's Market wasn't just a place to work—it was a small escape from the pressures of home.

It's where I first learned what it meant to earn something, to show up, and to be counted on. It taught me more than how to stock shelves or bag groceries—it taught me the rhythm of responsibility, the quiet pride of honest work, and the comfort of being part of a community that looked out for one another.

Those early lessons stuck with me long after I left that little corner store. They shaped how I viewed work, trust, and community.

Even during the hardest times, there were moments—small but powerful—of kindness and connection that helped carry me forward. Leon's Market was one of those moments.

A light in a dark stretch of my young life.

Back then, it wasn't unusual for kids to walk into the store with handwritten notes from their parents, listing what they needed for the house. Sometimes no money or food stamps *which also was the first time I was introduced to this form of payment*. He'd fill the order and get paid later. Frank ran tabs for people in the neighborhood.

Frank, was the heart of Leon's Market, he didn't blink. He read those notes like they were gospel, filled the bags, and told the kids, *"Tell your mama she can settle up Friday."* Trust was currency.

He kept tabs (*mostly in his head*), not just accounts. That store ran on something money couldn't buy—trust. People lived paycheck to paycheck, and Frank knew that. He didn't harass folks about what they owed. He understood the struggle. The whole neighborhood did. That little market survived not on profit margins—but on faith, relationships, and a quiet understanding that we were all just trying to make it.

Growing up on Markoe Street wasn't just about a house—it was about the neighborhood. It was a patchwork of people, places, and lived moments that stitched together the fabric of my early life. Every corner had a story.

Every block had a lesson—about survival, about respect, about leaning on each other when there wasn't much else to lean on.

Awakening to the World

Around that time, I started seeing the world through new eyes. The Civil Rights Movement was growing louder. The names Malcolm and Martin were everywhere—spoken in barbershops, shouted in the streets, whispered in the kitchens of tired mothers who just wanted their children to live.

Riots and resistance were filling the news. And for the first time, I understood what it meant to be Black, young, and seen as a threat in your own city.

Still, we held it together at home. My mother did her best—and we followed her lead.

Sundays meant gospel music and string beans snapped on the kitchen table. Weekdays meant school, chores, and keeping out of trouble. Irving Street taught me structure. Leon's Market taught me discipline.

But inside, I was still that boy from Irving Street, holding tight to the memory of warmth and wholeness—trying to make sense of a world that now felt colder and louder.

And in the back of my mind, I still carried the memory of Cliff, of that no-hitter in 1964, of what it meant to be seen and taken somewhere special. Moments like that became my blueprint. If I could give someone else that kind of memory, maybe I was doing something right.

Childhood Friendships

My early years on Markoe Street were enriched by deep friendships, particularly with Gary Hughes, who became my "brother from another mother." Gary wasn't just a best friend—he was family. Our bond was unshakable, and it remains a constant reminder of the friendships that helped shape my early life.

Markoe Street also brought lifelong friendships with kids like Junnie, Rhonnie, Pete, and Phoenix. Rhonnie, Junnie's sister, was my childhood girlfriend.

I also remember Phoenix's father, Mr. Gene, who owned the neighborhood barbershop where my brother and I got our haircuts.

I didn't know it then, but I was already walking my path. I can still hear the buzz of clippers, the smell of shaving cream, and the unmistakable sound on the jukebox as I entered the barbershop.

*♪ Everything here is so clear, you can see it
And everything here is so real, you can feel it
And it's real, so real, so real, so real, so real, so real
Can you dig it?" ♪*

— **Hugh Masekela**, "Grazin' in the Grass"

That moment sticks with me—music, movement, and memory, all wrapped into one. Those friendships were innocent yet formative, teaching me about connection, loyalty, and joy.

Whether we were playing outside until the streetlights came on or simply hanging out in the neighborhood, those relationships remain some of my most cherished memories.

Although we have since lost touch with one another, the impact they had on my life is lasting.

We raced popsicle sticks down the gutters after the rain and chased each other until the streetlights buzzed to life. On weekends, we played tops on the sidewalk, or skated up and down the block in those old metal skates that clamped to your shoes.

I broke my arm once doing just that—right in front of the funeral home garages, near the little alley. But that didn't stop us. We wore our joy like armor.

The Neighborhood Stores

Across the street, the Muslims ran their own store. They made some of the best hoagies around, but the shop had a different vibe. It wasn't as brightly lit as Frank's, and the clientele felt distinct. Unlike Frank's Market, credit wasn't an option there, at least not that I was aware.

Just up the street was another Muslim-run shop, Mrs. Rachel's "candy store". To us kids, it was like stepping into a dream. Shelves were packed with all kinds of penny candy, and in the back, she sold the best sloppy joe sandwiches I'd ever tasted.

They were simple, messy, and absolutely delicious—a treat that brought a little joy to our days.

Brother Charlie's Arcade and the Art of Pinball

Not far from Mrs. Rachel's "the candy store" was Brother Charlie's arcade. Brother Charlie—always greeting everyone with his signature phrase, "BEAUTIFUL!" It was how he said it that resonates with me —was another staple of the community. He was a Muslim too, but his place wasn't about food or groceries; it was about fun.

The arcade was where I discovered my love for pinball. For a nickel, you got three balls, and I became a master at the game.

The clinking of coins, the flashing lights, and the thrill of racking up high scores made the arcade feel like a little escape from the world outside.

The Avenue: Life's Crossroads

Markoe Street was just one thread in the larger tapestry of our neighborhood. The avenue was where everything came together.

Times Café was a regular spot for my mom, a place where adults gathered and conversations flowed.

A little further down was a diner with booths that had their own mini jukeboxes—a hangout where you could get a soda and listen to music while you waited for the laundry to finish at the Laundromat next door.

On my side of the avenue, near Leon's, stood Francis Funeral Home—a solemn reminder of life's fragility—and Patterson Hardware Store, where you could find just about anything you needed to fix or build.

Across the street was Gene's Barber Shop, where I got my haircut after leaving Irving Street when BoBo used to cut my hair.

A Neighborhood That Shaped Me

Each of these places—Frank's Market, Mrs. Rachel's, Brother Charlie's, Tim's, and the others—was more than just a business. They were lifelines, gathering places, and schools of life.

They taught me about trust, about finding joy in the small things, and about the interconnectedness of a community.

Looking back now, I see how those experiences wove together to create a foundation for the person I became. Markoe Street and the surrounding neighborhood were far from perfect, but they were home. They were my world, and they shaped me in ways I'll never forget.

Tim's and Payday Treats

Around the corner on 47th and Upland was Tim's, my go-to spot whenever I got paid from PGH. They served a half-chicken platter with fries that was a feast for a young man with a hard-earned paycheck.

That meal became a ritual for me—my way to celebrate the end of a long week of work.

Negro League Baseball: A Front-Row Seat to Black History

I remember standing along the fences at Johnson's Playground on 47th Street, watching what I now know were Negro League baseball games. At the time, I didn't understand their significance—I just knew something important was happening. The way those men moved. The pride in the stands. They also played at Kingsessing Playground.

Looking back now, I realize I was witnessing Black excellence before I even knew the word for it.

Anna B. Shaw: Middle School Years

After completing elementary school at Alexander Wilson, I moved on to Anna B. Shaw Middle School, also located in Southwest Philadelphia. Shaw was my first experience with the structure and responsibilities of middle school, where I began to grow both socially and academically.

Those years were a significant step in my journey, preparing me for the challenges and opportunities that lay ahead.

They marked the beginning of a period of self-discovery and growth as I navigated the complexities of adolescence within the supportive framework of my neighborhood and community.

A Transformative Opportunity: My Years at Philadelphia General Hospital

A pivotal moment in my early life came in 1967 or 1968 when Gary's grandmother, Mrs. Mae, brought both of us to work with her at Philadelphia General Hospital (PGH).

I was just 9 or 10 years old, and the experience opened my eyes to a world of opportunities and responsibilities that would shape my character and work ethic for years to come.

At PGH, I worked in the hospital's cafeteria facilities, which were operated by the Berlo Vending Company. They also managed all the vending machines throughout the hospital—cigarette, candy, coffee and soda—which gave me the opportunity to learn a wide variety of skills.

I operated the cash register, prepared both hot and cold sandwiches, worked the grill and deep fryer, and even helped with banking duties, including making dozens of donuts for the two hospital restaurants—all while managing the counter.

I worked alongside Bill Rosner, the manager, from the Mills Building to the Police and Fireman Ward and every stop along the way to refill and stock the vending machines, learning how to perform minor repairs along the way. The only thing we didn't make on-site were the pies—they were delivered fresh every morning. I loved lemon meringue pie so much that once a week, I'd have one delivered just for me.

The fast-paced environment gave me a sense of purpose, and I thrived on the challenges it presented.

I stayed at PGH until 1974, just a year before the hospital closed for good. Those years were transformative. I learned the value of adaptability, teamwork, and giving my best to every task, no matter how small.

While other kids were playing stickball or running through open hydrants, I was clocking in—learning how to rise to challenges and perform in a fast-paced, demanding environment.

PGH didn't just give me a job—it gave me purpose. It gave me structure at a time when home life felt chaotic. The cafeteria was fast paced, but it was steady and predictable. It was something I could control.

The lessons I took from that place—about work, responsibility, and resilience—became the foundation for everything that followed.

Those years — the late '60s into the early '70s — were full of fire across the country. At the end of the '60s wasn't just a shift in time—it was a shift in who I was as well. The Civil Rights Movement had fractured, Malcolm X had been assassinated in 1965. Martin in '68. Robert Kennedy not long after, and what replaced the dream was a grim reality: survival.

The country was pulling itself apart in war, riots, and disillusionment. For young Black boys like me growing up in Philadelphia, the line between childhood and manhood was thin, often blurred by the weight we were forced to carry too early.

The Black Panthers were patrolling Oakland and North Philly, and the streets were waking up to revolution. But at my age, I didn't fully grasp the scale of what was happening. I just knew we were tired. Tired of being told to wait. Tired of being blamed. Tired of surviving.

♪ *"Say it Loud — I'm Black and I'm Proud!" ...*
...We rather die on our feet
than keep living on our knees...♪

James Brown - *"Say it Loud — I'm Black and I'm Proud!"*

That song wasn't just defiance — it was Permission — Permission to Exist, Permission To Be Proud, Permission To Stop Shrinking. It became the anthem of a generation trying to hold on to its dignity in a country built to erase it.

CHAPTER 3 - Return to Irving Street: The Teenage Years

In 1968, I returned to 5113 Irving Street, living with my Aunt Wilma and Uncle Robert while attending Anna B. Shaw Junior High School. Though separated from my mother and siblings, this move reconnected me to the values of my early years. We lived a simple life, full of rhythm—full of love.

Irving Street was a tight-knit community where families shared backyards separated only by fence lines. The neighborhood was alive with laughter and the chatter of kids playing until the streetlights came on. Even after dusk, we'd be running up and down the block until it was time to come inside. The porches connected our houses like front-row seats to Black life in motion—you could visit the neighbors without even stepping into the rain.

On one side of us were the Andersons—Mr. Dan and Mrs. Helena, along with their children Danell, Yolanda, Terry, and Shavon. On the other side lived the Francises — Mr. and Mrs. Francis, and their daughters Carolyn, Jackie, and Tracy. They lived beside the “old white lady” who barely spoke to anyone. Her steps were off-limits to us, and every now and then she'd throw salt water on them to keep us away. Her house sat right next to the alley we used as a shortcut to the store on Locust Street.

A few doors down were Damon and Kevin Jackson, who lived with their grandparents, Mr. Lamar and “Gramps.” Then came Mr. and Mrs. Green, with their children Sissy, Donna, and the oldest, Billy—who was a long-distance truck driver. The Butlers—Mr. and Mrs. Butler and their son Larry—lived next to them, just before the second alley on our side of the street, which broke up the row of connected homes.

Across from that break lived Tanida, a close family friend, and Linda (RIP), my cousin’s best friend. A few doors down was the apartment building where my Aunt Sadie and her boyfriend Johnny—who was a cop—lived. They would later marry. A few doors past them lived my best friend Jakey with his parents, Mr. Jake and Mrs. Dot, and his siblings Kevin and Joy.

Across the street lived Alexander “Sput,” Joe Jefferson, Viola, Leroy and Larry—who I first met on Woodland Avenue when they moved to the city. Their grandfather lived on Markoe Street across from the garage where I broke my arm roller skating back in the day.

Directly across from our house stood the “church house,” where Renee Davis lived with her father Spencer, who was the caretaker for the church property.

We were a real neighborhood—tight-knit, loud, full of life, with mothers and fathers present on the block. It was the first time I could actually see the kind of family structure I had always craved. It gave me a glimpse of what I wanted for myself—proof that my dream of a complete family wasn't impossible.

We played dead block, tops, wall ball, kickball, football, basketball, and spun tops until the sun went down. On weekends, we were off doing Boy Scout activities. Our time was filled with activity—scaling walls, playing half-ball in the lot, or heading down The Strip for excitement. It was a time of pure joy.

Everything we needed was right there on that one block—two candy stores and a restaurant—all within walking distance. We never had to cross a single street. Even as little kids, we were safe because the grownups looked out for everybody. They all knew who you were and who you belonged to.

You learned early that no matter where you were on that block, there was always a grownup watching you or watching out for you. That's just how it was.

Living with my aunt and uncle during that time gave me a firsthand look at what family dynamics could be—what love, discipline, and belonging looked like under one roof. It wasn't always easy.

In fact, the experience was often bittersweet. But it taught me resilience, and it helped me grow. Around the corner on 51st Street were Crip (Christopher), Tony, another Renee, Thelma and Ronnie—who was dating Sissy Green.

Right behind our house on Locust Street lived Aunt Doris, Uncle Sonny, and their daughter Marilyn. Though we weren't related by blood, they were like family. Uncle Sonny and Marilyn have since passed, but Aunt Doris, now elderly, still lives in that same house. Our yards shared a fence line.

Next door, separated by a breezeway, were the Woodsons—brothers who could fix anything. Gary, who served as our “drill sergeant” (“to the rippa hoot”) when we had a drill team, was a genius. He was the first guy I knew who built a motorized bike from spare parts, complete with a horn and a microphone. His brother Lester, closer in age to Rob, was just as talented with his hands. Further down on Locust was Zeke, his brothers—Stevie and Darryl—and their sister.

And then there was one of my oldest friends, “Poodie,” who technically lived on the North Side of Market Street but claimed our hood as his own. He's still a good friend to this day—even if we don't see each other much anymore, I know that when we do link up, it's like no time has passed.

Funny enough, we actually ended up working across the street from each other before I retired from Deloitte. Small world.

The Strip – 52nd Street

Back then, *52nd Street* wasn't just a street—it was *The Strip*. It was the beating heart of West Philadelphia, a place where Black-owned businesses thrived, music spilled out of open doors, and the smell of fresh bread, fried fish, and barbecue mixed in the air.

On Saturdays, it seemed like everybody ended up there—shopping for church clothes, picking up records, catching a movie, or just people-watching from the corner.

It was a runway for style and a stage for community life. If you grew up in West Philly, The Strip was part of your story, whether you meant it to be or not. For me, it was where I learned how the world worked—its beauty, its grit, and the rhythm that held it all together.

On the corner of 52nd & Locust Street was Foo-Foo's, home of the legendary "Mama Jammer"—a steak sandwich dripping with special sauce that had people lining up around the block.

The line wrapped so far it felt like part of the sidewalk was permanently reserved for hungry customers. On the opposite corner stood the Locust Theater, one of our neighborhood movie spots.

Just down from it was Punchy's Seafood, where I'd grab half-chicken or fried fish platters that could rival Tim's on Woodland Avenue.

Next to Punchy's was the Penny Arcade, run by a gangster named *Brickyard*. I spent so much time there I even worked behind the counter for a while, handing out change and keeping the machines alive.

Many of the businesses along The Strip had ties to gangsters or the mob—places like Foo-Foo's and Mr. Silk's (owned by Gus Lacey) were part of that under-the-table network that kept certain doors open and certain pockets lined.

Just off 52nd on Locust was Crip and Ella's, a rib and chicken joint known for serving some of the best barbecue in West Philly. Their ribs were fall-off-the-bone tender, smoky and sweet, pulling people in from all over the city. The smell alone could stop you mid-walk and have you reaching for a few dollars you didn't plan to spend.

On 52nd and Spruce Street stood the Cougar Lounge, where the hum of conversation mixed with the warm bass of Motown spilling from the jukebox. Right across the street was the Big Top bar—which would later become the home to "*Big George's*" famous soul food spot. That's where I met Muhammad Ali for the first time.

It wasn't unusual for Ali to stop by Black neighborhoods—he had a way of showing up unannounced, drawing a swarm of kids who treated him like royalty. That day, I was one of them. He leaned down, smiled, and pressed a dollar into my palm. To a young kid from West Philly, it felt like a blessing from a living legend.

On the opposite corner, the Flower Store's bright colors and sweet scent mixed with the aroma of frying fish from nearby takeout joints. Next to it stood Mr. Silk's 3rd Base, right beside the Yellow-Front Store. Across the way, Sun-Ray's Drug Store sat beside Hollywood's, where my "big brother" Rob would take me on Saturday mornings to talk, laugh, and watch the street come alive.

Further down was the Ponytail, a go-go bar with women dancing under flashing lights while the band kept the rhythm tight and funky. Across from it stood Black Oak Park—later renamed Malcolm X Park—a reflection of the rising wave of Black pride and political consciousness reshaping our neighborhoods in the late '60s and early '70s.

Neet's stood farther along The Strip, a gangster-owned spot with the Jamaica Inn upstairs. Hakim's Bookstore, tucked away on Chancellor Street, was a cultural lighthouse—its shelves stacked with Black literature, radical thought, and African history you'd never find in the school library.

Shopping was an event. John's Bargain Store was where we found brand-new clothes with tiny imperfections, and Florsheim Shoes on the corner of 52nd and Walnut was where I bought my first pair of "*left hooks*"—short Stacy Adams boots. We wore them with starched *high-boy shirts* and *khaki pants*, cuffs rolled up just enough to show off the boots.

And our hair? *Fried, dyed, and laid to the side*—straightened with a hot comb, sealed with Murray’s pomade, and glistening under the streetlights.

Jim Trotter’s small sporting goods store sat farther up the Strip. Trotter, a member of the Philadelphia Warriors Roller Skating Team, fueled my roller derby obsession. I traveled with Aunt Wilma and Mrs. Dot (Jakey’s mom) to *Hamburg, PA, Cherry Hill, the Spectrum, the Civic Center, the Arena, and the 69th Street Forum*—wherever the derby rolled, I followed.

Next to Trotter’s was Empire Records, our neighborhood’s temple of vinyl. One night it burned down, and my cousin and I snuck into the ashes to salvage (steal) what we could. We nearly got ourselves arrested, but walking away with a stack of half-scorched records felt like treasure.

Shapiro’s was where I got my first—and only—pair of orthopedic shoes to correct my inward-bowed feet. They were white, with a bar across the bottom they were “*brogans*”. They didn’t completely fix the problem, but they were mine, and I still smile thinking about them.

The Locust Theater had a polished feel, and I’ll never forget the night *Trouble Man* lit up its screen. Robert Hooks starred in it—ironically, his son *Kevin Hooks* was from West Philadelphia too, and he and I both attended Huey around the same time, though we didn’t know each other.

My mother and Aunt already knew of his father Robert Hooks, so seeing his name on the marquee felt like a neighborhood win. When the lights dimmed and that first deep bass line rolled out, Marvin Gaye's voice slid over it like smoke—*"There's only three things that's for sure... taxes, death, and trouble."*

Every man in that theater knew those words weren't just lines in a song—they were a truth we lived. By the end, when he sang, *"I come up hard, but now I'm cool, I didn't make it sugar, playing by the rules..."* it felt like a quiet promise to ourselves walking back out onto Locust Street.

The Nixon Theater was different—grittier, more alive. It had a balcony and an energy that seemed to lean in on you. I saw Ben there. The story was about a boy and his unlikely friend, but Michael Jackson's voice turned it into something else entirely. *"Ben, you're always running here and there... you feel you're not wanted anywhere..."* In our world, it wasn't about a pet rat—it was about friendship, loyalty, and finding someone who saw you when no one else did.

When the final notes of "Ben, you're my best friend" drifted through the speakers, the whole room seemed to carry it out into the night.

Not far from there was Dutch Treats on Walnut Street, its famous windmill sign spinning in the breeze, marking the spot where you could get the best milkshakes in the city.

That stretch of 52nd Street wasn't just storefronts and neon signs—it was a living soundtrack. The songs and films of the time weren't background noise; they were threads in the fabric of our days. They taught us, reminded us, and sometimes warned us.

Heading farther south, you'd find the Olympia Ballroom, where they held parties, dance shows, and bingo nights. *Mrs. Mae*, my co-worker from the hospital, loved bingo, and I'd often go with her.

The air was thick with cigarette smoke, the smell of coffee, and the sing-song calls of “B-I-N-G-O!” — another kind of music in the score of my youth.

The Late 1960s: Big Brother Robert's Influence

Although the late 1960s into the early 1970s were challenging times for my big brother Robert Lee Taylor, Jr., they were also formative years for me. Robert struggled with being in and out of jail, caught up in trouble, and battling a severe drug habit. Yet, despite his personal challenges, he became a rock for me, a bright spirit who shaped my life in ways I don't think he ever fully understood.

When I moved back to Irving Street in 1968, Robert would often take me downstairs late at night while everyone else was asleep.

We'd sit together, sharing ice cream and cookies, as he imparted lessons that have stayed with me to this day. He'd say things like, "Boy, I better not catch you out there in them streets on some bullshit." Using today's words, he was telling me to avoid the pitfalls he had experienced firsthand.

Robert had a reputation in West Philadelphia as someone not to be messed with, and his name carried weight. I knew that if anyone bothered me or James, they'd have to answer to him.

That sense of protection allowed me to walk confidently from Irving Street to Shaw Junior High School every day, even through neighborhoods where gang and turf wars were common.

Back then, the phrase "*Where you from?*" was the equivalent of today's "*stop and frisk.*" The difference was that rival gangs, not the police, demanded answers as you passed through their turf (territory). Thanks to Robert's reputation, I could navigate these situations with confidence, knowing I had someone watching out for me.

And through all of it — I worked.

Saturday Mornings at Hollywood's

One of my fondest memories of Robert was our Saturday mornings at Hollywood's, a small neighborhood diner where we'd have breakfast before I went to work.

Those were "our" talks—moments when he encouraged me to do better and be better because he believed I was better. At a time when I had no one else to look up to, my "big brother" Robert's encouragement meant everything.

He'd look me in the eyes and tell me I had potential, that I didn't need to get caught up in the streets or the trouble he had faced. I held on to those words tightly because they were exactly what I needed to hear.

A Heart of Gold and a Lasting Legacy

Robert left an indelible mark on my heart. Despite his struggles, he had a heart of gold, bigger than the neighborhood itself. He always made me feel safe, loved, and protected.

When he passed away in 2005, it left a hole in my heart that has never been repaired. With each loss since that time, I've felt a part of myself fade away.

Even now, I think about him and his impact on my life. *"Hey, Big Bro! Look at me now—I did what you told me. I didn't get caught up in the bullshit of the streets, and I kept pushing forward. I hope I made you proud. I miss you."*

Looking back now, The Strip was more than just a stretch of pavement lined with businesses—it was an open-air classroom. It taught me style, how to walk with my head high, and how to navigate spaces where respect was earned, not given.

It was a place where the scent of barbecue could pull you across the street, where the sound of a Marvin Gaye lyric or Michael Jackson's voice could follow you for blocks, and where you learned to read people as quickly as street signs. It was a mix of hustlers and hard workers, preachers and players, gangsters and grandmothers, all moving to the same beat in their own way.

The Strip was where my eyes truly opened — where my street instincts were forged, my self-awareness deepened, and my sense of purpose first took root. I didn't simply move through it; I carried it with me, and I still do.

CHAPTER 4 - Relocating to South Philadelphia: A Stepping Stone

“Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in...”

Michael Corleone - *The Godfather Part III*.

In 1972, I moved to the Martin Luther King (MLK) housing projects in South Philadelphia to join my mother and siblings, marking the beginning of a significant chapter in my life.

Moving to South Philadelphia wasn't a choice made in joy. I left behind West Philly — a place I knew, loved, and felt rooted in — and was thrust into a different world. Everything felt unfamiliar. South Philly was more diverse than anything I was used to, and adapting wasn't easy. But if you live long enough, you learn: change is always coming.

The MLK housing projects provided a roof over our heads, and for that, I was grateful. But they represented a reality I was determined to rise above. The projects were not a place of belonging for me; they were a stepping stone, a temporary chapter of survival —not a permanent definition of who I was.

This transition reminded me of the challenges we faced as a family and the resilience it took to keep going.

It also fueled my determination to break free from those limitations and create a better life for myself and my future family

The MLK Projects — were made up of four towers in total, named after a man I respected deeply. Our building rose 11 floors high, with about 17 units per floor.

We lived at the very top. Across from us stood another tower, even taller, with 15 floors. At first, I hated it. The structure was cold, the neighborhood was tense, and the environment felt nothing like home. But over time, something shifted.

For one, we had working heat and lights. No broken furnace to monitor. We had a stove that actually worked. After everything we dealt with on Markoe Street, those basic utilities felt like blessings.

But life on the 11th floor had its downsides — especially when the elevators were broken. And getting to know the neighborhood? That was a whole other challenge.

Back then, gangs controlled much of the city, and the projects were home base for the 13th and South Street gang. If you were new — or even if you weren't — you got tested. Fights. Bullying. Pressure to prove yourself. West Philly had its dangers too, but at least there, I knew the players. I was from there. In South Philly, I was just another outsider trying to survive.

Once again, I had to leave friends behind—a recurring theme in my journey—and adjust to a new school for my final year of junior high. Leaving Shaw Junior High in West Philly, I began attending Bartlett Junior High in South Philly.

I was working and going to school at Bartlett Junior High. That created a strange duality: by day I was in classrooms and hospital corridors at night working in the cafeteria until it closed at 8pm.

While Bartlett was an adjustment, I made the most of it and graduated, preparing myself for the next step—South Philadelphia High School. But even then, South Philly never truly felt like home. I always considered myself a West Philly kid at heart.

We lived just a block off Broad Street — home of the Mummers Parade, the Thanksgiving Day Parade — but to me, it represented something much bigger.

I called Broad Street my yellow brick road. It was my path to Center City — to tall buildings, elevators, offices, and men with briefcases. I didn't know what kind of businessman I wanted to be... *I just knew I wanted to be one. I wanted to be somebody.*

At Bartlett, I was always on the move. Most days, I'd slip out early — especially during my last period typing class. Mr. Allen never took roll, and back then, typing was for secretaries. Or so I thought. (That would come back to humble me later in life.) I wasn't planning on sitting behind a desk... not yet. But the seed was already there.

I'd leave school, walking the *yellow brick road* to catch the 42 bus on Broad and Walnut Street, and head back to PGH to work. I kept that routine all the way through high school, right up until the summer of 1974.

The city was hot then — not just in temperature, but in tension. Gun violence. Turf wars. So many young Black men losing their lives. Somehow, I stayed out of it. But I wasn't untouched.

In the hallways of the projects, I met people who became part of my story — for better or worse. One of the first was Darryl Stewart. We lived on the same floor, and he remains a friend to this day. Then there was Pud, Chink, Wayne, and Stanley who was brothers. Pud and I became inseparable around 1972–73. We were always together — hustling up quarters playing pokeno with his mom's friends so we could hit the movies.

Back then, a dollar went a long way. We'd catch a show at The Duke, The Duchess, The Fox, The Goldman or Stage Door Cinema.

We'd get a slice of pizza and one soda with two cups. That's how we lived — together, scrapping joy out of whatever we had.

Chink and I were close too for a time. We went to school together. Since I was working, I could buy my own clothes — usually from Krass Brothers on South Street or Big Hearted Jim's.

Merchants would call out from the doorway: “*What you need? How much you got?*”

You could get a full outfit for \$35 — and you were somebody when you stepped into school wearing something fresh.

Not all the relationships were easy. Wayne, rest in peace, was someone I clashed with constantly. We fought often — and not always fairly. His brother Stanley and I had our tensions too.

One summer while working with the Housing Authority, Wayne hid a butcher knife between the cushions of a sofa — meant for me to sit on. But Stanley sat on it instead.

The blade tore into him, and he had to wear a colostomy bag. I still don’t know how I avoided it. But I do know God was watching over me. Despite the chaos, I stayed focused. I held on to my dreams.

The Yellow Brick Road

After moving into the projects and adjusting to my surroundings, I started having a recurring dream—one that always centered on *Broad Street*. But I didn’t see it the way most people did. To me, Broad Street became my Yellow Brick Road—not leading to fairy tales, but to a future I dared to imagine. A future of Possibility, Power and Purpose.

At the very top of that road stood City Hall, with William Penn perched high above it all. In my dream, City Hall was Oz—not a place of magic, but a powerful symbol.

It represented what felt unreachable yet irresistibly magnetic. The place I longed to reach.

Just beyond that, stretching out in glass and steel, was what I came to call my Emerald City—the business district that lined the west side of Broad Street.

That was the land of opportunity. That's where the movers and shakers walked with purpose. Suits, briefcases, decisions being made behind tall doors I hadn't yet walked through.

On the east side of Broad was the retail district—bustling stores, show windows, and commerce. It too played its role, but it was the west side that stirred something deeper in me.

I used to walk from Bartlett Junior High School to Broad and Walnut Streets to catch the 42 bus—day after day. In the heat. In the cold. Always facing north. I'd leave school early, skipping my last-period typing class, thinking it wasn't for someone like me. (Ironically, typing would become a core skill later in my professional life.)

It wasn't just a route to the bus stop. That walk became something else in my mind. Something bigger. I called it *my Yellow Brick Road*. Every step I took down Broad Street, I imagined I was walking into the life I dreamed about—one I wasn't born into, but one I was determined to build.

I didn't have a blueprint. But I had grit, discipline, and direction. And I had a dream that one day, I wouldn't just walk past those big buildings — I'd walk into them like I belonged.

I wasn't looking for fantasy or magic. I was building my own way out of the quicksand I was born into.

That stretch of Broad Street wasn't just pavement—it was my Yellow Brick Road. And City Hall, high above, was the promise of Oz. And just beyond it—the Emerald City I sought—wasn't make-believe. It was the world of opportunity. And I was coming for it.

Friendship in the Projects: James "Pud" Crawford

One of the most impactful relationships I formed during my time in the MLK projects was with James Crawford (Pud). We met shortly after I moved in, and within a year or two, we became very close—like brothers. Pud and I were different in many ways. He was shaped by the environment, while I saw myself as someone trying to rise above it.

But despite those differences, our bond was real. Pud was loyal, consistent, and always there during a season in life when I desperately needed a brother.

He was a product of the projects. I was fighting not to be. But somehow, we met in the middle. Our friendship would last decades, weathering the highs and lows of young adulthood. But everything shifted after I retired from Deloitte in 2009. I hit a difficult stretch and reached out, hoping for the same support I had given freely over the years. His reply caught me off guard: *“Mike, you don’t ask.”* Whoa! That one sentence cut me deeper than he probably knew. It wasn’t just what he said—it was what it revealed. *I always assumed that, that was never needed to be said. At least that is how I thought our relationship was. When I had and he needed I just gave - my problem (assume) was that I expected the same in return.*

But I found out the hard way that this wasn’t the case:

One thing that moment taught me was:

People will come and go throughout your life, often carrying their own agendas—and nothing you say or do will change that. You may wish things were different, hoping they would be more or less than what they are. But the truth is, people are exactly who they are. That isn’t a flaw; it’s reality.

Life has taught me to accept others as they are, not as I wish they could be. They didn’t enter my life to change for me—just as I wasn’t meant to change for them. When their season passes, so do they. And that’s okay.

Each person serves a purpose in their season. Sometimes they bring growth, sometimes clarity and sometimes pain. No more, no less.

CHAPTER 5 - South Philadelphia High School: Finding My Path

The transition to South Philly was difficult; the environment was unfamiliar, and I struggled to find a sense of belonging.

When I entered high school I was still working at PGH. Working full-time while attending

Despite these challenges, I remained focused on my education and graduated from South Philadelphia High School on June 19, 1975. While academics were not my strongest suit, I carried with me a determination to succeed and create a better future.

Awakening and Awareness – Black History

It was during those South Philadelphia High School years that something shifted inside me. Not just academically, but spiritually, culturally, consciously. I began to see through the cracks in the stories we were being told—especially in Black History class.

I was enrolled in the class, because I thought this would be a class that would speak to my soul. But when I started to engage in the class and ask questions—real questions—the teacher got uncomfortable. I wasn't trying to be disruptive.

I just wanted the truth. Why was the curriculum so sanitized? Why was this elder Caucasian afraid of my questions and inquisitive nature? Where were the full stories of Malcolm, of Martin of Garvey, of Angela Davis? At this point I realized that the messenger was the problem.

I was told to leave the class.

They sent me to Mr. Parazano, head of the department. He didn't want to deal with me either. But that moment taught me something: truth makes people uncomfortable—especially when it challenges the lies they've come to accept.

That's when I realized that the classroom would never be enough for me and the answer to my questions.

I had to educate myself. Learn from the streets, the elders, the books no one assigned. Plainly I had to learn on my own.

Discovering Printing: A Life-Changing Decision

Prior to my senior year at South Philadelphia High School, in the spring of 1974, something truly unexpected happened. I had already completed most of my academic requirements, leaving space for an elective.

That's when my good friend, James "Fish" Savage(RIP), pulled me aside and said "*Mike, check out printing,*" it's an easy class with a cool teacher and, "*he's solid*". Fish, had taken printing the year before as part of his commercial curriculum.

I selected the elective and attended the upcoming school year, under the guidance of Mr. Charles Kasola, I learned typesetting by hand, running presses both automatic - AB Dicks/Addressograph Multigraphs and manual - Heidelberg/Chandler & Price Letterpresses, striping, darkroom camera work, plate making and bookbinding.

The pressroom had its own compelling rhythm—ink rolling, machines clapping, paper snapping in perfect time. The smell of ink, the hum of the presses, the precision of the craft—it all spoke to something deep inside me. I wasn't just surviving anymore. I was mastering something.

There was order and power in it. For a kid from the projects who had grown up around chaos and unpredictability, printing offered something profoundly different: Control.

By the time I finished that year, I was top in my class, creating programs for school events and building confidence I never knew I had.

When I graduated from South Philadelphia High on June 19, 1975, I was jobless. I had left PGH the year before, and now I had to find a way to support myself. My mom was still on welfare, and times were hard. I was no longer just a kid from the projects anymore. I was expected to be a provider, a survivor, a technician, a dreamer with tools in hand.

The yellow brick road hadn't ended. *It was just getting paved.*

Philadelphia Offset Printing School

After graduating high school, I wasn't sure what would come next. For a while, I considered joining the military. One day, while riding the 42 bus on my way to the Marine recruitment office, I saw a newspaper ad for the Philadelphia Offset Printing School.

Something about it caught my eye. I got off the bus at 19th Street, walked into the school office, and inquired about their nine-month program.

Money was tight. We were on welfare, and my Uncle James (RIP) was gravely ill, which added to my mother's stress. But she found a way. She worked with her caseworker to cover the \$150 admissions fee, and I secured a Basic Educational Opportunity Grant (BEOG) to pay the remaining \$3,600 tuition.

By January 1976, I was all in. The program was demanding, but I thrived in its structure. The steady hum of the presses, the smell of ink, the precision—it calmed me. In a chaotic world, printing gave me focus and peace.

I wasn't the loudest, but I was always watching, learning. I had something to prove—to myself more than anyone—that I could finish something that I could rise above the expectations placed on young Black men from the projects. Printing became more than a trade—it became a purpose.

On August 13, 1976, I graduated at the top of my class. That day wasn't just about me—it was a win for everyone who poured into me: my mother, my family, Fish, Robert, Mrs. Mae, Pud, and even the critics who counted me out.

The printing school gave me more than a skill—it gave me confidence, discipline, and the belief that I could build a future.

I was ready to work, to provide, to build. Because I believed: *“When I win, everybody in my circle wins.”*

This wasn't just about survival anymore. This was the beginning of a legacy.

Life in the Projects: Family and Determination

Long before I ever walked into a boardroom or helped my Mother purchase her first home, there was a moment that lit a fire in me that never died.

We were having a disagreement. I was venting about her boyfriend, Mayo, saying he wasn't anything to me. And without hesitation, she snapped back: *“He's more of a man than you'll ever be.”*

Those words stung, I was taken aback. Not just because of who said them, but because I knew they weren't true—and yet I carried them like a stone in my chest from that day forward. I never respected Mayo, never connected with him as a man nor respected him as one as well.

But after that moment, I made it my mission to prove her wrong.

By the time Mayo passed a few years later, I was finishing up printing school and preparing to start my first job at Touché Ross, which would eventually become Deloitte. It couldn't have been more different from the smoky bars where Mayo worked.

And to me, it felt like proof. Proof that I *could become the man she never believed I would be*.

During that time, I did what I could to support my mother. Rent in the projects was \$34 a month, and I gave her \$75 every payday—enough to cover housing and help put food on the table.

She would often tell me not to stay for her sake—that I needed to build a life of my own. But I stayed anyway. Because even after the hurt, I still wanted to show her...

That I was a man, That I was her son. That I was trying.

From Printing School to Touché Ross

Graduating from the Philadelphia School of Printing wasn't just the end of a program—it was the closing of one chapter and the quiet, uncertain beginning of another. For me, it was proof that every late night bent over assignments, every early morning ride to class, and every ounce of discipline I could scrape together had paid off.

Being top of my class meant more than a certificate. It meant the school put me front and center for every job interview that came through their doors. They wanted to showcase their best talent to potential employers, to make sure businesses would keep coming back for more. I didn't fully see it then, but in their eyes, I wasn't just graduating — I was their investment.

The truth was, I didn't know the first thing about navigating the world of professional interviews. I didn't know what to wear, how to carry myself, or how to answer questions with confidence.

I came from a world where survival skills mattered more than business etiquette. So when I sat across from my first interviewers, I bombed. Badly.

One company was so unimpressed they sent written feedback back to the school. That could've been the kind of thing that knocked me flat — but instead, it lit a fire. The school took that feedback seriously. From that moment on, they added professional development to the curriculum: how to dress, how to sit, how to speak, how to ask the right questions — and, just as important, which questions not to ask. My early misstep ended up becoming a stepping stone for every student who came after me.

But I wasn't starting from zero. I had learned to tie a tie years earlier in the Boy Scouts. My manners had been drilled into me by my mother, my Aunt Wilma, and the women of Irving Street — women who carried themselves with dignity and demanded the same from the young men they raised.

And I had something far more valuable than polish: I had empathy. Growing up with nothing had taught me to see people, to care for the next man, to recognize the struggle in someone else's eyes because I'd lived it myself. Those tools — the basics of presentation, respect, and compassion — I already carried.

When the next round of interviews came, I put on the only suit I owned — the same beige suit I'd graduated high school in, paired with a chocolate shirt and a beige tie. That suit became my armor. I wore it to every interview after that, because it was all I had — but I made sure that when I walked in wearing it, I carried myself like it was tailor-made for success.

Once I tightened up my appearance and learned the art of confidence without arrogance, everything changed. Job offers started rolling in — two, three at a time.

That's when one of my instructors pulled me aside. "Mike," he said, "don't take the job at Touché Ross. It won't give you the chance to grow through the traditional ranks — apprentice pressman, junior pressman, journeyman, master pressman. You'll get stuck."

On paper, maybe he was right. Touché wasn't the obvious choice for someone chasing a pure printing career. But I wasn't chasing just that. I had my own vision — my own Emerald City. I'd carried that dream since I was a boy, a voice inside me guiding me and protecting me through every hard season.

And although the print shop at Touché was where I started, I knew once I got in it was going to be hard to get me out — because my vision had always guided me there, even if it never showed me a way out. Coming in when I did, with technology on the rise, was perfect timing.

No, the job at Touché didn't lead to the apprenticeship or the master printer role I once imagined at the Philadelphia Bulletin. But it gave me something else — exactly what I had dreamed of since moving to the MLK Projects. That walk down Broad Street, my proverbial Yellow Brick Road, led me straight into the Emerald City and into the ivory towers.

I had made it to where I was supposed to be. A dream fulfill

FROM QUICKSAND TO KING

SECTION II:
TRIALS, TURNING POINTS, AND
TRUTH

CHAPTER 6 – A Key to Emerald City

The year was 1976 — America’s Bicentennial. Flags waved, parades rolled, and the country was busy celebrating 200 years of “freedom.” But for a young Black man from West Philly stepping into corporate America, that freedom still came with fine print. Philadelphia itself was a city of contrasts — gleaming Center City skyscrapers alongside the neglected blocks of Markoe Street and the MLK Projects. Redlining, job discrimination, and limited opportunity were part of the daily reality for most Black families. Affirmative action was still in its early years, a tenuous bridge offering rare openings to people like me, but it came with scrutiny and skepticism from those who didn’t believe someone from the “wrong side of town” could belong.

I had just graduated from the Philadelphia Offset Printing School — a vocational technical program that gave me a craft and a vision. Before graduating, I secured a job at Touché Ross & Co., one of the largest accounting and consulting firms in the country. Their office sat high above 1700 Market Street on the 24th floor, right in the heart of downtown Philadelphia — what I would come to call the Emerald City.

Can you believe it?

It was August 16, 1976 — that date still glows in my memory like neon.

That first morning, the city felt like a movie set. The streets were alive with men in sharp suits and women in dresses that shimmered like they were headed to a fashion show. The sound of heels clicked against the pavement; briefcases swung like pendulums of purpose. I was eighteen years old, dressed in pressed slacks and a collared shirt, trying to look the part but still feeling like an outsider — a kid from Martin Luther King Projects, now surrounded by skyscrapers and silver elevators.

As I turned at the corner of Chestnut Street and 17th, walking towards the IVB building at 1700 Market Street I just stood there for a moment looking up at the building, just breathing it in. *That moment right there....* I felt the full weight of my history: the streets I'd walked, the projects, Markoe Street those cold nights of loneliness and hunger, sweeping floors while stocking shelves and selling penny candy at Leon's Market, cleaning tables and filling vending machines at PGH.

The absence of a father left me navigating a cruel world on my own. Finally, I could be the “Man of the House”— a title I carried like a badge of courage and honor, but also a burden, the weight pulling me down before I could rise. I'd survived, guided by the lessons my Mother, Aunt Wilma, and “big brother” Robert had instilled in me.

I was about to step into a world I had only dreamed of.

For years, looking out my 11th-floor bedroom window in the projects, I could see the city skyline — sparse back then, but the IVB building sign stood out clearly, a beacon I never imagined I'd one day reach.

I was about to step into a world I had only dreamed of. For years, I had watched that skyline and that sign, feeling the lights and promise, and heard the city whisper, *"One day, this will be your destination."* Now, that day had come. I was finally standing at the gates, my ticket in hand, ready to enter the Emerald City.

What I had only glimpsed in dreams was now becoming reality. I didn't wear a suit; the only suit I owned was the one I wore to the interview to get the job. I'd been told earlier on that the print shop dress code was business casual — sneakers were fine, no need to overdress.

Early lessons had already taught me that if you want to know how to dress for a new job, watch your supervisor and dress how he dresses: simple, practical, effective.

The air was thick with summer and possibility, and the city pulsed with its own kind of heartbeat — car horns, bus brakes, and the hum of downtown life.

Back then, there weren't many food vendors downtown. I actually predated that era. In those days, there was a city ordinance — food vendors couldn't be too close to one another — so only one or two were allowed on a given stretch. Luigi was one of the originals, maybe the only one on Market Street at the time.

He and his wife, Margaret, ran their little cart like a neighborhood landmark. Neither spoke much English, but they spoke "good food." A hot dog with sauerkraut, or a hot sausage on a hard roll with cooked onions, relish, and mustard — that was lunch heaven.

We became friends over time. In those early days, Luigi's cart was my go-to spot until I built up enough capital to explore other lunch options. Just about 10–15 feet away was a small newspaper stand — really just a metal box in those days.

The vendor would open it up each morning and stand outside until every paper was sold. Later, that stand evolved into a full booth selling magazines, gum, lottery tickets, and all the major news papers — The New York

Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal — along with the hometown favorites: The Journal, Bulletin, Daily News, and Inquirer.

There were plenty of choices back then. Across the street was a White Castle, and right next to it — the famous \$2.49 Steak House. You could get a steak, baked potato, salad, and iced tea for exactly \$2.49. The steak was a little chewy, but it was still the best I'd ever had. Honestly, the *only* steak I'd ever had back then.

I was never big on White Castle, but when you worked late, it was the only thing open. Next door to the steak house stood King of Pizza, wedged between it and a porn theater. Beside that was a men's hat and clothing store, and right next to it — a penny arcade.

Back then, I'd spend my whole lunch hour in that arcade, feeding quarters into the newest pinball machine and chasing my initials onto the high score board. On the way back, I'd grab a slice or a hot sausage from Luigi and head to work — learning how to stretch my lunch hour just right.

Further down the block was Esquire Men's Store, where I spent way too much money trying to look sharp. Then came the Fox and Milgram movie houses, and Pop Edwards — a bar where I had my first "official" mixed drink: a Tanqueray and tonic with a twist of lime — *hated it*, I switched to Whisky Sours or Tom Collins after that. But I was trying to look important.

It was my first real lunch with a client — Ken David, the service man from Addressograph Multigraph (AM) that serviced the presses for the shop. There was so much packed into that one block... and I had only just crossed the street.

That day — that moment — was something else. I walked in with hope in my chest and pride in my stride. This wasn't a corner store or a hospital cafeteria.

This was Center City.

This was the Emerald City.

I was twenty years old, wearing my best shirt — pressed by hand, heavy with starch and hope. It wasn't just a new job. It was a new world. Touché Ross & Co., — the name alone sounded like money, with marble floors, men in suits and polished shoes, skyscrapers, and power.

I didn't come from money, but that day I carried myself like I belonged there. The boy from Irving Street the MLK projects had arrived — not by invitation, but by pure determination.

The elevators whispered as they climbed — 24 floors up. I remember looking at my reflection in the mirrored wall, thinking, *"You're not supposed to be here... but you are."* And I smiled.

When I stepped off the elevator, I already knew where to go. I'm not sure who spoke first — me or Roz, the receptionist — but we exchanged a quick greeting as I walked down the hall toward the print shop.

The moment I stepped inside, the smell hit me — ink, paper, and ambition. The machines hummed with precision, like they had their own heartbeat. It didn't take long before I learned to move in rhythm with them.

My work ethic became my signature. I showed up early, stayed late, and absorbed everything I could. I was hungry — not for food, but for foundation, for knowledge, for something solid enough to build a life on.

Those first moments set the tone for everything that followed.

My First Week at Touché Ross

The first morning I walked into Touché Ross, I didn't wear a suit. By then, I'd been told the print shop was a casual environment — sneakers were fine, no need to overdress. This wasn't the kind of role where you'd ruin good clothes with ink stains and paper dust. Early on, I'd learned a simple but valuable rule: if you want to know how to dress for a new job, wear what your supervisor wears. Cool — I understood that.

I didn't have much of a wardrobe at the time, but I had been taught since childhood that if your clothes were clean, pressed, and presentable, they were “new” every time you put them on. My mother, Aunt Wilma, and the women of Irving Street had drilled that into me. So even with limited options, I showed up looking sharp in my own way.

It would only be a few years later that I learned another valuable lesson — one that would change everything for me: *Don't dress for the job you have. Dress for the job you want.* Timing is everything, and by the time that wisdom landed in my lap, I was making the kind of money that allowed me to build the wardrobe I had always dreamed of. I started investing in quality suits, crisp shirts, and a shoe collection that could go head-to-head with anyone in the building. When I began dressing the part of the role I was aiming for, people stopped seeing “the guy from the print shop” and started seeing someone who belonged in bigger rooms.

But on that very first day, my world was still the print shop — we were located on the 24th floor, alive with the steady hum of offset presses, the sharp scent of ink.

I was the new guy, but I didn't carry myself like one. Years of working since I was eight years old had taught me to earn my place quickly.

I showed up early, stayed late, and paid attention to everything — not just the printing process, but how the orders moved, how deadlines were handled, and how the floors above us ran.

Even then, a small voice inside me was taking notes: Watch. Learn. Prepare. The print shop might have been my starting point, but I could already feel that this building — these halls, these systems — were leading somewhere bigger.

By the end of my first couple months, I knew two things for certain:

1. *I could master this job, and opportunity*
2. *I wasn't going to stay in this position forever.*

What I didn't know was how quickly the flow of technology was about to change everything — and how that change would pull me from ink and paper into an entirely new world.

I officially started my real, grown-up job that day, at this super fancy accounting place right in the middle of Philadelphia. Man, it felt like moving from our old streets right into the pages of a storybook. Like stepping out of my everyday world, where most young Black guys from the projects didn't get to go, and right into the Emerald City I'd always dreamed about. This wasn't just some job interview — this was it. My first real step into a place I'd only seen in my imagination.

It felt like a world away from the projects. The skyline shimmered, and I remember standing at Broad and Walnut, watching the early morning light hit City Hall like a crown. I was finally a part of the pulse.

I can still feel the whoosh of the doors and the cool air inside that building. Everything was so clean! The floors shined like glass, the walls were bright white, and everyone wore crisp suits and ties. They talked in this smooth, polished way, totally different from how we talked in the neighborhood. It was nothing like where I came from.

I didn't have any important family connections or fancy corporate manners. What I had was this burning hustle, a hunger to prove myself, and hands that knew how to work, really work. But make no mistake—I was a Black man in a white corporate world. And they reminded me of that every day. Inside, I was terrified. Not just of the work, but of whether I truly belonged. I constantly questioned myself: Was I giving too much of myself?

Was I not giving enough? How could I fit into this world without losing who I was? Because the truth was, every morning before I even reached Center City, I was already fighting a battle.

Coming out of a redlined area meant I was often stopped by police on my way to work — and again when I returned home in the evenings. For nearly four or five years, this became part of my daily routine. I would spend my day inside gleaming office towers, surrounded by corporate professionals, only to return each night to the harsh realities of project life.

From morning to night, I was living a duality. By day, I was in the “big house” — corporate America, polished floors, glass elevators, and boardrooms. By night, I returned to the “outhouse” — the projects, where survival required constant awareness and caution.

And with that daily journey came a weight I carried silently.

The First Test of Belonging

One day, early in my time there, a group of us from the print shop and file room were sitting around talking during a quiet moment. The Managing Partner at the time, Jack Adler, walked past and saw us. He stopped and said, “I want you boys to go get the papers up from the men’s room.”

Everyone else jumped immediately, scrambling to fulfill his request. But I didn’t move. I stood there and watched them rushing off, breaking their necks to comply. I wasn’t trying to be rebellious — but I knew why I had been hired. I had gone to school to become a Photo Offset Lithographer. I hadn’t come there to clean bathroom floors.

Later that day, his secretary came to the print shop and said Mr. Adler wanted to see me. As I walked toward his office, my heart was pounding. I was only about four months into the job, and I was convinced this was my last day.

When I walked in, he asked me directly why I hadn’t gone to get the papers from the bathroom as he instructed us to do.

I looked him straight in the eye and said, “*First off I’m nobody’s Boy*”. And I didn’t come here to clean bathroom floors. “I’m a Photo Offset Lithographer.” Back then, that title meant everything to me. It was what I had trained to do in school. It gave me identity in a world where I was still trying to find my place. And it was true.

What I didn't fully understand in that moment was that this was my first real encounter with authority in a professional environment. This wasn't the streets. This wasn't the neighborhood. This was corporate America. And I was standing my ground on principle.

It could have been the end of my beginning. He stared at me for a long second... then smiled. "I like you, kid," he said. *"You've got a lot of moxie".*

That was the end of the meeting. From that day forward, we had mutual respect. He even began asking me personally to print golf cards for him, and I always made sure he was taken care of.

When I returned to the print shop, the guys were stunned. They had expected me to be fired. Instead, they saw something else — that I had stood my ground respectfully, without compromising who I was.

That moment taught me an important lesson: belonging wasn't about surrendering your dignity. It was about earning respect while keeping your identity intact.

The Duality of Living in Two Worlds

There was a duality in my life back then that most people could never fully understand unless they lived it.

I was growing up in the Philadelphia housing projects, in what was considered the “red line” — not in the sense of nightlife, but in the sense of invisible boundaries. Those lines told you where you were supposed to stay. They told you where you did not belong. And if you crossed them, especially as a young Black man, you had better have a reason.

Where I lived, anything north of our neighborhood — especially heading up Broad Street toward Center City — was outside of our assigned world.

And yet, that was exactly where I had to go every single day to work.

Walking north on Broad Street, you could literally see the divide with your own eyes.

On the west side of Broad Street, past places like Fitzwater and moving toward Locust and Walnut, that was the business district. That was where the office towers stood. Where the suits walked. Where corporate Philadelphia lived.

On the east side of Broad Street was the retail district — department stores, shops, people from all backgrounds moving around. Blacks, whites, anyone could be there. You blended into the crowd.

But the west side — the business side — was different.

That side was not meant for people who looked like me.

Back then, there were only a handful of Black faces working in those buildings. Maybe five or six total that I can remember seeing regularly. That was it. Everyone else was white.

So every day when I walked north, crossing into that world, I was stepping into territory where my presence was automatically questioned.

Once I passed certain blocks — around 15th Street and up toward the heart of Center City — I became visible in a way that had nothing to do with me as a person. I wasn't just a young man going to work.

I was seen as someone who did not belong there.

And the police made sure I knew it.

It was routine.

I would be stopped walking to work:

"Where are you going?"

"What are you doing over here?"

"Where do you work?"

"Why are you in this area?"

These weren't occasional encounters. This happened regularly — sometimes several times a week. And it wasn't just going to work. It happened coming home too.

So every day, just getting to my job meant navigating suspicion, interrogation, and the constant feeling that I had to justify my existence in a place I had every right to be.

But the duality didn't stop there.

Because when I returned home, I faced a different kind of pressure.

In my own community, people knew I worked downtown. They knew I had a job in Center City. And instead of that always being seen as something positive, it sometimes made me an outsider there too.

To some people, it looked like I thought I was better than them. Like I was trying to leave the neighborhood behind.

So I lived caught between two worlds.

When I was at work, I was often looked at as someone who didn't quite belong — a young Black man from West Philadelphia moving through a corporate environment that few people from my background had ever entered.

And when I arrived back home to the projects, the perception flipped. There, I was sometimes viewed as someone who thought he was better than everyone else — just because I left every morning dressed for work and returned carrying myself differently.

Neither was true.

But it was my reality for a long time.

Downtown, I didn't fully belong because I was Black, young, and from the projects.

Back home, I didn't fully belong because I was working in a world most people there could never access.

It created a constant internal tension and jealousy — a feeling that I was always standing on a border, never fully accepted on either side.

I didn't have the credentials everyone else talked about. When coworkers discussed colleges, degrees, and family connections, I had nothing to contribute. I didn't come from that world. I didn't even know how to speak its language yet.

So I learned to move carefully.

To observe...To listen.

To survive in spaces that were never designed for me.

With that daily journey came a weight I had to live through every single day.

At home, I lived with my head on a constant swivel. At work, I lived under constant pressure to prove myself — not just once, but every single day.

From morning to night, I walked a tightrope between two worlds.

But that duality didn't break me.

It sharpened me.

Because it taught me how to adapt, how to observe, and how to move between worlds without losing myself in either one.

And it reminded me, every single day, why I had to keep climbing — not just to escape where I came from, but to build something stronger for those who would come after me.

The Print Shop and Finding Love

I started in the print shop as a pressman, but it felt like the whole place was just waiting for me. To me, it was my golden ticket!

One minute, I was filling vending machines and working the register back at PGH, and the next, I had a real badge, a corporate job, right in downtown Philly.

That was the moment it clicked in my head, loud and clear: I wasn't just dreaming of the Yellow Brick Road anymore. I was on it.

No —even better.

I had arrived. I was in the Emerald City. But arriving didn't mean relaxing. It meant proving I belonged.

The print shop became my proving ground.

I worked harder than anyone else in that room. I stayed late when others clocked out early. I cleaned, organized, learned every machine inside and out. I treated every job like it mattered, because to me, it did.

It was my opportunity to build something solid for myself.

At the time, the shop was led by Kenny Harmon, the supervisor who often clocked out early, leaving the bulk of the work and responsibilities on my shoulders.

I didn't complain. I saw it as an opportunity.

I stayed late, cleaned up, and delivered. I soaked up everything like it was a sacred space, treating every job with care and making sure every piece was perfect.

While others might have resented it, I absorbed everything. I learned how to manage workflow, how to meet deadlines, and how to anticipate problems before they happened.

Over time, management noticed. And when they did, things changed quickly. Kenny was out.

And I was in.

In just nine months — before I had even turned twenty — I was promoted to supervisor. Not because someone handed it to me. That moment changed everything. I hadn't been handed that position.

I had earned it.

As supervisor, I didn't just maintain the department — I transformed it. I rebranded the “print shop” into the *Visual Communication Center*.

I upgraded our technology, tightened our turnaround times, and set a new standard for quality and efficiency.

For the first time in my life, I felt the deep satisfaction of knowing that hard work alone — not connections, not privilege, not credentials — had opened a door for me.

First Love and First Lessons

By the spring of 1977, something inside me had begun to change.

Just months earlier, I had stepped into Touché Ross feeling like an outsider — a kid from the projects trying to survive in a world that didn't seem built for someone like me. But day by day, shift by shift, I began to find my footing.

One minute, I had been filling vending machines and running registers at PGH, and the next, I was working in a major corporate firm, wearing an employee badge, riding elevators into the sky.

It was more than a job.

It was proof.

Proof that the Yellow Brick Road I had dreamed about from my bedroom window in the projects wasn't just a fantasy.

I was on it. No — even more than that. I had arrived.

I was standing inside the Emerald City.

And people were beginning to notice.

That realization began to change how I saw myself — not just as someone surviving day to day, but as someone building a future.

Meeting Donna Maria Boyd

During the summer of 1977 I met Donna Maria Boyd, a Hallahan High School student working as part of a summer program. She was the first girl outside of the ghetto and project living I had ever encountered. There was something special about her—mainly because she represented something different, a glimpse into a world beyond what I had known.

Donna and I connected instantly and deeply. Though we were separated by four years in age, I knew she was the one for me. Her presence in my life felt like a blessing, and I was captivated by her intelligence, grace, and charm.

Donna wasn't from the projects.

She wasn't shaped by the same environment that had defined my early life. There was softness to her presence, a calmness, a sense of stability that felt almost foreign to me.

And that difference drew me in immediately.

For the first time, I wasn't just interacting with someone who understood survival — I was connecting with someone who represented possibility.

A glimpse into a world beyond what I had known. We connected quickly, and deeply. There was innocence to our relationship, but also seriousness. Being with Donna made me think about the future differently. It made me consider the kind of man I wanted to become — not just professionally, but personally.

She believed in education, in long-term goals, in planning ahead. I believed in working hard, surviving, and creating opportunity where none existed. Somehow, those two perspectives met in the middle. But time, distance, and life have a way of changing things.

By the spring of 1979, I could feel our communication starting to fade. The conversations became less frequent. The emotional closeness that once felt so natural began to shift. And by August of that year, she told me the news that would break my heart. She had met someone else. And she was getting married.

I didn't yell. I didn't argue. I didn't try to stop her. But inside, I felt something collapse. Not just because I had lost her — but because I realized something about myself in that moment.

I hadn't fought for her. I hadn't truly understood what she meant to me while I still had the chance.

Losing Donna taught me one of my first painful adult lessons: that meaningful relationships don't survive on good intentions alone. They require attention, effort, and emotional presence.

With her, I had been blessed.

But I hadn't yet learned how to nurture a blessing.

For a long time after she left, I carried that regret quietly.

I told myself I would never again find what I had lost.

And in many ways, losing Donna marked the end of one chapter of my life — the chapter of youthful innocence, where love felt simple and the future seemed limitless.

What I didn't know yet was that life was about to become far more complicated.

Because the next time love entered my life, it wouldn't come wrapped in possibility.

It would come wrapped in responsibility.

Marriage.

Fatherhood.

And the kind of trials that would test everything I believed about myself as a man.

The print shop remained my anchor. It was the one place where effort always produced results, where discipline led to progress, and where outcomes made sense. Machines responded to precision. Deadlines responded to hard work. There was order there.

Life outside those walls, however, was far less predictable.

A City in Flux, A Man in Motion

The city around me was changing too. Crack was beginning its slow crawl through neighborhoods. Black fathers were disappearing—some to jail, some to addiction, some to the grave. Ronald Reagan's policies hadn't hit full swing yet, but you could already feel the tightening.

But I was in motion. Still carrying the lessons of my mother's hands, my aunt's order, my brother's warnings. I was standing in boardrooms now, even if no one knew my name. I was still invisible to some, but never to myself.

These were the building years. Quiet victories. Silent sacrifices. Love gained, love lost. And through it all, I kept my eye on the prize: to be a man my children could one day be proud of.

A man whose story would mean something.

Digital by Hustle – Learning Technology without a Degree

Soon I wasn't just printing materials—I was designing them. I became the bridge between traditional print and digital production. I didn't go back to school. I went to work.

I started learning computers by sitting in labs before and after my shift, watching, experimenting. I'd observe consultants build presentations, and one day, a manager handed me a mouse and said, "You try." That was my breakthrough.

With the rapid growth in the technology field—from printing presses to xerography, to word processing, then desktop publishing—I was able to "ride the wave" of technology as it was ever-changing, sometimes almost daily, and carve out a niche that would take me beyond. Using the firm's computer labs, I taught myself applications like CP/M, DOS, Office Writer, WordPerfect, Lotus 1-2-3, and Harvard Graphics. Then came desktop publishing tools like Ventura Publishing, PageMaker and QuarkXPress, and the full suite of Adobe tools, especially Photoshop.

The company supported my every step, even paying for me to take evening courses to be certified in each and every software application, including many soft-skill training classes provided by Carnegie Mellon. Each skill moved me closer to the future. Eventually, I moved on to Web Development Tools like Ventura Publishing and Dreamweaver.

I saw an opportunity and sold the need to the company, who gave 100% support for each endeavor.

This wasn't formal education—it was survival through self-teaching. That old Compaq 8086 became my classroom. I taught myself how to install DOS, use command-line interfaces, format documents, build spreadsheets, and even automate processes.

While others waited for training, I got to work. I wasn't just formatting memos—I was creating documents that looked like they came from publishing houses: clean, sleek, branded, and professional. I elevated the Visual Communication Center and built a reputation not just as a printer, but as a problem solver and creative technician.

The Desktop Publishing Revolution (1986–1993)

By the late 1980s, word processors weren't enough for what I envisioned. I needed layout precision, image control, and design-level flexibility. That's when I found Ventura Publisher—and everything changed.

Ventura allowed me to transform our basic documents into powerful visual communications: manuals, proposals, and reports. I learned frames, master pages, and style tags—concepts far ahead of their time. It felt like coding with design.

I still remember the 1989 proposal we created using Ventura for a major client bid. Custom branding, visuals, financial exhibits formatted cleanly from Excel—all pulled together under one cover. It stood out. And we won.

That moment proved that self-taught skill could impact real business outcomes. I didn't just build documents—I built influence.

From WordPerfect to Web Pages – Bridging Two Worlds (1994–2000)

As I mastered desktop publishing, I also became fluent in the software that defined the era—WordPerfect, Lotus 1-2-3, and eventually Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. While others were catching up, I was being tapped to teach. By now, I wasn't just running a print shop.

I was advising partners, training colleagues, and sitting in on meetings about firm-wide communication strategies. I was the bridge between the old-school way of doing things and the emerging digital future.

And then, the internet arrived.

I'll never forget that Microsoft seminar in the mid-90s. They introduced a new tool—FrontPage. Most attendees barely paid attention, but I saw a revolution. I went back to the office and built a prototype internal website for our branch. That prototype turned into a portal. That portal grew into a firm-wide intranet. Suddenly, I was the office's first Webmaster.

I taught myself HTML, image editing, and usability standards. I coded <body> and <html> tags like they were second nature, thanks in part to my earlier experience with Ventura's tagging system. That overlap between publishing and web development made me feel like I'd been preparing for this all along.

From public websites to secure internal hubs, I was now managing Deloitte's digital infrastructure—not because I had a degree, but because I had the drive.

Manager of Web Services – A Legacy Written in Code

Eventually, I transitioned from the shop to the digital world. I became the office's go-to for design, then for web, then for systems integration. My role kept evolving. I became Manager of Web Services, leading a team that oversaw both internal and external web platforms across our region. I wasn't just building pages anymore—I was setting digital strategy, managing teams, and collaborating globally.

I helped define best practices, shaped web standards, and ensured that everything we produced reflected the quality and credibility of our firm. I oversaw intranet systems still in use long after I retired in 2009.

It was my idea and design that I sold the company for the firm's very first intranet site, helping them stay ahead of the new technology.

Through all the big company changes, Touché Ross becoming Deloitte, I stayed right there. I was living out a dream every single day, showing that if you're tough and always ready to learn, you can stay in the magic city for a long, long time. It wasn't about the tech.

It was about transformation. I had started with ink on my hands—and ended managing code and content on a screen. But the work ethic stayed the same. The vision stayed the same. The hunger to grow never changed.

The Self-Taught Climb – Discipline Over Degrees

Looking back, every step of my journey was paved not by credentials, but by commitment. I wasn't handed this path—I built it. I didn't wait to be taught—I taught myself. And when new technology came—I didn't fear it. I ran toward it. Each late-night experiment, every manual read, every mistake made and learned from—it all added up.

From that first Harvard Graphics slide presentation to overseeing the intranet architecture, I rose without permission.

That's the truth I want to leave behind. Not that I became a "tech guy," but that I became a builder of bridges. Between eras, Between both analog and digital. Between what was and what could be.

Because when you come from nothing, every new skill you gain is a brick. And every brick can become a road. And I built mine all the way to the Emerald City.

The Education They Never Taught

Looking back now, I realize something important:

What allowed me to grow in that environment wasn't book knowledge.

It was survival knowledge.

I had entered Touché Ross without the degrees many around me carried. Most of the people I worked with had formal education I had never seen — college diplomas, advanced credentials, family connections to professional worlds I had only glimpsed from afar.

But over time, I came to understand something powerful:

- I had a degree they had never seen either.
- I had a lifetime of experience navigating a world that was not built for me.
- I understood pressure in ways they never had to.
- I understood how to read people quickly.
- I understood how to move strategically in unfamiliar environments.
- I understood how to anticipate problems before they happened.

- Most importantly, I had the temperament to seize opportunity when it appeared.

Because long before I ever stepped into a corporate office, I had already learned how to survive in systems designed to limit people like me.

Even as a child growing up in the projects, I understood something many assumed children could not possibly grasp.

I understood what the word “*project*” really meant. It wasn’t just a place where families lived. It was a system — much like welfare or government surplus programs — designed to direct a family’s way of being. These programs were necessary for survival, but they carried an unspoken expectation: that those who depended on them would remain dependent.

Even as a boy, something inside me resisted that idea with everything I had. I did not want to be anybody’s “project.” I did not want to be part of what felt like a social experiment created by mankind to contain and quietly hold a people down.

At the same time, I understood my mother’s plight.

She was raising her children alone, doing whatever she had to do to keep us alive. There was no judgment in my heart toward her — only love and respect.

She was surviving.

But even as I accepted that reality, I also knew something else:

I did not have to accept that as my destiny.

As a boy hoping to become a man, I could already see how easy it would have been to fall into the lifestyle surrounding me — the streets, the shortcuts, the temptations promising quick rewards but carrying long-term consequences. Many young men around me took that path. But that was never who I was. That awareness became one of the strongest forces driving my life.

Creating My Own Emerald City

As a child, I didn't have the language to process the questions I carried about why Allah had placed me in those circumstances.

So I created my own way of making sense of it. I began to think of my life as a journey — much like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. The projects became the place where I had landed, not by choice, but by circumstance. And somewhere beyond that world, there had to be an Emerald City.

To me, the Emerald City was never about wealth.

- It meant dignity.
- It meant stability.
- It meant being able to provide for my family.
- It meant stepping into spaces where I could stand tall as a man and feel that I belonged.

That metaphor became my way of coping. It turned survival into purpose.

A Window Into the Future

What amazes me now is how clearly Allah was showing me that path long before I realized it.

Living in the housing projects at 1312 Fitzwater Street, Apt. 11-K every single day from my bedroom window I had a clear view of the Philadelphia skyline and the IVB building at 1700 Market Street where I would spend 33yrs as a professional with an office in the high rise on the 24th floor.

I saw those buildings every day, without even thinking about it. At the time, they were just part of the background of my life. But now I understand:

That window was a picture into my future. Those buildings represented a world completely different from the one I lived in — a world of professionals, offices, suits, and opportunities that seemed far removed from the streets below my window.

And yet, they sat there every day as if waiting.

Walking the Yellow Brick Road Without Knowing It

Every day, without realizing it, I literally walked my own Yellow Brick Road. I walked it to school at South Philadelphia High. I walked it every day to the bus stop at Broad and Walnut to go to work at Philadelphia General Hospital. I walked north along Broad Street — the very path that would eventually lead me into Center City and into the professional world I had imagined since childhood.

Even riding the bus westward to PGH, I traveled through that environment daily, long before I believed I belonged there.

Looking back now, I see it clearly. Allah had not only given me a vision of the Emerald City. He had been quietly walking me through it long before I ever stepped inside its doors as a professional man.

But life doesn't unfold in straight lines.

Even as I was finding my footing professionally — building a career, learning new skills, and stepping into spaces I once thought unreachable — another part of my life was beginning to take shape.

The dreams I carried weren't only about success in the workplace.

They were about building a family. About love.

About becoming the kind of husband and father I had promised myself I would be since childhood. And like many lessons in my life, that journey would not come without struggle.

Because the next chapter of my story would test me in ways no job ever could. It would teach me about love, loss, and commitment — and the painful difference between intention and readiness.

CHAPTER 7 – The First Marriage: Love, Loss, and Lessons Learned

The early 1980s were a pivotal time—for me, and for Black America. The Reagan era was in full effect, ushering in policies that quietly devastated Black communities. Crack cocaine was creeping into our neighborhoods. Mass incarceration was spreading like a silent disease. It felt like everything around us was shifting—and not always for the better.

And in the middle of all that, I got married.

Her name was Lynette Cheryl Congo.

We met at Touché Ross, both young, focused, and finding our professional footing in corporate America. She was an HR secretary and I was a pressman. I had vision and purpose. Lynette was soft-spoken, graceful, with long flowing hair and a smile that made you feel at ease. There was something about her gentleness that felt like balance to the intensity I carried inside.

I believed we could build something solid—something better than what either of us had come from.

She didn't make it easy. She turned me down at first. But I was persistent, and eventually, she said yes. That "yes" turned into love. And in 1982, we got married.

When the Dream Felt Real

For a while, it truly felt like we were on our way.

We were both young professionals at the time, working in Center City Philadelphia, while living in the heart of University City in West Philadelphia—a place I was deeply familiar with and comfortable in.

We would walk the neighborhood together, pushing Ayana in her stroller, stopping in parks, talking about the future we believed we were building. Those were peaceful moments—times when life felt balanced, hopeful, and full of promise.

We often talked about buying one of the large houses in the area. We dreamed about stability, about creating a home that would represent everything we had both worked so hard to achieve.

In those days, I truly felt like the dream I had carried since childhood—a wife, a family, and a stable home—was finally becoming real.

But after Ayana was born, things slowly began to change.

While I was at work, her parents started coming around more and more. At first, I welcomed it. I believed family support was a good thing. But gradually, their presence began influencing the plans Lynette and I had made together.

Our original plan had always been clear: once Ayana was about six months old, Lynette would return to work at Touché Ross. But somewhere along the way, her opinion started to change.

It became less about returning to work—and more about not wanting to go back at all. At first, I tried to adjust. I told myself I could carry the load. But I could see the shift wasn't coming from her alone—it was coming from her parents. They would tell her, “You're living good, he's making enough money. You don't need to go back to work.”

At first, that didn't trouble me the way it might seem. In truth, part of me even understood it. Motherhood was new to Lynette, and I knew that transition could be overwhelming. More than that, the dream I had carried since childhood included being the primary provider—the man who went out to work while his wife managed the home and cared for the children. So in the beginning, I told myself this was simply a natural adjustment, not a problem.

I was willing to carry the financial load. That part never frightened me. What I needed in return was partnership—her commitment to caring for the home, nurturing our daughter, and helping build the stability we had always talked about.

But over time, I began to notice a different pattern emerging. The issue was no longer just about staying home—it was about the growing absence of responsibility within the home itself. The house often remained in disarray. Meals were not prepared. Basic routines for Ayana were inconsistent. And at the same time, the presence of her parents in our daily life became more constant and more influential.

It wasn't immediate. For the first several months after Ayana was born, we were still aligned with our original plan—that once she was about six months old, Lynette would return to work. But as time passed—around eight or nine months after Ayana's birth—I began to feel a shift taking hold. The conversations we once shared about building our future began to change, and the influence of her parents grew stronger, often reinforcing the idea that she did not need to return to work or take on greater responsibility at home.

That was when the tension began to build. I was willing to do my part—I had always done my part—but I needed her to do hers as well. Instead, I began to feel as though I was carrying both roles alone, while outside voices were quietly reshaping the direction of our household.

Months passed under that growing strain. What had once felt like temporary adjustment slowly began to feel like a new normal.

By that time, Lynette had become pregnant again. It was also around this period that I began seeing things more clearly. That was when the foundation of our marriage first started to crack — not because of the pregnancy itself,, who was innocent in all of this, but because I began to recognize something deeper that I had feared my entire life.

I began to see the return of what I had come to call a “*project mentality*”.

The term, itself, was never about where someone lived. It was about a way of thinking — a mindset shaped by survival systems that, over time, could condition people to accept dependency instead of striving for independence.

I had seen it firsthand growing up in the projects.

What I Should’ve Seen

Before we got married, there were signs—things I saw but tried to overlook. One moment in particular should have stopped me in my tracks.

I visited her parents’ home. I walked into their kitchen and immediately sensed something was off. There wasn’t a crumb of food in sight—no bread, no milk, not even a half-eaten snack.

When I asked why, her father replied flatly, “These kids will eat it all up.” Her mother nodded in agreement.

Then I noticed it—a fully stocked refrigerator in their bedroom, reserved just for the two of them. That shook me. In my world, even though we had very little, food was shared. You didn't hoard nourishment—you spread it around, especially for your children. That should've told me something. But I pushed it aside. I thought. "We'll build our own traditions". I believed I could shift the culture.

I was wrong.

The Principles I Carried On

I didn't grow up with much, but I grew up with values. I didn't have riches, but I had a blueprint for what being a man, a partner, and a parent should look like.

I knew what it meant to show up, to carry the load, to be the man of the house. I was ready to be the father I never had. The protector, the provider, the one who would break generational cycles with discipline and love.

Lynette didn't know how to cook—that didn't bother me. I could cook, and I was willing to teach her. But she didn't want to learn. That was the part that stung. It wasn't about skills—it was about effort.

She showed signs of the same mindset I had fought to escape back in the projects: "project mentality"—being content with struggle as long as someone else carried the weight of that struggle.

The Dream I Was Chasing

I never planned to marry twice.

To me, divorce meant failure—and failure meant becoming the very thing I had spent my entire life trying not to be.

My father had left when I was a young boy. That absence shaped me deeply. It became my blueprint—not for what I wanted to become, but for what I refused to become.

As a little boy, I carried a simple dream: a wife, a stable home, a couple of children, and a peaceful life. I wanted the image I saw on television—the white picket fence, the father leaving for work each day, the mother holding down the home.

In those days, there were no Black families on TV. The only model I saw was the Ozzie and Harriet lifestyle. I didn't want it because it was white—I wanted it because it represented stability. It represented a life without chaos, without abandonment, without uncertainty.

I wanted to break the cycle.

So when my marriage began to show cracks, it didn't just hurt—it shook the very foundation of the dream I had carried since childhood.

A Cracked Foundation

When our first daughter, Ayana Nicole, was born in 1983, everything was perfect. We were exactly what I had always wanted—a happy family doing family things. But not long after, things began to change.

We had agreed Lynette would return to work after her maternity leave. But once Ayana arrived, she changed her mind—under the influence of her parents, who insisted she should stay home. I didn't fight it, even though it shifted everything. I adjusted, took on the financial responsibility, and kept pushing forward because I believed it was what was best for our family.

But with that decision came a new reality—and new weight.

If Lynette wasn't going to work, I needed her to show up in other ways: to keep the house in order, care for Ayana, and help build the home we dreamed of.

But that's not what happened. I'd come home from long hours on the job to a house that looked untouched. No dinner on the stove. Dishes piled up. Laundry everywhere. Ayana often still in her pajamas, and Lynette?

Curled up on the couch with a romance novel—lost in someone else's fantasy while ours slowly crumbled. Still, I tried to overlook it. I chalked it up to adjustment, to postpartum, to anything that would allow me to keep believing we could get back on track.

But then after about twenty months, Yasmeen LaVonne, was born in 1985 on Valentine's Day. With her birth came a newfound drive and desire to make our marriage work even more, but again I was met with no support. I would come home to a house untidy, the kids not taken care of and no meals to eat. I found myself in the same situation as before a wife who found more enjoyment in her romance novels and her parent's daily visits. Over a short time instead of growing stronger, our household grew more unstable. I loved both my daughters with everything I had, but I was now carrying the full weight of our growing family alone.

I worked hard to give them what I didn't have—a color TV, a Betamax (video recorder), cable TV, a stereo system—things I dreamed of as a child. I wanted to show them that comfort, peace, and progress were possible.

But in that environment, those things didn't last.

The Betamax? Destroyed—Ayana and Yasmeen, too young to know better, shoved a butter knife inside it. “What if one on my girls got shocked by this?” The stereo system? Busted. The TV? Pulled down and shattered. “what if it would have fallen on one of them?”

It wasn't their fault—they were just babies. But there was no one watching them closely. No structure. No supervision. No accountability. This bothered me much more than replacing material things.

Her parents? They came while I was at work and went as they pleased, helping themselves to the groceries I bought, for my family, undermining me, telling Lynette that we were “just fine.” But I knew we weren’t. I could feel it. I was being drowned by the very life I was trying to build. I wasn’t afraid of housework. I could cook. I could clean. But I couldn’t do it all—and not alone.

I wasn’t just a man trying to keep a house. I was a man fighting to hold onto a dream.

The Weight I Couldn’t Carry Alone

When Yasmeen was born, the pressure multiplied.

I came home from long hours of work to a house in disarray—dishes piled up, laundry undone, no meals prepared. Lynette often sat absorbed in romance novels while our reality slowly crumbled.

It wasn’t about domestic chores—it was about partnership.

I worked hard to provide everything I never had: a color TV, a Betamax, cable television, a stereo system. But those things didn’t last.

The children, too young to understand, damaged them—and there was no supervision, no structure.

Her parents came and went freely, eating the groceries I purchased, reinforcing her belief that everything was fine.

But I knew it wasn’t.

I felt like I was drowning in the very life I had fought so hard to build. I wasn't afraid of the grind. I had been grinding my whole

life. I didn't mind scrubbing floors, cooking dinner, changing diapers, or waking up at dawn to head to work.

That wasn't beneath me.

What broke me was the isolation—doing all of it alone, while being made to feel like it wasn't enough. I was trying to raise a family, not drag one behind me. But it started to feel like I was the only one paddling—and the boat was sinking fast.

I was climbing out of the quicksand I was born into, doing everything in my power to build something stable. But the deeper I poured into the house, the more it felt like I was pouring into a bucket with a hole at the bottom. Nothing stayed full. Nothing stayed whole.

The silence in that house was loud. And the weight on my shoulders was growing heavier by the day.

Her parents weren't helping—they were undermining. Telling her she was fine. That I was just being controlling. That I was trying to do too much. But they didn't see me counting dollars at night to pay bills. They didn't see me pushing overtime to keep us afloat. They didn't see me coming home exhausted, only to be greeted by chaos.

They didn't see me. And eventually—neither did she. My voice didn't matter.

My efforts went unseen. I was becoming invisible. I was fading in my own house.

Slipping Away

The family I had dreamed of—the one I believed would heal the pain of my own childhood—was unraveling. I could feel it. Every day, I watched the picture in my head drift further from the reality in front of me.

And that pain, that disappointment became too heavy. I didn't turn to drugs or alcohol to party—I turned to them to numb. I wasn't looking to get high. I was looking to stop feeling, even just for a few hours.

To escape the heartbreak of seeing my dream die while I was still alive.

I was trying to hold everything together with both hands—my daughters, my marriage, my peace—but the weight was too much.

And slowly, I started slipping. Not because I didn't love my family, but because I had no more rope to hold on to.

I wasn't afraid of hard work. I had been grinding my entire life.

What broke me was the isolation.

I felt invisible in my own home. My voice didn't matter. My efforts went unseen. The dream I had carried since childhood was slipping away, and I blamed myself.

I began turning to drugs and alcohol—not to celebrate, but to numb the pain. I wasn't trying to get high. I was trying to stop feeling.

I didn't have the courage to take my own life—but I found myself hoping the drugs would do it for me — That is how deep the had become.

The Hardest Goodbye

By December 30, 1986, I made the hardest decision of my life—I left the marriage.

Not because I stopped caring. Not because I stopped providing. I continued to pay all the bills, healthcare, food, utilities. I never abandoned those responsibilities. But I could no longer stay in a home where I felt invisible—unseen, unheard, and unraveling, while the absence of love was quietly destroying me emotionally.

Leaving my daughters, especially Yasmeen, left a scar that still lives deep inside me. She deserved better, and the emotional state I was in at the time would not have allowed me to be the father she deserved.

I had to save myself from myself.

I realize now looking back, that this was the first time that I had ever put me first.

I knew that if I stayed, I would have nothing left to give them.

I left for work that morning of December 30th knowing I would not return to the marriage.

The Awakening

I spent the next couple months sleeping on my mother's couch in the projects – back to a place I hated so deeply, but the only place I could go to rest my head. I continued drinking and drugging just to find some kind of comfort and make it through each day.

I attempted to communicate with Cheryl to see if there was something left that we could “make work” but I believe her parents had planted in her head that was not true but she believed so much that it kept a divide between us that would never be fixed.

After one particularly heavy night of drinking and drugging at my mothers, I woke up and looked in the mirror, and I didn't recognize the man staring back at me.

But even in the fog—somewhere deep inside—I still had a flicker of awareness. I still had a voice whispering, “Mike, this isn't you.”

I could feel it. I was losing myself—not just as a man, but as a father. And I knew that if I didn’t pull myself back, I’d lose the two most important things in my life: Ayana and Yasmeen.

Because even though my marriage was crumbling, even though I felt invisible, my daughters still saw me. And I wanted them to see a man who could rise. A man who could and would rebuild.

I wasn’t going to let that happen.

I came out of the bathroom with tears streaming down my face and I asked my mother:

“Mom, what’s wrong with me? Why doesn’t anybody want me?” –

She replied with words that changed my life forever:

“Son, you may not always be a husband, but you will always be a father.”

Those words cut straight through the fog.

The very next day, I went to the barber shop and got a haircut and a shave – I had begun growing a beard – not out of choice but neglect during my depression, I bought a new suit, and stopped drinking and using drugs completely. – Cold Turkey!

I started training on my bike again. I chose to live

I didn’t go to rehab, I didn’t sit in a circle and talk about addiction, I just told myself the truth.

I looked in the mirror and said, “This ends here.”

Lessons Learned

If there’s anything I know now, it’s this: Real love should never destroy you. It should never leave you hollow. It shouldn’t erase your voice or demand the sacrifice of your sanity. Real love lifts. It sees. It protects. It strengthens rather than diminishes who you are.

And when it doesn’t — when love begins to break you instead of build you—you have to choose to save yourself.

That’s what I did.

I chose me. Not out of ego. Not out of selfishness. But out of survival.

Because I knew one undeniable truth:

If I didn’t rise, I’d never be able to lift anyone else

CHAPTER 8 – The Winter Rebirth: Meeting Deb

By the fall of 1986, my marriage was already hanging by a thread. The tension at home had grown unbearable. I was still living under the same roof, still providing, still trying to hold the family together—but emotionally, I was exhausted, isolated, and running on empty. I was no longer searching for solutions. I was simply trying to make it through each day without losing myself completely.

It was during this fragile and uncertain period — while I was still living in the family home, still fighting internally over what to do next — that a single night would unexpectedly shift something inside me.

It was a crisp November night in 1986, a pivotal time in my life, the kind of evening when winter makes its presence known with a biting chill in the air. Sullivan's Bar was alive with energy, the glow of neon signs bouncing off frosted windows, promising warmth and escape from the cold. I stepped inside, shaking off the chill, unaware that this night would change my life forever.

The room buzzed with laughter, music, and conversation. As I made my way in, I couldn't help but notice the attention I was drawing. Several women seemed intent on capturing my eye, their glances lingering, their smiles coy. I spent some time engaging with a few of them, enjoying the lighthearted attention.

But among the admirers, one stood out without even trying—Debbie.

She sat with a group of friends, her radiant black hair framing her beautiful face. Her smooth skin seemed to glow under the dim bar lights, and her shyness only made her more intriguing. Her deep brown eyes met mine for a fleeting moment, and something unspoken passed between us.

From that moment, I knew she was different. She didn't try to compete for attention, at least not at first — she simply existed in her own quiet confidence. And somehow, that drew me in more than anything else. She wanted me, even if her shy demeanor made her approach subtle.

At one point, as she got up to head to the bathroom, she passed by me, brushing her butt against my shoulders as she squeezed past. The touch was fleeting yet deliberate — a playful, confident move, entirely unforgettable.

Later in the night, Debbie made her move. She glanced at me and said casually, “*I need some air,*” before heading toward the door. Her voice carried just enough invitation to catch my attention. I got the hint and followed her outside.

The cold air hit me as I stepped out. It wasn’t snowing, but the chill was sharp, the kind that cuts straight to the bone. The street was quieter than the bar, offering a moment of reprieve from the noise.

As I approached her, that unspoken connection flared again, as though the night had orchestrated this moment for us.

I stepped behind her, my arms wrapping around her waist. She leaned back into me, her body fitting against mine as if it had always been meant to. The embrace felt natural, almost instinctive, as though we had known each other for years rather than minutes.

In that moment, the thought crossed my mind: *Am I about to cheat on my spouse?* But the truth was, I was getting absolutely no emotional support at home. She had already been “cheating” in her own way—choosing someone else, her parents, over me. That choice pushed me to search for what I wasn’t receiving in my marriage.

I was at my wits' end. I needed support—or at the very least, a reminder that I wasn't broken, that someone still wanted me. So no, I didn't see it as cheating, not in the way most people would define it. The reality was, Cheryl and I had left each other long before I crossed that line. Emotionally, spiritually—we were already done.

What I felt in that moment wasn't lust—it was longing. I was aching for affection. For comfort. For someone who could hold the weight of my hurt without adding to it. Someone willing to lift me up instead of breaking me down.

For a few fleeting moments, I got lost in that feeling. I wasn't thinking about betrayal. I was thinking about survival.

My wife had already chosen her parents over me—repeatedly. Not in body, but in loyalty, in partnership, and in commitment. Does that mean she was cheating on me? In my opinion, yes — because that kind of betrayal can cut just as deeply.

Deb and I had only just met. And I hadn't had feelings for anyone else. Not even her. But in that moment... she didn't feel like temptation. She felt like permission, permission to finally think about myself.

My feelings,

My worth.

As we stood there, her warmth pressing against me in the chill of the night, the noise of the world seemed to fade—leaving just the two of us. That was it nothing more and nothing less. Unplanned, unexpected but real.

And for the first time in a long time. I felt seen. I felt wanted.

At the same moment a thought crossed my mind – a lesson I learned at very early age:

Allah doesn't always give you what you want when you want it – but He will always provide you what you need, exactly when you need it. Not on your timeline. But on His. And that's the difference between wishing...and trusting.

When we returned inside, the night belonged to us. Conversation flowed effortlessly, her laughter filling the space between our words. Debbie's shy warmth and sharp wit captivated me, drawing me deeper into a connection I hadn't expected but couldn't resist.

We ended the night returning to our respective lives, but we exchanged numbers. Over time, we spoke on the phone, but life's complications kept us from moving forward immediately.

Still, that night planted a seed that would later bloom into something extraordinary.

The Dark Period

By late 1986, things in my life had taken a darker turn. I was in the midst of my “dark period,” dealing with the fallout of my crumbling marriage and a growing dependency on the cocktail of cocaine, marijuana, and scotch that had become my escape. It was during this time that the bonds I had with my sister, once so strong, began to fray.

One night, not long after the new year in early 1987 a gathering at my mother’s apartment on the 11th floor became the flashpoint for a rift I never saw coming. It was supposed to be a night of fun—my brother Bill, Tony Wise, Mike Cosey, Kelser (Fulton Davis), and I were cutting up, drinking, and indulging in the distractions we’d grown used to. For a while, it was just that: fun. But as is often the case in times like these, the night took a turn.

The Glass Incident

The moment was small, almost trivial in the grand scheme of things, but it hit me like a wrecking ball. Kelser—a so-called “friend” of my sister’s, someone I always felt had more influence over her life than he should—dropped one of my mom’s prized glasses. Not just any glass, but part of a set I had worked hard to collect for her years ago while working at PGH.

I remember how proud I was of that set, a blue collection with Roman designs, complete with a pitcher and ice bucket. Gas stations back then ran promotions where you had to buy one piece at a time over months to complete the set.

I had saved, planned, and worked for it as a gift for my mom—a way to show her how much I cared. When Kelser realized what he'd broken, he didn't apologize or even look sorry.

Instead, he smirked, glanced down at the shattered glass, and ground it into the floor with his foot. That smirk lit a fire in me. It wasn't just the glass—it was the disrespect.

The arrogance. The dismissal of something that held meaning for me, a piece tied to my effort and love for my mother. My first thought was to throw his ass out the window—especially since the incident happened less than a foot from it. I was that mad... and that irrational.

But instead, in one quick motion, I grabbed him with one hand, his coat with the other, and lifted him clean off his feet. At 5'6" and barely 110 pounds, he was no match for the anger surging through me. I carried him through the living room, down the hallway, and out the front door—then threw him out of the apartment. The party ended right there, and everyone left.

But the rage didn't leave with them—it stayed, simmering under my skin, mixing with the regret and frustration of a life I could feel slipping out of my control.

The Aftermath and Reflection

In the days that followed the incident, the story of what happened spread, and opinions formed quickly. Some thought I'd gone too far, while others kept their thoughts to themselves. But later, a few of the guys who had been there that night came around, and their honesty helped me find some clarity in the situation.

Mike, a man I respected for his level-headedness, was one of them. We both enjoyed a good glass of scotch, and as we shared a drink, he spoke candidly about what had happened. Mike had always been different from the rest of us—he drank but never touched the drugs or smoking that were common in those circles. From everything I knew of him, he was a man of principles, someone who stood firm in his beliefs.

Mike affirmed what I already knew in my heart: Kelser's actions that night were disrespectful. Hearing him say it wasn't something I needed, but it was something I appreciated. Mike's candor validated my feelings, not that I doubted myself, but it was good to know I wasn't alone in how I saw things.

Tony, too, eventually admitted to me that he thought what Kelser did was wrong. It wasn't about the glass itself—it was about what it symbolized, about respect and the lack of it.

Drawing the Line

I knew I was the “new guy” in this clique, an outsider in many ways. These were people who had tighter bonds with each other than they did with me, but that didn't matter. The disrespect wasn't going to happen on my watch. I didn't care about fitting in or earning their approval—this was about standing up for what I believed was right.

From that night forward, my relationship with Kelser was strained, though I wouldn't call it a loss. It was never really my relationship to begin with—he was close to my mother, brother, and sister, not me. So the distance between us didn't bother me. If anything, it was a relief.

The Protector and the Turning Point

Before 1985, my life had a purpose that felt clear: I was my little sister's light. She looked to me not just as her older brother, but as a father figure, someone she could depend on.

Growing up, she was the smartest of us four—a joyful spirit with her head in books and comic books, blissfully unaware of the world's harsher realities. I admired her focus and determination, and I wanted nothing more than to see her succeed.

When she decided to attend Indiana University of Pennsylvania and later transferred to Temple University, I did everything I could to support her dreams. She was the only one of us who went to college, and I was proud of her in ways I couldn't always put into words.

Even as I built my own family, I stayed close to her, doing my best to be the kind of brother she could always rely on.

Perspective Gained

That incident became another piece of the puzzle in understanding myself and my place in the world during a turbulent time.

It wasn't about the glass, though it was tied to something I valued deeply.

It was about respect—respect for the effort I'd put in, for my mother, and for the idea that some things are worth standing up for, even if it means going against the grain.

Looking back, I don't regret my reaction. It might not have been handled perfectly, but I've learned that life's pivotal moments often come wrapped in imperfection.

What matters is what you take away from them — and how they shape the person you're striving to be.

Moving Forward

Leaving my marriage was not a decision I took lightly, but it was necessary. Despite everything, I have no regrets about making that choice because it blessed me with two beautiful daughters.

However, the weight of that decision—particularly its impact on Yasmeen—has stayed with me. It wasn't just a turning point in my life; it was a defining moment that shaped my relationship with her and reminded me of the lasting consequences of my actions.

This chapter of my life is a reflection of love, sacrifice, and resilience. It taught me that while decisions made in desperation may seem necessary, they can leave scars that take a lifetime to heal. I hope that through my efforts since that time, Yasmeen and Ayana understand the depth of my love for them and the reasons behind my choices.

My daughters are my greatest blessing, and I've spent every moment since striving to be the father they deserve.

Even now, I continue to run—not from responsibility, but from the poverty and struggles of my past. That marathon has shaped who I am, and it is a journey I'll continue for the rest of my life.

A Turning Point

One night, after waking from a destructive binge, I reached a breaking point that I had already described earlier—when I looked in the mirror and finally confronted the man I was becoming.

It was that same moment when my mother, sensing my desperation, told me words that would stay with me for the rest of my life:

“You may not always be a husband, but you will always be a father.”

Her words hit me deeply, forcing me to confront the direction my life had taken.

I soon realized I was still paying rent on my West Philly apartment— even though my ex had already moved out. That realization pushed me to return there, quit drinking and drugging, and make a conscious decision to move forward.

During this time, Debbie and I briefly lost touch as she handled her own matters. But soon, fate intervened, and we reconnected on more stable ground.

CHAPTER 9 – Rebuilding, with Redemption and Commitment

Reconnecting with Debbie

In March-April 1987, during a lunchtime walk, I ran into Debbie by chance. We exchanged pleasantries and went on our separate ways, but soon after, she called—and from that moment, we both knew we needed each other.

As the summer of 1987 approached, the obstacles in both our lives had either been resolved or were in the process of being resolved, and we took the next step together. Moving in that summer wasn't just practical—it was the start of the life we were building side by side.

At that time, my marriage to Lynette had already ended in every way except legally. I had initially filed for divorce myself, but because the attorney I retained was based out of state in New Jersey, the paperwork never properly moved forward despite my having paid to initiate the process. It was later that Lynette filed on her own, and the divorce finally proceeded through the courts.

On July 3, 1987, Debbie moved in with me. Our connection deepened as we navigated the challenges of my still-faltering marriage and began to envision a future together.

A year and a half later, in the winter of 1989, we made it official. On a day as magical as the night we first met, Debbie and I exchanged vows, committing to the love that had carried us through those early challenges.

Though Sullivan's Bar is no longer there, its legacy lives on in the memories it holds for Debbie and me. That night may have been fleeting, but the spark it ignited remains eternal.

Through every season of life, Debbie has remained the woman who captured my heart that chilly November evening, her presence a constant reminder of the magic that began on that unforgettable night.

When Love Isn't Enough

But the divorce came with a whole new set of challenges.

After the separation, I found myself in a tough position: *how was I supposed to manage two households on one paycheck?*

Before the courts ever stepped in, I was already giving Lynette \$200 every two weeks—on my own. No one had to force my hand. I also continued to provide health insurance for our daughters.

I did that because it was the right thing to do, not because a judge said I had to. But at some point—probably under the influence of her parents—she filed for child support. That cut deep.

It wasn't just the filing. It was what it symbolized. She didn't come to me. She didn't sit down and say, "*Mike, we need to talk.*" Instead, she went to them—to the system, to the courts, to strangers. That felt like betrayal.

When the arbitrator reviewed my finances, the court ordered the same amount I had already been giving: \$200 every paycheck—on the 15th and 31st, exactly how I got paid.

Nothing changed except now, it was court-ordered and came directly out of my check. I was making just over \$500 a week before taxes. Without overtime, I was bringing home barely \$600 every two weeks. I wasn't balling. I was budgeting. I wasn't wealthy—I was responsible.

But even though the numbers didn't change, something inside me did. It stung to have a system—a system that didn't know me, my kids, or my character—tell me how to take care of my children. That was my job, and I had already been doing it.

And still—after all that—she would call and ask for more. And I'd say what she probably didn't want to hear: "*The court told you what I owe. That's what you asked for.*"

It was cold. But it was the truth.

At one point, I even asked for custody—not in court, just in conversation, as a man. I asked my mother and my aunt what they thought, and they looked at me and said,

“On what grounds are you taking those girls from their mother?”

And they were right—legally, but emotionally? I believed my daughters belonged with me. I felt I could offer more structure, more stability, more grounding. I didn’t want to take them away out of spite—I wanted to build something solid with them.

Eventually, I left it up to the girls. At first, they agreed to stay with me. But after a few weeks, they chose to return to their mother’s home. And that broke something in me.

They’d still come to visit on weekends. But I could see it—the comparison. They felt like their younger sisters were getting more. What they didn’t understand was... we were simply responding to the needs we saw in front of us, in real time. It was never favoritism. Never hierarchy. It was just a different season, a different household, and a different kind of stability.

But the pain of not having them with me every day—that stuck. That created a distance I never wanted. I never abandoned them. Not once. But I know there were moments where it probably felt like I did. — Let me be clear: *I wanted my girls with me.*

Not because Lynette was a bad mother—she wasn't. But because I wanted to give them something I didn't have growing up. I wanted to raise them under one roof, with love and intention and direction. I wanted to do right by them. And I tried. God knows I tried.

I wasn't perfect. I made mistakes—some I still regret to this day. But not a single day went by where I didn't think about them, pray for them, and wish I could give them everything they needed and more.

Building a Fractured Life

Debbie and I built a life filled with love, laughter, and resilience. Together, we welcomed two daughters:

- *Amira Iman Davis, born March 15, 1990*
- *Aisha Jamila Davis, born February 17, 1991*

Debbie has been my partner in every sense of the word, helping me navigate challenges and celebrate successes.

In March 1992, Deb and I bought our first home together—located at 7711 Pickering Avenue in the West Oak Lane section of Philadelphia. We purchased it from Henry Scott, a friend and realtor, using a rent-to-own arrangement.

Another Promise Fulfilled - A Boys Dream

That home gave me space to finally take the next step in a dream I'd carried since I was a child: *getting my mother out of the projects.*

By 1995, I was ready. Henry had another property. I toured it, brokered the terms, shook hands—without even telling my mother.

I knew if I asked her opinion too early, she'd talk herself out of it. When I finally told her, she brushed it off: *"You got your own family now. Don't worry about me."*

But I had always worried about her. She just didn't know—or maybe she pretended not to know.

She visited the house on a Friday. The following week, I had my brother gather some friends and pack her up. By Saturday of the following week, she was out.

A House She Didn't Know Was Hers

She thought she was simply renting. But I had arranged a plan with Henry and Larry Shippen, a *personal banker* I met through Henry.

Larry helped establish her first credit line, a bank account, and a paper trail. To get her engaged, I told her a little lie: *"Mom, just start putting a little aside—for incidentals, in case something comes up."*

What she didn't know was that part of her rent was being saved as a down payment. In 1997, I told her the truth.

She panicked: *"How can I pay that?"*

I said: *"If you raised four kids with nothing, then four kids can take care of you. You didn't bring me this far for me to leave you now."*

Everything she needed to buy the house was already in motion. And I promised I'd be there every step of the way. When we got to the bank for closing, she sat beside me—nervous and unsure. She didn't understand the numbers, but she trusted me.

When it was all said and done, she walked away from the table with just over \$2,500 in her pocket—money that was hers, though she never even knew it—and the keys and deed to a house that would become her own. *Her forever home.*

She finally had clean running hot/cold water, working appliances, steady heat.

- No more unwanted guests.
- No more Markoe Street.
- No more MLK or Mill Creek Projects.
- No more bouncing back and forth between Irving Street and wherever
- No more crying quietly in her room, wondering if she had done enough.

- She was no longer a government project. No more government assistance.

Mom had climbed the *rough side of the mountain*—and now, she had made it to the top. And the truth is... we both did. Together, we made it. And I had never been more proud.

By then, I no longer questioned whether Mayo was still “a better man than I’d ever be.” I didn’t have to. I could see the answer in her eyes—the peace, the pride, the joy she carried. She was finally happy. *Finally free.*

And for the first time, something different settled in my mind. Not doubt. Not comparison. Just this: “*Man of the house.*”

And this time, it finally felt true.

She lived out the rest of her days in peace there. And today, my brother still lives in that home.

That moment—handing her the keys, watching her walk into a place she could finally call her own—was one of the proudest moments of my life.

A Brotherhood Forged in Corporate Halls

They say in life you don't always get what you want, but if you stay true to yourself, you'll always be given what you need.

That truth brings me to my friend—my brother from another mother—Earl Patterson. I first met Earl around 1998 or 1999 — he’d know the exact year; that brother has always been sharp with numbers.

He walked into my office at Deloitte, fresh on the job and needing some materials reproduced. He stood there with his arms crossed, clutching papers like a nervous schoolgirl, wearing what I could only describe as a “Bill Cosby” sweater. My first thought was, *What the...?*

I asked how I could help, and after he told me what he needed, I shot back, “If you’ll first unfold your arms and take off that ‘Bill Cosby’ sweater, then I will.” We both laughed. I handed him a work order form and passed the job to Tim, my right-hand man, to take care of it.

A few days later, we crossed paths again. No sweater this time, and his arms were uncrossed. We shared a knowing smile, and I asked him if he wanted to grab lunch. He gave me a puzzled look and said he didn’t have any money.

I just looked back and said, “I didn’t ask you if you had any money. I asked if you wanted to go to lunch.”

My guess was that he had just started the job and hadn’t been paid yet—his money wasn’t “right,” as we’d say in the streets. He didn’t know I came from the same kind of place he did, and I wanted him to feel at ease—like he was talking to a homey from the neighborhood.

From that moment, I saw something real in him. I started chipping away at the walls he’d built around himself, walls born from the fear of navigating a foreign corporate world.

I wanted for him what I never had when I first stepped into that maze: a mentor. Someone to say, *I got you*.

When I entered corporate America, it was full of “yes boss, no boss” types—folks playing the game, but losing themselves in the process. I was hired at Touché Ross—later called Deloitte—during the era of Affirmative Action. I’ve always suspected my light skin may have helped me through the door, but they quickly learned that my Blackness wasn’t muted by my complexion. I was “blackety-black” on the inside—but smart enough not to let that hold me back.

I realized early on that what I lacked in book smarts, they lacked in street smarts. What I had in street smarts, they couldn’t learn. What they had in books, I could study. So, I did. I learned enough to speak their language—but I always seasoned it with wisdom from the streets. That balance made me a lightning rod—someone not to be taken lightly.

That’s the blend I wanted Earl to master. He already had the book smarts, and truth be told, he had a demeanor that reminded me of “those white folks,” if you’ll pardon the expression.

What I wanted to teach him was how to merge that polish with his roots so he could rise even higher than I ever did.

Years have passed, and I can say this without hesitation: outside of my own family, I've never been closer to anyone than Earl. When I've faced challenges, I often found myself asking, *What Would Earl Do?*

He never knew it, but he was my hero—while he thought I was his. Two peas from the same pod, taking different paths to end up in the same place.

History will show: from the day we met, he became my most trusted and beloved friend. If I had to design the perfect friend, the perfect brother—Earl Patterson would be the blueprint.

Planting Roots and Living Legacy

The house on Pickering Avenue wasn't just four walls and a roof. It was proof—evidence that two people from broken beginnings could create something whole.

That address symbolized more than ownership; it embodied survival, stability, and intention.

It was a turning point in our lives, a physical space where dreams weren't just talked about—they were lived.

We planted roots there, not only in the soil but in spirit. The neighborhood was filled with other Black families who, like us, were striving to give their children more than what they had. There were cookouts in the summer, neighbors who watched out for one another, and a sense of shared pride.

It wasn't perfect, but it was home. And for the first time in a long time, I felt the quiet peace that comes from permanence.

Inside that home, we raised our daughters with intention. We weren't just feeding mouths—we were nourishing souls. Debbie and I worked as a team, balancing discipline with love, structure with freedom. I read bedtime stories, helped with homework, showed up at school events. I was the father I had once wished for: present, accountable, and engaged.

Those years weren't without challenge. The 1990s ushered in a new wave of struggle for the Black community. The crack epidemic morphed into mass incarceration. Tough-on-crime policies ravaged our neighborhoods. And even as I worked a good job and paid my taxes, I was reminded daily that being a Black man in America meant moving through the world with constant awareness.

Still, we built joy within our walls. Gospel music played on Sundays while we cleaned the house. Debbie cooked meals that brought everyone to the table. The girls laughed, fought, played, and grew. And I watched, sometimes in awe, at the family we had created out of the ashes.

We made mistakes, of course. Missed opportunities. Words we wished we could take back. But we apologized. We learned. And together, we kept growing.

Fulfilling a Dream

By 2001, we had outgrown the house on Pickering. Not just physically, but spiritually. We were ready for the next chapter. That year, we moved into our forever home at 7709 Oak Lane Road. A bigger space, a quieter street, but the same heart.

That move wasn't about status. It was about vision. It was about creating a foundation that our children could return to, a legacy they could inherit. We had weathered the storms—individually and together. And Oak Lane was our reward.

It wasn't about arriving. It was about anchoring. And for the first time in my life, I felt deeply rooted—not in the streets, not in the projects, not in survival, but in love, in family, in legacy.

This chapter of our lives was quiet in the best way—a kind of calm earned only through chaos. A peace that came not from what we had, but from who we had become. It was a place of stability, a home where we have lived ever since.

This was the dream of a little boy born into a world that never made room for him—a world that placed barriers at every turn, designed to keep him from rising. A boy with no college degree, told far too early that he was *“the man of the house.”*

A boy who started with absolutely nothing, but a dream.

From earning just about \$2,400 a year at PGH... to starting at \$6,700 a year at Touché Ross, doing whatever it took to feed his family. That boy became a man— *A man who built a life, a career, a home, a legacy.*

- A man who rose to earn six figures...
- Who has been married to the love of his life for over 36yrs.
- Who fathered four beautiful daughters.
- Who took care of his family.
- Who took care of his mother.
- Who fulfilled his promise.

And proved that where you start doesn't define where you finish.

Along the way, following my own version of the *yellow brick road*—never knowing that the road “out” would lead me not just to survival, but to possibility, to opportunity, to reinvention. A poor kid from the projects, briefcase in hand, walking down Broad Street toward the ivory tower of 1700 Market Street—my office, on the 24th floor, in the heart of Center City.

I didn't just escape.

I arrived

Not bad for a little boy born into a world that had no space for him on that rainy, somewhat cool Sunday morning when I left the University of Pennsylvania Hospital—on December 8th, 1957.

The Yellow Brick Road was never golden.

But it led me home

The 2000s: Lessons, Losses and the Shaping of a Man Changed

The new millennium brought many challenges, but nothing could have prepared me for the devastating losses that began to unfold in the 2000s.

By 2001, Debbie and I had outgrown our space on Pickering Avenue—not just physically, but spiritually.

That year, we found our forever home on Oak Lane Road in Cheltenham Township, in the suburbs of Philadelphia. It wasn't just a new address; it marked the beginning of a new era.

The house on Oak Lane quickly filled with warmth and music, laughter and healing. It became the space where our daughters would grow into young women and where our family would gather. The echoes of everything we had overcome resonated within its walls, becoming the soundtrack of our daily lives. Our roots had finally found soil deep enough to grow.

But even as we built this new foundation, life came with profound new tests. In 2005, I lost my cousin Robert Jr.—my big brother in spirit, the one who had shaped my childhood with his strength and presence.

His passing was sudden and struck a deep chord in my soul. I was glad that he got to be at my first cookout in our new home. After all those morning and late-night talks, it meant everything for me to have him here and to see what I'd done with his advice. I wanted him to be proud of me, and he was. Rest well my brother.

Just a couple of years later, on March 29, 2007, I lost my mother, Mollie Janell Lunce. Nothing could have prepared me for that. She was the anchor of our family, the one who had held us together through fire, poverty, heartbreak, and relocation. Her passing left a profound hollow in my soul.

I carried her voice in my head long after I could no longer hear it in real life. Her wisdom became my conscience; her memory will always be my compass. She remains, even now, one of my greatest blessings.

In 2014, I experienced the death of my Uncle Robert—another giant who helped shape the man I would become. He had served in the Navy and ran his household with military precision, but beneath that discipline was a dependable love.

He taught me the value of routine, order, and taking pride in even the smallest task—lessons that guided me every day I stepped into the corporate world. He was the blueprint for excellence, especially when nobody was watching.

Then, on October 25, 2016, my Aunt Wilma, who had been like a second mother to me, passed away. She was my sanctuary, the person I turned to for comfort and wisdom. Losing her felt like losing the final thread holding me together.

These weren't just funerals I attended; these were monumental shifts in my identity. With every loss, I became the keeper of more memories, the holder of more wisdom, the storyteller for a family that had always endured.

Suddenly, I was no longer the child in the family; I was the elder, the one others looked to. These losses hardened me in ways I had never experienced before, forcing me to navigate life without the pillars of my past.

The year 2008 brought a flicker of hope to a weary nation. The election of Barack Obama felt like a spiritual balm—a moment of collective pride, proof that our dreams were not in vain.

I watched with tears in my eyes as he took that oath. My mother didn't live to see it, but I knew she was smiling somewhere. I felt her presence in that moment.

As the decade came to a close, I realized just how much life had taught me. How many people I had loved. How many I had lost. And yet, I was still here. Not just alive, but truly present and grounded. A man shaped by pain, yes—but ultimately, by purpose. These were the years that refined me, and in that refining, I found something sacred: peace in the face of sorrow and strength in the name of legacy.

I wasn't done.

I was simply stepping into the next phase of becoming.

Navigating Change and the Road to Retirement

In 2009, the country was going through a difficult time. Inflation was on the rise, the job market was crashing, and layoffs were becoming the norm. The technology industry, in particular, faced major cutbacks as companies outsourced positions to countries like India. It was during this period of uncertainty that my decision to retire came about.

The writing had been on the wall since 2008, as I witnessed the gradual downsizing of essential technology workers in my company.

By 2009, I was presented with two options: be let go or take an early retirement.

After 32 and a half years of dedicated service, I had already met the criteria for retirement.

Though I wasn't ready to stop working, it seemed like the right decision. The company offered me a severance package that would cover 18 months, and I would still qualify for unemployment.

I chose to retire, feeling confident that this path would provide a smoother transition during such an uncertain time.

Though the decision wasn't entirely voluntary, I tried to embrace it. My first grandchild, Nevaeh, was born in 2010, and retirement gave me the incredible opportunity to be present in her life. I stayed home with her for a year, cherishing the time spent as a full-time grandfather.

Those moments brought me immense joy and a renewed sense of purpose during a challenging period of adjustment.

However, the financial realities of retirement soon set in. The income I had been accustomed to—just over six figures annually—was no longer there, and I found myself dipping into my life savings, 401(k), and other retirement funds to maintain the lifestyle I had worked so hard to achieve.

I refused to let all my years of effort and sacrifice go to waste, so I did what I had to do to stay afloat.

In the winter of 2010, I took a seasonal position at Macy's, working in fine watches and jewelry. It was a short-term job, lasting only two or three months, but it kept me occupied and provided some extra income. Still, it wasn't enough to fill the gap left by my previous earnings, and the search for stable employment continued.

The job market was tight, and finding meaningful work proved to be a daunting challenge. Ageism became an obstacle I couldn't ignore—I often felt that my experience and skills were being overlooked simply because of my age.

Despite these frustrations, I refused to stand still. I kept pushing forward.

Eventually, I was offered an opportunity at a call center that was advertised as a technology supervisor role. When I arrived, I discovered it was actually a sales position for health and life insurance. Though I had no experience in insurance, I accepted the challenge—it was a job, and I needed the income. The company provided training, and after two or three months, I earned my health and life insurance license.

For the next four years, I worked in the call center, selling health insurance and Medicare plans. I rose to the position of senior supervisor, a testament to my adaptability, discipline, and determination. Even in a completely new field, I found a way to thrive.

My success in the insurance call center eventually led to another opportunity. My project manager recommended me for a position at a financial call center, where I transitioned to working with financial services. This new role provided more stability, and I stayed there for another seven years, working diligently and continuing to support my family.

In January 2024, after years of navigating the ups and downs of the job market, I finally retired for good. It was a long journey marked by resilience, adaptability, and an unwavering determination to keep moving forward, no matter the challenges I faced.

Each step along the way—from the tech industry to insurance sales and financial services—proved that I could pivot, learn, and rebuild whenever life demanded it.

Retirement this time felt different. It was not just a conclusion to a career but a culmination of years of hard work, sacrifices, and lessons learned.

Reflecting on the journey, I am proud of how I managed to provide for my family, maintain our lifestyle, and continue growing despite the many obstacles life threw my way.

Through it all, I remained committed to the values that shaped me: resilience, hard work, and a refusal to give up on the life I had built.

My story is not just about professional success —it is about adaptability, perseverance, and the deep love for my family that kept me moving forward when standing still was never an option.

A Life of Love and Legacy

Deloitte wasn't just a career—it was the backdrop for some of the most important chapters of my life. It gave me the means to create a life I'm proud of and provided opportunities to meet the people who shaped me.

Through my journey there, I found my first love —Donna, my first wife—Lynette, and my forever love—Debbie, all of whom played pivotal roles in my story. Along the way, I gained four beautiful daughters, six wonderful grandchildren, and the chance to assist my mother (RIP) in purchasing her first home, a moment of pride and gratitude that will always stand out in my memory.

For someone who once saw himself as a vagabond or nomad with no real roots or sense of belonging—an outcast—I've built a life I never imagined.

Despite the challenges and hardships, I've created a legacy of love, resilience, and success that I hold close to my heart.

I didn't inherit solid ground. I built it.

And now, I leave that solid ground for those who come after me to stand on.

Losing a Brother

Over the years, I've always been someone willing to give people a chance, but I'm not one to be crossed. My relationship with my brother has been a prime example of this balance. My brother battled alcohol addiction through his late teens, twenties, and into his thirties.

Thankfully, he's been sober for almost 40 years now, but back then, it was bad. As the older brother, I was often the one people called when things went wrong.

"Bill is out here going off. Can you come get him?" Or worse, there were calls about attempted suicides, stints in rehabilitation centers, and stays in mental health facilities. The calls never seemed to stop. Even after I got married, I kept getting them, disrupting my life and my sleep. Eventually, I reached a breaking point and started leaving my phone off the hook to avoid "the call."

After moving to East Oak Lane, I finally felt like I had some distance from the chaos. My brother assured me he had straightened out, and I wanted to believe him. I even tried to help him by introducing him to Henry Scott, a friend of mine who owned property and ran a home-flipping business. Henry was pivotal in my life—he helped my family get our first home on Pickering Avenue in the Cedarbrook section of West Oak Lane. Henry rented us a home until we could qualify for a mortgage, and for that, I will always be grateful.

But Henry and I had our differences. Our friendship began to erode after I realized he was more focused on money than genuine connection. Still, I couldn't overlook the opportunities he had given me and my family, including helping me get my mother on the path to homeownership. Despite the strain, I stayed connected with Henry, though never as close as we once were.

As for my brother, despite the frustrations, I always tried to be there for him. But the cracks in our relationship widened after I reached out to him during a tough time. I had recently left Deloitte and was struggling financially.

My daughter, Amira, needed help getting back to school, and I swallowed my pride to ask my brother for support. He said he would help, but when the time came, he acted like he forgot. Feeling betrayed, I turned to Henry for a loan—something I swore I'd never do—but as a father, I did what I had to do for my family.

That incident marked the first major rift between my brother and me, and I thought it would be the last.

Years later, after our mother passed, I decided to visit my brother at her house, where he was now living and maintaining his sobriety. I hugged him because, at that moment, I felt we both needed it. That visit helped us reconnect, and we began communicating and spending time together again.

When he was diagnosed with lung cancer in 2023, I was devastated, but I made it a point to call and visit him regularly. I wanted to be there for him the way I had always been. Thankfully, by mid-2024, he completed chemotherapy and was declared cancer-free.

But then, in August 2024, my life took a turn. I received news that I might have prostate cancer. Devastated and unsure of how to process it, I needed to talk to someone—a man who could understand my fears. I turned to my brother, the one person I thought I could trust.

I told him about my PSA count and explained what it meant. He seemed surprised and said, “Wow.” Then his phone rang.

After a few minutes, he said, “Hold on, bro,” and answered the call. It was Jap, an old friend from the neighborhood. My brother even put the phones together so Jap and I could exchange pleasantries. Then, he said something I’ll never forget: “Bro, let me take this call, and I’ll call you back.”

I was stunned. Here I was, pouring my heart out about a potential cancer diagnosis, and he prioritized catching up with an old friend. I waited for his call, but it never came. Days turned into weeks. When he finally called two or three weeks later, he asked how I was doing. I told him I was fine, but my trust in him was shattered. He claimed he had tried to call me back, but my phone showed no missed calls. By then, it didn’t matter. The damage was done.

Since that moment, I've decided to cut ties with my brother completely. After decades of supporting him, being there through his darkest times, and standing by him even when it cost me, I realized I could no longer subject myself to his lack of reciprocity. That August marked the end of our relationship. I've washed my hands of him, and I'm done dealing with him on all fronts.

CHAPTER 10 - Letter to Ayana and Yasmeen: The Dream I Carried

Ayana and Yasmeen - You were always part of my dream.

Hell—you were and still are my dream. Without you, I have no dream

From the time I was just a poor boy in West Philly with nothing but hand-me-downs and hope, I remember saying to myself, *“When I get big, I’m gonna have a wife and two kids, and we gonna live in a nice house with a white picket fence around it. A house full of everything we need. And I’m gonna be there—to protect and provide.”*

That wasn’t just a wish. It was my *escape plan*—a blueprint I drew up in my heart, long before I even had the tools to build it. That dream was born out of absence. Out of watching my own mother work her fingers to the bone to hold things together. It came from wanting to rewrite the story I had inherited. I didn’t just want something better—I *needed* it. For me. And for the family I hoped to create.

And when I finally had a family of my own—when you came into this world—I truly believed that dream was coming to life. You were the heartbeat of everything I was trying to build.

Your mother and I had a beginning filled with hope. I thought we shared a purpose, that we'd rise together out of the weight of poverty and generational struggle. She was beautiful, I was determined, and together we had *you*. I believed that was the start of everything I'd prayed for. But over time, that shared dream started to divide.

Her parents had their own version of who I should be, and slowly I felt myself being pushed out of my own vision. I wasn't trying to dominate—I was trying to lead. I wasn't trying to control—I was trying to build. But when it became clear that my voice, my role, and my vision were being rewritten by others, I couldn't stay in that space.

I didn't walk away from *you*. I walked away from a life that no longer felt like mine. Still, I know what that absence did. I know what it took from you.

And for that—I carry a weight that no words can remove.

You both suffered from the fallout of my absence. The silence where my voice should have been, the protection I should have offered, the guidance I couldn't give from a distance. That truth haunts me.

“But I will leave this world knowing that, though I wasn’t there for you as I should have been—and that truth has weighed on me all my life—I carry nothing but pride when I speak or think of you. I only wish, for a moment, that you could see yourselves as I see you: two beautiful, strong, Black, independent women. That vision has always filled me with a gleam of pride.”

But you were never forgotten. Never set aside. Never unloved.

If anything, your absence in my daily life became the tear in my heart that never truly healed.

I never intended to criticize your mother or speak poorly of your grandparents, because me choosing her was my own decision, and I stand by it. However, it's time for me to speak my honest truth. Her life, while different from mine in some ways, was not the future I wanted for you or for myself. In fact, it represented exactly what I had spent my entire life trying to escape.

Even though she grew up in a two-parent household, her family still struggled. Your grandmother was a crossing guard, and your grandfather worked as a junker.

They worked diligently and provided what they could. Yet, observing their home showed me that simply having two parents didn't guarantee a full or thriving life. That wasn't the foundation I wanted for my children.

I felt your mother had become content with this lifestyle, and it wasn't the future I desired for our family.

I wasn't looking for perfection—I was building toward *purpose*. And I believed your mother, having come from a similar struggle, would walk that path with me. But she found contentment where we were, while I continued pushing toward where we could be. My vision, I realized, was far more expansive, and the mission was too critical for me to ever settle.

Maybe she had her own dream. Maybe it didn't match mine. And maybe that's where it all began to fall apart. Still—I never stopped trying. Even in silence. Even in heartbreak. Even in distance.

I want you both to know: *my goal was to build a firm foundation*—for you, my seed, and for the seed to follow. You were and still are a part of that build. I know I stumbled. I know I fumbled. Hell, looking back, I know I just plain F'd up, not on purpose because surviving and making things better for my family was my only mission. And I'll probably do it again before my time is up. But never—*not once*—did I exclude you from that mission. It might be hard to accept, but I'm not a perfect man.

But I have always tried to be perfect *for you*. That's been my life's mission. Every decision I made—right or wrong—was made with your best interest at heart. I know it didn't always feel like that. I know there were times when the pain spoke louder than my intentions. But that's my truth.

So I ask you—don't judge my mistakes by my heart, but understand them through my head. I lived my life by trial and error. And more often than not, it felt like more error than trial. But I never stopped loving you. I never stopped *trying*.

You asked me to write this memoir—and maybe, just maybe, it was your way of asking, “*Who are you, really?*” You wanted to know the father you didn't get to grow up with. And I owe you that. So here it is. All of it, The mess. The missteps. The mistakes. But also the mission. The love. The loyalty. The dream.

While I didn't get everything I planned for, I did get something right. I eventually found a partner who believed in my vision. Who didn't try to change me, Who walked beside me—no noise, no interference, just faith. And with her, I was able to give the same love, protection, and provision I once dreamed of giving to you.

I know that must be hard to see from the outside. But it was never about favoritism. It was about *presence*. And your absence is the piece that still breaks me.

I always knew my road would be rough. I was born on *A Long Dusty Road*. Long before I understood what being a man or father truly meant, I whispered “*Precious Lord, take my hand... lead me on, let me stand.*” And when I finally found someone to walk with me, all I asked was for her to trust me.

Because through it all, I held on to one truth: “*Everything’s Gonna Be Alright.*” Even when life didn’t match my vision, even when I couldn’t be everywhere I wanted to be, I still believed: *A Change Is Gonna Come.*

And I still do.

This was the dream I carried.

And you—Ayana and Yasmeen—you *were always the heart of it.*

With all my love,

Pops

CHAPTER 11 - Letter to Amira and Aisha: The Gift of My Presence

You are my peace, my promise —the light that helped me breathe again.

I want to begin this letter by saying something clearly—something I need you to hold close not just in your head, but in your heart:

You didn't get more. You just got me.

What you received wasn't a reward. It wasn't favoritism. It wasn't privilege. It was simply *presence*.

You got the part of me your sisters—Ayana and Yasmeen—were never fully allowed to experience. And that truth lives in the deepest tear of my heart. One side filled with joy, the other aching with absence.

I don't blame you. I celebrate you.

I don't write this from guilt—I write this from *truth*. Because I need you to understand that I've always had the same dream for all of my daughters. *The same vision, The same love, The same mission.*

Long before you were born, before I even knew your names, I had already imagined the life I wanted to build. That dream started when I was just a boy living in poverty, watching my mother try to survive without a partner, without rest, and

without options. I knew then I wanted something different for my children.

I wanted a home filled with love, protection, stability—and a father who showed up every day, not just when it was convenient or allowed.

That was the dream I carried.

But with Ayana and Yasmeen, I was locked out of the dream I helped create. I fought for my place, but I was shut down, shut out, and silenced. The presence I wanted to give them was stolen by circumstances and decisions that were not mine alone.

And no matter how much I tried, I could only do so much from the outside looking in.

When I met your mother—your *mom*—everything changed. Not because the dream changed, but because she allowed me to live it. She believed in me. She didn't try to rewrite my role or edit my voice. She walked beside me, trusted me, and together we built the life I had once only imagined.

You two were raised in that dream—not because you were chosen above your sisters, but because the door to that life remained *open*.

What you experienced—family dinners, father-daughter talks, late-night prayers, daily hugs, hallway laughter, and hallway lectures—those weren't extras. Those were supposed to be *standard*. That was the original vision.

And yes, I'm proud of the life we built. I'm proud of the father I've been to you. But I would be lying if I said I didn't carry the pain of what I couldn't give Ayana and Yasmeen. There will always be a part of me that feels unfinished—like a foundation I wasn't allowed to pour for them. And it's not their fault. It's not yours either. But it's there. That's the tear in my heart.

One side holding the joy of being *here* for you. The other mourning the times I couldn't be *there* for them.

So when you read this, I hope you don't feel burdened. I hope you feel *blessed*—not because you were loved more, but because you got to experience the kind of love I always meant to give. You got to grow up with my arms around you. My voice in the room. My eyes watching over your every step.

And if nothing else, I hope you see this truth:

I loved you *all* the same. I just didn't get to show it the same way. You got the dream I had carried since I was a boy. Ayana and Yasmeen got the dream I was never fully allowed to bring to life.

But in my heart—you are all my daughters. You are *each* my legacy. You are *all* the reason I rise every day and try to be better than I was the day before.

This is the truth. This is the dream. This is *my love* for you.

Forever your father,

Daddy

CHAPTER 12 – Letter to My Grandchildren

Everybody's got their own version of what poor looks like. But when I talk about it, I'm not speaking from imagination—I'm speaking from memory. I lived it. I carried it. And if I'm being honest, parts of it still live in me today.

What I have now—peace, warmth, a roof over my head, food in the fridge, a soft bed to lay in—I didn't grow up with that. I didn't inherit anything but dust and struggle. I didn't walk into comfort; I fought and bled for every single thread of it. For so long, all I had was the raw will to survive.

I was told early: "You've got a long dusty road ahead of you." They weren't lying. My journey was long, painful, uncertain, but it was never without purpose. *That purpose was *You*.*

I wore holes in my shoes and patched them with cardboard. I slept on floors because the mattress springs bit through thin sheets. I shared one tattered set of gym clothes and paid for it in bruises when I couldn't keep them bleach-white. I stood in kitchens with holes in the ceiling and listened to mice fight over crumbs. And through all of it, they called me "the man of the house."

But I was just a little boy—scared, lost, confused—trying to be what nobody ever showed me. I lived a lifetime before I turned ten. I worked from the moment I was able until nearly the day I retired.

I became a man by necessity, not by example. And even though I didn't always get it right, I **never** stopped trying.

So when I see you now—resting in warmth, laughing without fear, choosing from full pantries, sleeping in clean beds—I smile. Because that means I did it. I didn't just survive—I built. I laid a new foundation on top of the one that tried to bury me.

This letter isn't just about what I endured—it's about what I hope for you. Don't be like me—a broken little boy searching for his father in every mistake. Be better. Be whole. Be honest. Be present. Be the kind of person who looks back at their life not with regret, but with gratitude.

Know that I made mistakes. Many. Know that I came up short sometimes—not because I didn't care, but because I didn't know how. I provided what I never had, the best way I could.

Let these words guide you:

- *No opportunity is beyond your reach. The true power lies within your choices.*
- *The harder path often leads to the richest rewards.*

- *You were born as an individual—choose yourself every time.*
- *The faker you are, the bigger your circle; the realer you are, the smaller it gets—but stronger too.*

And when it's your turn to build, do it boldly. Don't start where I started. Start where I finished. And then take it higher.

I don't leave this world as a broken man—I leave as a broken little boy who gave everything he had trying to get it right. You are my proof that it was not in vain.

Love always,

Pop-Pop

FROM QUICKSAND TO KING

**SECTION III -
LEGACY, REDEMPTIONS &
REFLECTIONS**

CHAPTER 13 - The Quicksand and the Dream

I was born into quicksand. Into systems that were designed to hold me down, not lift me up. Into a world where my mother did all she could with what little she had. Into neighborhoods where fathers were ghosts, dreams were rationed, and dignity had to be fought for.

And yet, even in all that... I dreamed. I dreamed of something solid. Something lasting. A foundation. While some kids played make-believe, I built blueprints. And in my mind, that dream took shape as a yellow brick road—a path I could follow, one I could lay for my children, one that wouldn't sink beneath them like the quicksand I was born in.

That road—my yellow brick road—wasn't fantasy. It was Broad Street. From South Philly to North, every block of that long avenue was sacred to me. I rode it. I walked it. I worked along it. And every time I moved north on that stretch, I felt like I was getting closer to something greater—my own version of the Emerald City. A place of peace, of purpose, of dignity. Not wealth in the material sense, but wholeness, stability, and legacy.

I didn't grow up seeing that kind of life. So I had to dream it. And I had to believe that somehow—if I worked hard enough, if I fought long enough, if I kept getting back up—I could build that road brick by brick.

And through it all, I understood that dreams alone weren't enough—they had to be tethered to action, to endurance, to faith in what I could become.

And now, looking back with clear eyes, I know the truth:

I am the dream.

- *I am the dream of the little boy on Markoe Street, looking out the window, wondering where his father went.*
- *I am the dream of the boy who watched his mother boil water for baths and still managed to go to school like nothing was wrong.*
- *I am the dream of the young man who worked jobs at Leon's Market and PGH and felt pride in bringing home a paycheck at the end of the week—even when the ends didn't meet.*
- *I am the dream of the father who tried, who failed, but who never stopped trying.*

But I didn't build myself on strength alone. I built myself on sound—the music that wrapped around my soul, lifting me when the world was too loud, too cold, too hard. It was my earliest form of survival.

CHAPTER 14 - A Fatherless Boy in the Projects

In these pages, you read the story of a baby boy born with hope and promise — and a dream for a place in a world that had no place for him.

Born in West Philadelphia in 1957, my earliest years on Irving Street were wrapped in the warmth of a middle-class household—structure, family, and the glow of something whole. After my parents married in November 1958, we moved to Reno Street. In January of 1959, my sister Donna (Sis) was born, and by the end of the year, my brother Bill was born. I was still very young, but I remember Reno as the place where life began to feel uncertain.

An altercation I overheard between my mother and father that spring marked a turning point. The voices were loud and angry. This would be the last time I saw my father — that spring day in 1960. And then everything changed.

After he left, we moved to the Mill Creek Projects. I was too young then to understand what was happening, but something about the space — the way people moved, the way the walls echoed — felt different. It wasn't until later that I realized we had been living in survival mode.

We eventually moved to Markoe Street, and that's when I started to recognize what poverty looked like — and felt like.

I remember one Christmas on Markoe Street, receiving a red Radio Flyer wagon. At first, it felt like magic. A gift of joy. But it didn't take long for me to learn its real purpose: hauling government surplus food — powdered milk, K-rations, big blocks of cheese in cardboard boxes. That little red wagon became the first thing that made me feel the weight of the life we were living.

I slept on floors when the bed springs snapped. Sometimes, the coat I wore to school became my blanket. It was often warmer near the heat vents than under the covers. That's also when food stamps became part of our routine, and buying on time — from school clothes to household goods — became a way of life. I remember rummage sales; at the time I didn't know what they were other than an opportunity for something "new." What did I know? It was just "new to me."

We didn't talk about being poor. We just got by and made it work. Many days—if not every day—I looked in the fridge for a bite to eat and was met with a tough reality: there was nothing there—most times not even a light to show the emptiness.

Going to bed hungry wasn't a sometimes thing it became a harsh reality on many nights, but we pressed on. That's the part of poverty no one writes about — the part that lives in your bones long after the hunger is gone. And in the middle of it all was a little boy, just trying to understand the world - just trying to be in a space that gave him very little room to grow.

Eventually, we moved again — to the MLK Projects in South Philly. I was living on Irving Street with my aunt and her family at the time, but would be leaving soon after to join them per my mother's request. That's where I learned what it meant to be cut off from possibility. The ceilings were lower, the hallways darker, the streets louder and the pressure — to prove yourself, to protect yourself, to harden yourself — was everywhere.

I was a fatherless boy, with no direction and no blueprint for manhood — let alone fatherhood. I learned what I could from the streets, from TV shows, from watching my uncle — the way he showed up for his family, even though he was stationed halfway around the world as a Navy chef. He wasn't always home, but they knew they were going to be okay.

In Philadelphia, as in many northern cities, “the projects” weren’t built to lift Black families out of poverty — they were built to contain them within it.

The first high-rise public housing units were introduced in the 1940s under the guise of postwar urban renewal, but by the 1960s, they had become vertical traps — overcrowded, underfunded, and deliberately segregated.

Places like the Richard Allen Homes, Mill Creek, Bartram Village, and Martin Luther King Jr. Plaza (MLK) in South Philly were part of this system.

They offered heat and lights, but often stripped away dignity, stability, and pathways to upward mobility. Maintenance was neglected. Policing was punitive. Opportunities were scarce — not by accident, but by the way the system functioned.

The projects didn’t just house people — they held them. They were built not to empower, but to warehouse generations of Black families, tucked just far enough away from the promise of the American dream to keep them quiet — yet close enough to serve the city’s labor needs.

The system didn’t just ignore me—it tried to erase me. Redlining, welfare traps, underfunded schools that didn’t see Black brilliance—everything was a battle. But for me, battle became birthright.

I learned from mistakes.-from watching others — right or wrong. Mostly, I learned from what I needed and never had: someone to be there, someone to show me — the way you're shown how to ride a bike, someone to offer insight, direction, purpose — or just say or show: *"This is how it's done, Son."*

I had no one. There was no one to show me how to be a man, let alone a father. And when I became one, I failed — and I'm cursed every day with that scar that will never be erased. Not because I didn't care, nor want to — but because I didn't know how to give what I never had. The only thing I knew was to be present — because presence was what I missed most about growing up. At least be there — struggling with us — show me how to make it work, how to maneuver through the situation. But I had no one. So I learned wrong. So I did wrong — when I look back on it. I make no excuses for it. I'm just telling you what it felt like. What it's always felt like.

But even in that confusion, even in that emptiness, I was trying — a boy mimicking manhood, hoping effort alone could fill the void that guidance never did.

CHAPTER 15 – The Soundtrack of Resilience

These weren't just songs. They were survival. They were scripture set to soul. And now, standing here with years behind me and wisdom in my walk, I can say it loud: What I have now—I built it. Nobody gave me anything. My life was built from the bottom up.

“A Long Dusty Road” by the Art Reynolds Singers felt like my daily anthem. That road wasn't smooth. It wasn't fast. I was dragging my feet, praying for light, walking when everything in me wanted to stop. But I stayed on it.

And when the road started to climb, I found myself on the “Rough Side of the Mountain.” - Rev. F.C. Barnes didn't just sing it—he preached my truth. The climb wasn't graceful. It was gritty. Hands bruised. Knees worn. Soul weary. But I kept climbing. Because I knew what was waiting at the top wasn't just for me—it was for everyone who would come after me.

There were days I felt like I couldn't move another inch. That's when I'd hear Mahalia Jackson cut through my spirit like a blade of light: “Precious Lord, take my hand... lead me on, let me stand...” And somehow—I stood.

When I couldn't explain the pressure in my chest, I'd whisper to myself the words of Al Green: “Everything's Gonna Be Alright.” Even if I didn't believe it yet. I said it until I did.

And when I was on the edge of giving up—when life had knocked me down too many times and it felt like the fight was rigged—I’d find Sam Cooke waiting to remind me: “It’s been a long time coming... but I know... A Change Gon’ Come.”

Through it all, my soundtrack played in the background — “Everything Is Gonna Be Alright” whispering to me when I was weary, “Rough Side of the Mountain” echoing through the tough climbs, and “A Long Dusty Road” reminding me of how far I’ve come.

And through every storm, I learned to cross my own “Bridge Over Troubled Water,” standing not because the waters calmed, but because my faith held strong.

CHAPTER 16 - Building the Unshakeable Foundation

I turned my pain into purpose, my wounds into wisdom, my silence into strength and most importantly, I turned my quicksand into a solid road—a yellow brick road—not perfect but solid, not paved in gold, but in grit. A road my children can walk. A path my grandchildren can follow.

My role—my responsibility was to break the quagmire of quicksand I was born into and create a firm foundation to build on. Not just for me—but for the generations to follow. I wasn't just trying to survive—I was trying to reset the soil, so my children wouldn't have to plant their future in the same sinking ground I came from.

I never measured a man's wealth by what he could count — I measured it by what he could carry. Not in his hands, but in his heart. And I've carried a lot. I was born into lack — a world where the fridge hummed louder than the silence because it was often empty. Where faith was stretched across bills like too little butter on toast. But somehow, I survived. And not just survived — I refused to let the wounds of my beginning define the shape of my legacy.

I came to understand something over time: *abundance is not just about accumulation — it's about protection*. It's about covering the ones you love with something more than money.

It's about hope. It's about principle. It's about building something strong enough that your children — and their children — don't have to start in quicksand.

I used to look around and ask myself: How can I provide something different? The answer was never just found in dollars. It was in discipline, in sacrifice, in showing up when it mattered. And even when I stumbled, I never stopped building. Some of what I've built isn't seen — it's felt. It's the respect that trails behind my name. It's the truth I've etched into this story.

It's the quiet proof in the lives of my daughters when they realize: My father left me more than a memory. He left me a foundation. This is what I mean when I say *abundance is armor* — it shields. It shelters. It speaks for you long after you've left the room. It guards your name. It testifies.

In moments of self-doubt, when I questioned whether I'd done enough, I reminded myself: I didn't just hustle for paper — I hustled for peace. For stability. For softer landings. For mornings without fear. I hustled to leave behind something unshakeable.

From Markoe Street to the MLK Projects, from hospital hallways at PGH to boardrooms in Center City, I stayed on my Yellow Brick Road—paved not with gold, but with grit. I wasn't supposed to make it—especially not as a Black man without a college degree. But I did. I wasn't supposed to support my mother, raise a family, or retire from a thirty-year career at Deloitte with pride. But I did. I didn't inherit a legacy—I laid one down. I didn't get to follow a trail—I became one.

So no — I may not have left behind mansions or millions. But I left something better. I left a blueprint. I left armor. I left love dressed in wisdom. And that, to me, is abundance.

FROM QUICKSAND TO KING

CHAPTER 17 – The Weight of the Crown

I loved deeply. Married twice. Raised four extraordinary daughters. I stumbled into addiction and clawed my way back—not through rehab, but through raw truth, pain, and resolve. I failed in ways that still ache—especially in fatherhood, where I carry both deep pride and deeper regret. Some of my daughters knew me as a presence, others as a shadow. But through it all, I never left them behind. Even when I moved on, it was always in pursuit of firmer ground—for them, not just for me.

I think about my daughters—four miracles born from broken beginnings and second chances. I gave them what I could, when I could, how I could. Not always equally. Not always perfectly, but always with love. Ayana and Yasmeen, my oldest, carry the ache of my absence. I can't reclaim the time we lost, and I carry the weight of it every day.

They call me “Pops”—a name I hold with both humility and heartache. I hope they know I never stopped trying, even when I couldn't physically be there. Then came Amira and Aisha—daughters who received what the first two were denied: my presence.

Not because I loved them more, but because by then, I had learned how to stand. Because Allah, in His mercy, gave me another chance. But even still, the division remains. Different daughters, same father, same dream, just a little more healed by the time they arrived.

For most of my life, I carried a title I never asked for: “man of the house.” I was just a kid—maybe eight or nine—when someone said it to me. And from that moment on, I wore it like armor, like duty, like scripture. That label became my mission. I believed that everyone else’s problems were mine to fix. I didn’t just take on responsibility—I inherited burdens that belonged to grown folks long before I even reached manhood.

I became the one my brother called when he got into trouble, the one my sister leaned on when life overwhelmed her, the one who always answered—whether it was advice, money, shelter, or silence that was needed.

And for years, I carried it all—no questions, no complaints. Their weight became my weight. But when it was me who needed something? Silence. When I called out, I got excuses, when I reached out, they pulled away. No one ever asked, *“Mike, how can I help you?”*

So now? That time is over. Not in bitterness, but in peace. I'm no longer the emergency contact for people who never checked on my peace. I'm no longer the man of everyone's house— I am the man of this one. This house, my house. My peace. My sanity. My healing. And that title "*man of the house*"? It was a heavy label for a little boy. And I carried it longer—and harder—than I ever should have. It shaped my identity, my relationships, my sense of worth.

But I'm letting it go. Not because I stopped caring— but because I finally care enough about myself. So now at the tender age of 67, I reclaim ownership of me — no longer the man of everyone else's house, only my own.

Let them figure it out. Let them carry their own weight. I've done my part. I'm done rescuing people who let me drown. From now on, I won't be the weight-bearer for people who never once asked how much I was already holding. I'm not mad. I'm free.

And to those who find themselves lost now that I've let go, I offer you one last gift—

A word I coined just for you.

FITFO: Figure It The F* Out!**

CHAPTER 18 - In Memoriam: The Ones Who Shaped Me

Even as life with Debbie and our daughters settled into a rhythm of warmth, the world around me continued to turn, sometimes gently, sometimes like a storm. No matter how solid our foundation felt at home, nothing could stop the seasons of loss from coming.

In 2016, I lost my Aunt Wilma—my second mother. She had taken me in when I needed structure most, during that crucial transition from Markoe Street to Irving Street, from boy to young man. She taught me more through her quiet presence than most people teach with lectures. Her expectations were clear, her presence steady. She was my first example of dignity under pressure, of grace wrapped in discipline. Her death felt like the closing of a chapter I hadn't fully appreciated until it was gone.

But the hardest blow had come almost a decade earlier. On March 29, 2007, I lost my mother. No matter how much a man prepares himself, he's never truly ready to lose his mother.

My mom wasn't just the woman who raised me—she was my anchor, my lifeline, my north star. She had survived poverty, abandonment, relocations, health scares, and heartbreak—all while holding a household together on sheer willpower and quiet prayer.

She didn't complain; she simply endured. In doing so, she taught me the very essence of survival. Losing her left a hollow in my soul. For weeks after her passing, I found myself picking up the phone to call her, only to remember. The silence on the other end was louder than any voice I'd ever heard. In that silence, I heard echoes—her laughter, her wisdom, her scoldings, her lullabies. Her legacy wasn't measured in money or titles. It was in the strength she instilled, the values she lived by, and the way she made you feel like you mattered, even when the world didn't see you.

Then came the passing of my Uncle Robert in 2014. Another pillar. Another light extinguished. Uncle Robert had served in the Navy and ran his household with military precision. But beneath that discipline was a love you could depend on.

He taught me the value of routine, of order, and of taking pride in even the smallest task. His example stayed with me every day I stepped into the corporate world; he was the blueprint for excellence, especially when nobody was watching.

These weren't just funerals I attended; these were shifts in my identity. With every loss, I became the keeper of more memories, the holder of more wisdom, the storyteller for a family that had always endured.

And then there was my big brother Robert Jr. He wasn't perfect. He struggled with addiction, with incarceration, with his own demons. But none of that erased the fact that when I needed protection, when I needed someone to talk to, he was there. We shared more than blood—we shared moments: laughter, secrets, Saturday morning breakfasts at Hollywood's diner. He taught me what the streets couldn't: that even flawed men could offer unconditional love. When he died in 2005, a piece of my heart went with him.

Cliff—my mother's early companion—took me to my first baseball game, stood in the gap where a father might have been, and gave me one of the earliest glimpses of what it meant to show up for someone else.

So many of the people who shaped me are gone now:

My Mother, who gave me breath.

My Aunt Wilma, who gave me structure.

Cliff, who took me to my first baseball game.

And Robert Jr., who gave me courage when I had none.

My Uncle Robert, who showed me how to stand tall.

Their voices live inside me. Their lessons show up in how I walk, how I lead, how I love. Their sacrifices built the very foundation I now stand on.

And now, I am the elder of the original Irving Street generation.

CHAPTER 19: Still Standing: Reflections and Affirmations

As I look back on the road I've walked, I don't just see footsteps—I see trenches. Deep, weathered grooves carved by sacrifice, sorrow, and stubborn faith. My life wasn't a straight line. It was jagged and winding, steeped in sacrifice and sound.

I was born where dreams came cheap, but cost everything. Raised by a woman who held the sky on her shoulders and still managed to smile. The son of a man I barely knew, but whose absence shaped me just as surely as his presence might have. From that wound, I made a vow: I would be a better father than mine was. And though I stumbled more than I stood, that vow never left me. I carried it like a cross—awkward, heavy, sometimes forgotten—but never discarded. Even when life bent me, bruised me, broke me—I rose not always whole, not always right, but always trying.

There were seasons when I was lost; *addiction, depression, distraction, disappointment*. But even in failure, I found flickers of reason to keep climbing.

And when I met my wife, she was like the mouse that pulled the thorn from the lion's paw—small in stature, gentle in approach, but bold enough to calm a beast who'd forgotten how to trust. Her love rewrote the language I thought I understood. She believed in the man I could become—even when I didn't.

Now, I live in a world I never imagined. A place where people hire maids to clean houses they barely live in—while I still carry the muscle memory of scrubbing baseboards with bleach, chasing crumbs before roaches found them first. It's not just a new neighborhood. It's a new reality. But wealth doesn't erase the memory of hunger. Peace doesn't quiet the paranoia taught by poverty. I've learned that survival teaches habits luxury can't unlearn. I've moved from sirens to silence.

From blocks where sneakers slapped the pavement in flight, to streets lined with trees and guarded by deer. But sometimes, the silence screams louder than the chaos ever did.

Sometimes, I miss the noise—not because I want to return to it, but because it made sense. Now, I have everything I once prayed for... and still, some nights, I wrestle with the ghosts of what I lost along the way.

At 50, I left behind a career most would envy. I climbed corporate ladders barefoot, bleeding, with no blueprint—just belief. I didn't leave in defeat. I retired with dignity. And I'm proud. Not just of where I ended up—but of where I began. Of the floors I swept. The counters I manned. The people I lifted. The legacy I tried to leave. And yet, I still feel like a vagabond. A man who made it out, but never truly fit in.

Too polished for the hood, too raw for the suburbs. Always somewhere in between, always building, always believing that maybe—just maybe—I could turn the quicksand I was born into, into concrete for someone else to stand on.

So if this chapter, this life, this memoir says anything—let it say this: I failed. I rose. I wept. I loved. I lived. — And I never gave up. Because no matter how steep the mountain...I stayed on that Yellow Brick Road. And I'm still standing.

Looking back at my life in retrospect, I've come to understand that coming from humble beginnings is its own kind of blessing — though you rarely see it while you're in the storm. I didn't come from much. But what I did come from — struggle, sacrifice, strength — shaped me.

It taught me what not to become, what I must become, and what I was born to overcome. I wasn't handed much — not wealth, not privilege, not opportunity.

But I was handed something far more powerful: a will to rise. I built my life from the bottom up — no blueprint, no cushion, and no fallback plan. Just grit, faith, and fire.

I learned that what didn't kill me — all those tears, those sleepless nights, those *"almosts"* and *"not quite yet's"* — they didn't break me. They made me. They made me grateful for what I have now. Because I know what it's like to have nothing — and to feel like nothing.

But here's the truth: I am something. I am someone. I am a survivor, a provider, a protector, a father, a husband, a man forged in the heat of circumstance and cooled in the waters of grace. I am not perfect — but I am present. I am not flawless — but I am faithful. I am not everything — but I've always tried to be enough for the people I love.

Early in my life, I gave a lot of myself to people—family, friends, and associates alike. I offered my time; love, resources, and support without hesitation, believing that when my day of need came, that those same people would be there for me.

At the time, I thought it was a natural cycle—what you pour into others, they'll one day pour back into you.

But life taught me differently. Many of those deposits were one-sided. When it was my turn to lean, the shoulders I expected to find weren't there.

Some of the very people I had sacrificed for vanished when I needed them most. That hurt cut deep, and for a while, it felt like betrayal.

With time, though, I came to see it as preparation. I wasn't just being taught about people—I was being taught about life itself. Not every seed you plant will take root, and not every investment of love guarantees a return. What I gave wasn't wasted, though—it shaped me, strengthened me, and revealed the rare few who truly stood the test of loyalty.

I realize now that all of it was preparing me for the long game. Life for me wasn't checkers, where the moves are quick and obvious. It was always chess, where patience, strategy, and foresight matter more than speed.

I wasn't meant to win in the short game; I was being trained to endure, to think ahead, and to play for something bigger than the moment. There were moments when I wanted to quit. Times when the weight of my decisions — and the wounds of my past — threatened to drown me.

But I didn't drown. I rose. And every time I rise, I carry someone with me — my daughters, my grandchildren, the next generation of Davis blood. I want them to know: You come from a long line of survival. You come from a man who fought to leave you more than just stories — he fought to leave you a foundation.

AFFIRMATIONS I LIVE BY:

- I am the dream of my ancestors, realized through sweat and spirit.
- I am not defined by where I came from, but by where I choose to go.
- I carry the torch of every man who didn't make it, every woman who held a house together with faith.
- My past was *my proving ground* — *my present is my platform*.
- My children are my legacy. My grandchildren, my joy. My name, my responsibility.
- I walk with purpose. I speak with truth. I love with intention.
- I may have stumbled, but I never stopped moving.

This reflection is not just for me — it's for you.

So when the world tells you you're not enough, look in the mirror and remember:

You are your ancestors' wildest dream.

And you're not just standing — you're standing at

CHAPTER 20 – Special Acknowledgments

To My Beloved Wife, Deborah Ann Davis

Through it all, this one acknowledgment transcends words, touching the very core of my being. To my extraordinary wife, Deborah Ann Davis, the fire in my soul and the unwavering compass for my future: my gratitude for you is boundless, my love immeasurable.

When my world felt like it had crumbled to ashes, and I stood at the precipice of starting over—lost, burdened, and raw—it was your unwavering belief, your boundless patience, and a love that burned away the deepest shadows that truly saved me. You didn't just offer support; you were the very ground beneath my feet when I needed to dig new foundations, helping me anchor myself against the quicksand of my past. You saw a vision for my future before I could even fully articulate it, and you stood shoulder-to-shoulder with me, breathing life into every single step of its construction.

Your encouragement wasn't just a constant source of strength; it was the fuel for my rebuilding, the quiet, powerful force that made this memoir—and indeed, everything I am now—possible.

You loved me not just as the broken little boy trying to find his way, but as the man I was destined to become.

To say 'thank you' feels too small, too ordinary for the boundless depth of what you are to me. You are my greatest partner, my truest love, the very beating heart of my existence. What we built, we built together. My life truly began anew with you.

To My Daughters and Grandchildren

Ayana, Yasmeen, Amira, and Aisha, and my grandchildren, Nevaeh, Xavier, Ethan, Rylee, Andre Jr.(AJ), and Dream, thank you for your understanding and for allowing me to share our family's story.

Your lives are my greatest legacy.

I will take with me the hurt and pain I have caused each and every one of you, so that when I'm gone, that pain and absence between you can finally cease.

I humbly ask you to lay that burden at my feet, for every sacrifice I ever made, I made for each of you and for your future generations. I made no exceptions;

I simply wanted better for all of you, while trying to navigate uncharted waters of my own without a compass."

Special Dedication to Yasmeen - The Daughter Who Needed to Know

I want to offer the deepest, most heartfelt shoutout to the one who quietly ignited this journey—my daughter, Yasmeen.

And yet, even with all I've conquered—poverty, pain, injustice, the weight of responsibility thrust on me too young—there is one battle I have never won. The fear that still lives in me, quietly, every day... is the fear of not being there for you.

That fear, Yasmeen, has followed me like a shadow. It wakes with me. It walks beside me. And each day my heart skips a beat—not from joy, but from absence. From the space where you should be. From the distance that time, life, and wounds have built between us.

I don't fear many things. But I fear the ache of not knowing you more fully. I fear the echo of your absence in my life. And I carry that fear like a scar on my soul. If this book does anything—let it bridge that space. Let it speak when I couldn't. Let it bring you back to me in spirit, if not in step.

Because my heart will never stop reaching for you. Not today, Not ever. It was you who first said, "Pops, you should write your story."

At the time, I thought it was just a suggestion. But now I see it for what it really was—a plea.

A silent reach for something you felt slipping through your fingers: Me.

Not out of malice, nor out of blame. But out of a very human need to understand. The man whose blood you carry, but whose presence was fractured by the fallout of a love that didn't last.

Your mother and I, we did the best we could—until we couldn't. And in that split, so much got divided. Not just homes or holidays, But moments. Memories. Time.

And of all the things I lost in that chapter of life, the hardest to face was the space it created between you and me. Not just miles. Not just weekends.

But the quiet kind of space—the kind that lingers in photos never taken and questions left unasked. So maybe you asked me to write this not for the world... But for you.

To finally hear the story you never got to live through. To understand the man you only knew in fragments. To piece together the wholeness of your father From the jagged edges of divorce and distance. And for that, I owe you more than a thank you. I owe you this.

This book. This truth. This legacy.

You may not have had all of me growing up. But I give you all of me now—every page, every scar, every lesson. Not just as a father trying to explain himself, But as a man trying to reach his daughter's heart— Even if it took him a lifetime.

Yasmeen, I love you more than words can carry, More than apologies can mend, More than time can rewind.

And though I couldn't always be there, I am here now, in these pages—forever.

To My Dear Sister, Donna

To my dear sister, Donna, my precious Sis: Thank you for a lifetime of enduring love and unshakeable support. Through all the trials and the long, hard roads we walked together, you were my constant, my biggest cheerleader, often when I felt I had no one else. The joy we've finally found, sharing quieter, happier times in

these closing years, is a treasure I hold so dear—a balm for a past that was often anything but. My heart carries boundless love for you, Sis.

My Brother, Earl

I want to send a special acknowledgment to my dear friend, my brother (from another mother) Earl Patterson. You came into my life at a time when I was finally learning the hard difference between true friends, mere associates, and those just hanging on for

what they can get. You proved to me what I truly needed in a brother— not by blood, but by spirit—and showed me precisely why I've kept my inner circle small and fiercely protected.

Your unwavering friendship and brotherhood have been a cornerstone through every trial and tribulation. It's a rare and precious gift, a true testament to genuine connection in a world that often teaches us to expect less.

To my Brother and Sisters — Sis, Bill and Tina

I leave you with this note.

As you know I'm not your father, nor was I ever asked to act as one. Yet all the same, I took on the mantle and the responsibility to carry out those duties for each of you in the only ways I knew how.

At the age of eight, when I was called the “man of the house,” I accepted that title as one of responsibility handed to me — and being the oldest, I did with it the best that I could.

I learned early that being the oldest came with a burden or two. No one taught me how to carry that weight. There were no instructions, no blueprint. I simply did what I believed needed to be done.

Just as with my own children later in life, no one taught me how to be what others needed me to be. I just tried to show up — however I could, whenever I could — doing the best I knew how with what I had at the time.

I know the pains and struggles I carried are not the same ones you feel or fully understand. But I hope you always remember this truth:

I Gave it My Best.

I gave it my all.

*While I was trying to answer...
life's unbearable call.*

*No one had asked me — yet somehow I knew
that being firstborn came with a burden or two.*

*At the age of eight they called me the man,
But I was too young to understand*

*They said, Son you're the 'man of the house', I recall
But I was still learning to stand at all...*

*And I leave you with this final truth — one born from life,
from love, and from the scars we all carry:*

***We Came From The Same Mother,
But Bare Different Scars***

— Mike

Family, Friends and Naysayers

To all my family and friends, both past and present, whose lives intersected with mine and shaped the man I am today, I am eternally grateful. I also extend many thanks to my naysayers who said I'd never amount to anything, to those who took my friendship for granted, and to all who believed my life was about fulfilling their expectations and their agendas. Thank you. Through your actions, I was able to better find my own way.

And finally, to the readers, thank you for taking the time to walk this journey with me. Mike

Final Words – My Road, My Climb, My Bridge

From the beginning, my life has been a long dusty road. That road wasn't smooth or straight — it wound through the cracks of West Philadelphia, up broken stairwells, across cold kitchens, and into nights where the lights were cut and the cupboards were bare.

I didn't start on level ground — I started in quicksand. And most of my life since has been spent trying to build a solid foundation, brick by brick, truth by truth, mistake by mistake. Some of those bricks came from lessons learned the hard way, some from blessings I didn't see coming. But all of them came from a will to stand.

The climb was never graceful — it was gritty. I was born on the rough side of the mountain, and every step left my knees bruised, my hands scraped, and my spirit tested. But I kept climbing because I knew there was something on the other side. Rev. F.C. Barnes didn't just sing it — he preached my reality.

I crossed bridges over troubled waters more times than I can count. Some of those bridges I built myself out of nothing but faith and scrap wood, some were built for me by the kindness of others, and some were carried under me by the Precious Lord's hand. I know without a doubt I didn't make this climb alone.

And yet, the truth is — the road never got easy. Even in my victories, there were shadows.

The weight of absence in my daughters' lives, the stumbles into addiction, the moments

when my faith in myself wavered. But that same Precious Lord who held me on the bridges held me through the storms.

From Irving Street to the Mill Creek Projects, from Markoe Street to the MLK high rises, from coal furnaces to corporate towers — my journey has been one long walk toward solid ground. And now, when I look back, I see that I've been building more than a life for myself. I've been building a foundation for my family — a place where they can plant their feet and not sink the way I did.

So to my daughters — Ayana, Yasmeen, Amira, and Aisha — and to my grandchildren — I want you to know that every mile of that dusty road, every rock I stumbled over, every mountain I climbed, every bridge I crossed — I did it with you in mind. I wanted to leave you something better than I started with. I wanted you to inherit more than my scars — I wanted you to inherit my strength.

And to anyone still on their road — keep walking. The dust will settle. The climb will level out. The bridges will hold. And the Precious Lord's hand will guide you, even when you can't see the other side.

I started in quicksand.

I walked the long dusty road.

I climbed the rough side of the mountain.

I crossed bridges over troubled waters.

And I made it

— Mike

From Me to You

If you are reading this now, it means my journey has come full circle. But don't gather just to mourn my passing. Gather to honor the road I walked—not a polished path, but the whole truth: the rough side, the jagged climbs, the falls, and the rises.

I came into this world with nothing promised—no guarantees, no privilege, no parachute. I was born on December 8, 1957, in West Philadelphia, at the University of Pennsylvania Hospital. My early years on Irving Street were wrapped in warmth, structure, and the kind of love that lets a boy dream. But that light dimmed when my father walked out of my life that day on Reno Street. That moment changed everything.

From there, life took me to the Mill Creek Projects. Poverty, pressure, and pain became my constant companions—but so did my will. At eight years old, while other kids were chasing marbles or comic books, I was pushing brooms and stocking shelves at Leon's Market. I didn't just grow up early—I stepped up early. I carried burdens too heavy for a boy my age, but my will? Always heavier.

I worked at Philadelphia General Hospital, then spent 33 years at Deloitte. No college degree, no inheritance, no cheat codes—just grit, Allah, and grind.

I didn't rise for praise; I rose because someone had to break the cycle.

My proudest titles weren't "manager" or "employee." They were Husband, Father, Pops, Pop-Pop, Daddy, Brother, Friend, Survivor, Builder, and Believer.

My first great love was Lynnette, the mother of my first two daughters, Ayana and Yasmeen. Our marriage wasn't perfect, but it was real. And though our marriage ended, my heart never walked away. I walked toward healing, toward building firmer ground for my girls so they wouldn't sink in the same quicksand I had.

Then came Deb, my forever love, and our daughters Amira and Aisha—my second chance. By then, I was a different man: more stable, more healed. But the mission was the same—to be what I never had.

I didn't leave behind generational wealth—not because I didn't want to, but because there was none given to me. I left behind something stronger: a generational foundation.

Faith, discipline, perseverance, and the courage to keep climbing. I fought the demons I inherited—poverty, addiction, racism, abandonment—not just for me, but for the next generation. To say: this ends with me. Something better begins with you.

FROM QUICKSAND TO KING

The climb was never graceful. I started in quicksand, born into a world where every step threatened to pull me under. Generations before me had struggled, and poverty wrapped itself tightly around my family like an unbroken chain. I was a pawn—small,

overlooked, underestimated—but every hardship, every setback, every lonely step forward was a lesson, a move in a game I did not yet fully understand.

While many around me played checkers, chasing quick wins and fleeting pleasures, I was learning chess. Chess is the long game. It is patience. It is strategy. It is sacrifice. It is seeing beyond the moment and moving with courage, even when the path is unseen. Every step forward was deliberate, every move calculated, every sacrifice was for something greater than survival.

From Irving Street to the Mill Creek Projects, from Markoe Street to the MLK high rises, from coal furnaces to corporate towers, my journey has been one long walk toward solid ground. Brick by brick, truth by truth, mistake by mistake—I laid a foundation beneath my feet, strong enough for generations to come.

Through it all, I crossed bridges over troubled waters—some I built myself with faith and scrap wood, some carried by the kindness of others, and some held up by the Precious Lord's hand.

FROM QUICKSAND TO KING

Even in my victories, shadows lingered: absence in my daughters' lives, stumbles into addiction, moments when faith in myself wavered. But that same Allah who held me on the bridges held me through the storms.

FROM QUICKSAND TO KING

I retired from Deloitte in 2009—not out of failure, but with dignity. And in that quiet space, I began to write. I told the truth—the whole truth—not for sympathy, but for freedom.

My truth became my memoir: From Quicksand to King - Mike Davis – The Man, The Myth, The Truth. It wasn't written for applause. It was written as a blueprint, as confession, as celebration, and as legacy.

I wrote for anyone who ever asked themselves: “Is it too late to become who I was meant to be?” — No! It's never too late. Not if you keep walking your Yellow Brick Road.

I was a lion with a tender heart.

A builder with bruised hands.

A leader who led with love.

And now, finally, my work here is done.

I made it out of the hood.

I made it into the boardroom.

I made it into the hearts of my daughters. And now?

I've made it HOME.

So don't just remember me—reflect on the journey. Don't just cry—carry the lessons. Don't just mourn—multiply the mission.

FROM QUICKSAND TO KING

To my daughters, Ayana, Yasmeen, Amira, and Aisha, and to my grandchildren: every mile of that dusty road, every rock I stumbled over, every mountain I climbed, every bridge I crossed—I did it with you in mind. I wanted to leave you something better than I started with. I wanted you to inherit more than scars—I wanted you to inherit strength.

Thank you, I love you.

And I'll be watching from the other side... still cheering you on.

This life wasn't easy. But it was mine.

And I gave it all I had.

From Quicksand to King

I began in quicksand, born into a world where every step threatened to pull me under. Generations before me had struggled, and poverty wrapped itself tightly around my family like an unbroken chain. I was a pawn—small, overlooked, underestimated—but every hardship, every setback, every lonely step forward was a lesson, a move in a game I did not yet fully understand.

While many around me played checkers, chasing quick wins and fleeting pleasures, I was learning chess. Chess is the long game. It is patience. It is strategy. It is sacrifice. It is seeing beyond the moment and moving with courage even when the path is unseen. I learned to endure, to trust in Allah's guidance, and to see that my journey was always meant to be greater than survival.

Each step forward was never just for me. Before I could speak of wealth, I had to stop the bleeding of poverty. Before I could build prosperity, I had to break the chains running through my family's bloodline.

Stone by stone, I laid a foundation beneath my feet—not castles in the air, but solid ground strong enough for generations to come. I built for my children, their children, and every soul who would one day stand where I once struggled.

FROM QUICKSAND TO KING

Through faith, discipline, and unwavering resolve, I moved across the board of life. I became my own king—not because it was given, but because I chose to master the game, to count on no one but myself, and to rise above the quicksand. From pawn to king, from struggle to strategy, from survival to legacy, I transformed my life into a foundation others could stand upon.

This is my truth. This is my testimony. I leave a path for those who follow so that they, too, can rise higher, walk further, and dream bigger than I ever dreamed. My life was never just about survival—it was about building something enduring, something unshakable, something that will outlast me. And for this journey, this long game, this gift, I am forever grateful to Allah.

This life wasn't easy. But it was mine. And I gave it all I had.

I was the Man. I was a Myth. And now— I am the Truth.

From Irving Street to the Mill Creek Projects, from Markoe Street to the MLK high rises, from coal furnaces to corporate towers — my journey has been one long walk toward solid ground. And now, when I look back, I see that I've been building more than a life for myself. I've been building a foundation for my family — a place where they can plant their feet and not sink the way I did.

FROM QUICKSAND TO KING

*So to my daughters — Ayana, Yasmeen, Amira, and Aisha —
and to my grandchildren — I want you to know that every
mile of that dusty road, every rock I stumbled over, every
mountain I climbed, every bridge I crossed — I did it with
you in mind. I wanted to leave you something better than I
started with. I wanted you to inherit more than my scars — I
wanted you to inherit my strength.*

*And to anyone still on their road — keep walking. The dust
will settle. The climb will level out. The bridges will hold. And
the Precious Lord's hand will guide you, even when you can't
see the other side.*

I started in quicksand.

I walked the long dusty road.

I climbed the rough side of the mountain.

I crossed bridges over troubled waters.

And I made it.

Mike

Personal Eulogy

Ladies and gentlemen, family and friends —

You are gathered here today to honor the life of a man who was never supposed to make it... but I did.

I was a man who turned quicksand into concrete, who built a future where there was none, who lived not to be remembered for perfection—but for perseverance.

I, Michael Blaine Davis was born on December 8, 1957, in West Philadelphia. I entered this world not with wealth, but with will. Raised first in the warmth of Irving Street—a neighborhood wrapped in family, faith, and structure—I saw that light dim when my father walked away. From that moment on, life wasn't just lived—it was survived.

The poverty began in the Mill Creek Projects. The system didn't just fail me—it tried to erase me. But I refused to be invisible. I became “man of the house” before I was even a man. I was a big brother, a protector, a survivor. I walked streets where predators wore sneakers and survival was the only currency—but I never let those streets define me. I saw the chaos. I felt the hunger. And still—I dreamed.

That dream carried him through every move: from Irving Street to Reno Street, from the Mill Creek Projects to Markoe Street, from the MLK Projects to

Spruce Street, and finally from Pickering Avenue to Oak Lane Road. Through every home, every chapter, I carried with me the same vow: “I will be better than the pain that tried to break me.”

I kept that vow. Not perfectly, but persistently.

I rose from the coffee shops at Philadelphia General Hospital to corporate America to a respected leadership role at Deloitte—without a college degree, without connections, without a roadmap. Just grit, faith and vision. I walked barefoot on glass and still managed to leave behind footprints worth following.

I gave my life to love—fiercely, even when it hurt. I loved as a husband, first to Lynnette, then to my life partner and healing grace, Deb. I was a father to four extraordinary daughters — Ayana, Yasmeen, Amira, and Aisha — and six beautiful grandchildren Nevaeh, Ethan, Xavier, Riley, AJ and Dream.

To some, I was “Dad” or “Pops” and yet to others I was Pop-Pop. But to all, I was a foundation. Even when absent, my love was loud. Even when distant, my hope for them never faded.

I carried the pain of separation in my chest every day. I never stopped reaching, even when time and circumstances made it hard. I understood that fatherhood was not about being flawless—it was about always trying, always loving, and never walking away.

I gave my daughters not riches—but truth. Not luxury—but legacy. They were my reason to rise, my reason to heal, my reason to believe that a better tomorrow was possible—because I had lived the worst of my past.

I retired in 2023, not out of defeat but with dignity. I had climbed far enough to finally rest—and to reflect, And reflect, I did. In the later years of my life, I became not just a man who endured, but a man who understood. I gave my truth in the form of a memoir, Mike Davis – The Man, The Myth, The Truth—a blueprint for those who feel lost, voiceless, or unseen.

I write about addiction, about redemption, about generational pain and generational purpose, about the spiritual soundtracks that saved me —“A Long Dusty Road,” “Precious Lord Take My Hand,” “Rough Side of the Mountain,” and “A Change Is Gonna Come.” I wove my life into melody, into memory, into meaning.

I was a vagabond with no roots—but I became a builder who gave others ground to stand on. I didn’t come from wealth—but I passed down a wealth of wisdom. I didn’t always fit in—but I always stood out.

I was a son, a brother, a husband, a father, a grandfather, a friend, a leader, a warrior in loafers and a dreamer with calloused hands. I walked through fire barefoot and still carried others to safety.

And now—my work is done.

FROM QUICKSAND TO KING

I leave behind more than memories—I leave behind a foundation. Not built from brick and mortar, but from faith and forgiveness, grit and grace.

If you knew me, you knew I was a man who was strong in my conviction, who wept from his spirit, and spoke from my soul. You knew someone who may not have always said the perfect thing, but stood on his beliefs, and always tried to be the right man. Someone who failed—yes—but who never quit.

*So today, don't mourn a man who's gone—
celebrate a man who made it.*

I made it out of the hood.

*I walked my own path down the “Yellow Brick Road”
straight from the projects to the boardrooms of corporate
America.*

*And now, after a lifetime of heartaches and climbs, stumbles
and victories—after pulling myself from the quicksand of
struggle and learning to stand on solid ground—I've finally
made it home.*

Rest well, Mike.

You were the man.

You became the myth.

And now...You are the truth.

- Mike

A Closing Poem – My Road, My Climb, My Bridge

*I was born by the river,
in a little tent... of hope and struggle.
And just like that river,
I've been running ever since —
through storms that tried to pull me under,
through nights that tested my thunder.*

*It's been a long time coming,
but I've always known —
that a change was gonna come.*

*I was born in quicksand,
my feet sinking before I could stand.
The ground was never steady,
so I learned to be ready —
to hold His hand, and take my stand,
and let Him shape my life with His own hands.*

*My road was long and dusty,
the air was cold, the cupboards crusty.
No map, no guide, no helping hand,
I only had the whisper of Allah telling me to — Stand.*

*I climbed the rough side of the mountain,
where tears ran deeper than any fountain.
My knees bruised, my hands were torn,
Still climbing from the day I was born.*

*Every stumble was a seed that helped grow me,
Every sunrise a reason that pulled me through, free.*

*I crossed bridges over troubled streams —
Some were built from faith yet others from dreams,
While others laid down by loving hands,
and still others appeared when the Lord made plans.*

*Like my ancestors, I turned pain into power,
They wrung strength from the storm, and found
joy in the darkest hour.*

*They turned chains into culture, and scraps into strength,
forged slop into soul food that gave us new length —
To feed both body and spirit until we could stand,
a people who made survival taste like the promised land.*

This is my testimony:

I am more than where I began.

*The climb was well worth it. The bridges stood tall
My life is a testament that survived through it all.*

*For I came into this world with nothing in hand,
but I sleep now anointed, by His will and His plan.*

FROM QUICKSAND TO KING

*I am a son of survival, a man of the mountain,
a keeper of the road.*

*The boy they all said would never be whole— is the man who
finally gave up his ghost, and found his soul.*

And as Langston taught me early on,

I, Too, Sing America —

Pop-Pop's Prayers and Wishes

*For my Daughters: **STRENGTH.***

*For my Grandbabies: **PEACE.***

*For my Wife: **REST.***

*For Myself: **GRACE.***

And for all others -

The courage to keep rising.

Because we come from warriors,

and we move with purpose.

A Prayer for My Bloodline

ALLAH, Creator of heaven and earth,

I come before You not as a perfect man, but as one who has walked through fire without burning, and waded through floods without drowning. I carried burdens too heavy for a child's shoulders, yet You gave me the strength to stand.

I thank You for protecting me when the world tried to break me, for raising me when poverty tried to bury me, and for sustaining me when sorrow tried to silence me.

I now lift this prayer beyond myself—to my children, my grandchildren, and every seed of my bloodline yet unborn. Let my struggle be the last they must inherit. Let my wounds be the last they must endure. Let the quicksand I was born into be hardened by my labor, so that they may walk on solid ground.

I did not lay a perfect path, but I did lay a path where there once was none. I pray that those who come after me will make that road smoother, straighter, and stronger. For I know their path will not be mine, but their own. If they make it better than they found it, our bloodline will rise into the light of Your promise.

Teach them what life has taught me: that a large circle often indicates a lack of authenticity, while a small one can be a space where truth, loyalty, and love truly thrive. Teach them that some people enter their lives for a reason, others for a season, and some only pass through—but all come by Your divine design.

Let them know that wealth without wisdom is a fortune set to die, but wisdom without wealth can still raise a nation. So grant them both. Give them not just the gold of this world, but the knowledge of themselves. Not just houses to dwell in, but hearts they can be proud of. Not just riches to spend, but roots that cannot be uprooted.

I declare it: let me be the last in this line to taste the bitterness of chains, the last to carry the curse of poverty, the last to bear the weight of silence. Let those who follow me walk taller, rise higher, and shine brighter. Not because the world gave them anything, but because You, ALLAH, gave them everything.

This is my prayer, my covenant, and my testimony. When my name is spoken, let it be remembered not for perfection, but for perseverance. Not for ease, but for endurance. Not for riches, but for the foundation I laid with blood, sweat, sorrow, and faith.

Ameen.

In Closing

Ya Allah, I thank You for guiding me through every storm and every test. Please forgive my shortcomings and cover my children, grandchildren, and all future generations with mercy, guidance, and light. Grant them wisdom greater than mine, faith stronger than mine, and opportunities wider than mine. May they walk not in fear but in faith, always remembering that it is You who moves the pieces of their lives.

Ameen

Final Benediction & To My Friends

To my family, friends, and all whose paths have crossed mine — thank you. Whether you were there for a short season or a lifetime, you have been part of my story, part of my climb, and part of the bridges I've crossed. Some of you lifted me when I was down. Some of you challenged me when I needed it. Some of you simply walked beside me — and for that, I am grateful.

To my friends, you are more than people I know — you are living proof that relationships built on trust, honesty, and shared struggle can stand the test of time. We've laughed together, cried together, and in some cases, carried each other through storms. You've been part of my healing and part of my joy.

To my family, you are my legacy. Every choice I made, every risk I took, every mile of that long dusty road — I traveled it with you in mind. My hope is that you stand taller because I laid a foundation beneath your feet. My prayer is that you never forget where we came from, but also never stop reaching for where we can go.

And to everyone reading this — whether we've met in person or not — my blessing to you is simple: keep walking. Keep climbing. Keep crossing the bridges before you, no matter how shaky they may seem. Hold tight to your faith, guard your integrity, and lead with compassion.

FROM QUICKSAND TO KING

May Almighty Allah guide your steps, steady your hands, and give you peace in the storms. May your road, however long and dusty, lead you to solid ground. And when you arrive, may you find the strength to reach back and help the next soul on their way.

Go forward with courage. Go forward with love. And never stop singing your song.

Author's Note

When I was a boy in elementary school, I learned two things that never left me: the Black National Anthem ***Lift Every Voice and Sing*** and Langston Hughes' poem ***I, Too***. I didn't just memorize them—I absorbed them. They were my first lessons in Black identity, the beginning of understanding what it meant to claim a place in a country that didn't always set a table for me.

For more than 60 years, I've carried that truth with me—through streets that tested me, jobs that shaped me, and choices that nearly broke me. Like my ancestors, I often had to set my own table because none was waiting for me. I learned to live that poem: to keep standing, keep working, and keep adding my verse to the American story.

Decades later, another song found me: Bob Marley's ***Redemption Song***. By the time I first heard it, I was no longer that boy searching for identity. I was a man who had endured the climb, crossed bridges, and built a foundation from nothing. That song gave language to my journey. It became my anthem of completion, the soundtrack of survival turned into triumph.

FROM QUICKSAND TO KING

These three works came to me exactly when I needed them—two at the beginning of my journey, one at its peak. Together, they framed my life. Langston’s words taught me that I, too, sing America—that I belong in its story. The Black National Anthem taught me to lift my voice in pride, to walk with my head high like the king I am. And Marley’s ***Redemption Song*** reminded me that freedom, dignity, and peace of mind are worth every climb.

So now, when I close my eyes and lay down for the last time – this is my story, that I can say with truth:

I learned to sing America’s song
And in the end, I found my own.

PEACE
