

Myrtle Faye Rumph
with Naomi Bradley

*catch
the Vision!*

The Story
of the
Al Wooten Jr.
Heritage Center

AL Wooten Jr. Heritage Center



Program
from
8:30 AM
to 5:00 PM
6-7203

Homework Assistance
Tutorial Assistance
Computer Classes
Recreation-field Trip
Catch The Vision

AL WOOTEN JR. HERITAGE CENTER

Catch the Vision!

**The Story of the Al Wooten Jr.
Heritage Center**

**Myrtle Faye Rumph
with Naomi Bradley**

VANTAGE PRESS

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FIRST EDITION

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Acknowledgments

I wish to thank my two families—my blood relatives and my center relations. Both have given me unconditional love and support each day. I am blessed to have so many beautiful people in my life. The Al Wooten Jr. Heritage Center is a success story because of the generous people who have opened their hearts to catching the vision. I owe an enormous amount of debt to each and every one of you for your love and understanding and for your work. God bless you all.—Faye

To my mother, Mary, and to my sons, Timothy and Matthew, who have been my best encouragers and supporters. I bless God for your presence in my life.—Naomi

Together, we thank our Lord Jesus Christ for his influence every step of the way.

The Vision

"My vision is so big it's scary. I see my son's name all over this city, on buildings, vans, buses and so on. When I heard he had been killed in a drive-by shooting by a black man, I wondered what kind of world are we living in when your life can be taken away from you by a stranger. That means someone doesn't care about the quality of life.

"I felt like going downtown and standing on top of city hall and telling my black brothers and sisters, 'It's time to stop the killing,' because the pain I feel I don't want anyone else to feel this way. With that one bullet, someone took away my reason to live. I would tell them to please stop the killing, the pain is forever.

If anyone could catch the vision of my pain and turn it into something positive for our community, we would be able to save the next generation of kids. We as leaders must change our community's focus by offering our kids education, jobs, love, understanding and compassion. I see my son in the eyes of every child I meet."

Myrtle Faye Rumph – April 1993

Al Wooten Jr. Heritage Center – Vision Statement

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Chapter 1. Feeling My Pain

One by one, children trickled into our youth center. As usual, the first to arrive came straight from school just to hang out or get help with their homework before our classes started.

While waiting for our three volunteer tutors to arrive, I usually kept the kids busy with board games and television, and chips, cookies and soda from Park's Market down the street.

It was April 29, 1992. My eldest son would have been 39 that day had it not been for his murder three years before. The Al Wooten Jr. Heritage Center was his legacy, my attempt to keep my son's name alive and help prevent some other mother from feeling my pain.

But the money to keep things going was hard to come by. I was growing tired of scraping up the finances month after month, tired of trying to convince people to help support our cause, tired of the disappointments caused by over 50 funders turning down our proposal.

What was starting to bother me most, more than our gospel concert fundraisers with about a dozen people in the audience and less than \$100 in the till, was sitting alone with a couple of kids and a handful of brochures in front of Von's supermarket selling cans of chocolate caramel candies to pay the rent.

It didn't help sitting at that little card table with frizzy hair and yesteryear's clothing. I hadn't gone to the beauty shop or bought any new outfits but once or twice in the three years since I opened the center.

That was a sharp turn from the days when I got my hair relaxed straight and dyed sparkling sherry every six weeks. I wore tailored suits and hats on Sundays at the holiness church I attended faithfully for over two decades. And I drove nothing but Cadillacs. My husband Harris and I bought a shiny new one every two or three years.

Compared to my youthful days sharecropping and living with my parents and eight brothers and sisters in a five-room house in Chisholm, Tex., I had become pretty well off, despite the fact that I, like most people I know, was just payments away from losing possessions like my car and my house.

Before Dinnie's death my life centered around my church, my family and the businesses I owned with my husband, Harris Rumph. We always had some type of enterprise going, from a lawn service to a coin-operated laundry and a 28-unit apartment complex.

When the center opened, Harris and I owned H&M Moving and Storage, a growing company with five employees, a diesel truck and 30-foot moving van.

Ours was a comfortable, middle-class existence with our new Caddy in our clean garage next to our pastel yellow single-family residence, complete with dishwasher, family room, lemon tree and laundry hook-ups.

Trim lawns, lush bushes and bright flowers lined the Inglewood street where we lived. Quiet evenings watering our thick green grass led to friendly conversations with neighbors we knew well through our block club.

Our two-bedroom house was in the part of suburban Inglewood that black folk often aspired to when looking to leave the ghettos of neighboring Los Angeles. It was the kind of place I longed for in the 1960s as a fresh-from-the-South single parent living in a Los Angeles housing project.

My life before the youth center did include some community service. At church, I helped distribute clothes to needy families. I also gave donations to missionary causes and an occasional charity every now and then.

I gave, but only so much.

I could never have imagined one day spending my entire savings and selling my cherished Inglewood home to hold onto a place for children other than my own.

Not to mention allowing H&M to slowly falter because I spent everything I could on the youth center.

That little three-room storefront on Western Avenue and the kids who came through its doors became my main interest. I didn't care what anyone thought about my new priorities, including Harris.

We had our rifts over dwindling finances and had some nights when silence haunted our house. I felt I had supported his dreams throughout our 30-year marriage; answering phones, filing invoices, typing letters while he directed our course. Now I had something I wanted to do. I was still as shy and soft-spoken as ever, but Harris had never

seen me so stubborn. He knew I didn't mind if he walked away. I just didn't care anymore.

For the most part, Harris was supportive of my ambitions and was there for me to cry on his shoulders. He wanted me to be happy and actually admired how I chose to respond to Dinnie's death. He saw the change in me before most people did and early on accepted that things would be different.

With Dinnie's murder came the realization that my own worldly desires paled in comparison to other needs. After Dinnie was killed, all of that stuff – my clothes, my car, my house, my business, my savings, my planned retirement – became secondary.

I was willing to sacrifice my own concerns for our youth center, but I didn't know if I had the strength to go another month begging for dollars in front of the local supermarket.

And now, for the fourth year in a row, my son's day of birth brought the most aching realization that he was really gone. No amount of wishing, or praying, or pleading, or searching could make him materialize in front of me.

That April 29th morning, I sat thinking and praying at the chipped wooden desk in my partitioned office, thinking and wiping tears so my eyes would not be red when the kids got out of school.

When the first string of children, about eight of them, arrived that afternoon, I barely managed to pull away from my office and wipe the tears from my face and desk.

Usually, no matter how I felt from day to day, the kids could cheer me up. Their hugs and kisses, crayon drawings of flowers and houses just for me and boastings about their improving grades helped keep me going. But it was hard to erase my feelings this time.

Just moments before, sitting alone in my makeshift office, I had seriously considered closing the center. But where would the kids go if I actually did shut things down? What would they do?

Several of our teen-age boys used to hang out on street corners after school. They were the tagging crew that painted much of the graffiti in the alley behind our building, nice, but mischievous boys with a lot of pent up energy.

To some, they were "wannabes" destined for serious trouble. To me, they could go either way with the right influence and opportunity. I had to stay, even if it was just for them.

Give me strength, oh Lord, my heart uttered that April 29th. Your word says, "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning."

Little did I know, joy would come in droves as a result of an event about to occur that afternoon. But first, more weeping.

At 3:30 p.m. April 29, 1992, on my son's 39th birthday, a jury in Simi Valley acquitted four white Los Angeles police officers of beating a black man, Rodney King.

I was angry, Lamar Porter was furious.

"I'm going to jail tonight!" the 14-year-old shouted.

Kids as young as nine years old camped in front of the television watching the burning aftermath of the verdicts, some of them feeling their first pangs of racial hatred.

What should I say? What should I do?

Gathered in our lone classroom, sitting in gray chairs borrowed from Love, Peace and Happiness Church, facing a green chalkboard donated by Marcus Garvey Schools, we talked about the verdicts. I asked the kids how they were feeling.

"It's not fair."

"They beat Rodney King for nothing."

"Those cops should go to jail."

"They let them go because they're white."

The owner of a telephone service center next to our building interrupted our impromptu session. Mr. Gorham said people were rioting about a mile away on Florence and Normandie avenues.

We flipped the television on (I had turned it off to help calm the atmosphere for our discussion) and saw the pictures of young men attacking white motorists at Florence and Normandie.

That's when tempers really flared in our place. Lamar, Jason Wilbourne, Edward Nelson and Brett Williams jumped up from their chairs and headed for the door.

They were going to Florence and Normandie, the teen-agers shouted, and nothing could stop them. The four boys stormed out our front door and headed North on Western

from our 91st Street address. I managed to get the five younger children in my car and drove them around the corner to their homes.

On the way, I tried to convince Lamar, Jason, Edward and Brett to go home. But they were too bent on revenge, too fixed in their sudden belief that attacking white people was the right response. I watched them go, the four boys with their light complexions.

They wouldn't listen to me. This was quite different from the times these same young men sat in my office seeking my advice. They even brought me their photo albums filled with pictures of the squiggly lettering they spray-painted on garage doors along an alley behind our building.

We had special times together on Fridays at a bowling alley down the street. I would pack as many kids as I could, usually about six, into my beige Cadillac Seville for the short neighborhood field trip.

In the search for more things to keep our kids busy, I brought my sewing machine to the center and started a sewing class. I figured only girls would come, but the boys did too. They made sleeveless t-shirts and would dart through the center smiling and flexing their muscles, usually with a basketball cradled in their bare arms.

Those fun times together, and the kids knowing why I started the center, created a special bond between us. I could talk to them about their grades or about tagging and they would listen because they knew I cared.

In trying to do something positive, they started a club they called Young Black Ballers, or YBB. A "baller," they explained to me, is somebody who plays basketball. It could also be somebody who "has a grip of money," they explained.

The boys said the group started as a thing between friends, fellow basketball players, but evolved into a tagging crew when some of the boys started putting the group's initials up on walls. They eventually got into a fight for wall space with another crew who would cross out YBB tags, and vice versa.

I had never dealt with anything like that. Growing up in the 60s when graffiti was practically unheard of in Los Angeles, my three teen-agers gave me little trouble. They didn't even stay out too late for parties. In Dinnie's case, he played hooky from Gardena High School a couple of times, but that stopped when he got tired of me grounding him and taking the keys to the car he had bought for himself with his part-time job earnings.

Words like "gang" and "tagging" were foreign to me. I probably said "gang member" maybe 10 times in my life before Dinnie's murder.

I didn't see YBB coming. I didn't see any of the signs, like YBB scribbled on the covers of notebooks and on discarded paper around the youth center.

I was surprised that our teachings about heritage and unity somehow got warped into something that possibly led to some of our kids getting shot at and a woman getting shot in the head.

Lamar, Shannon and Latoya were standing outside the apartment Lamar's grandmother owned and his mother managed. It was about 8 p.m. on Friday night. Bullets rang out from a passing car. Our kids hit the ground.

One of the bullets hit a woman in the head. We know that she survived, but never found out who she was, or if she had anything to do with the shooting. Talk around the center was that the shooting had something to do with some of our boys crossing tags.

We found out about YBB about a week before the shooting when my seven-year-old nephew, Matthew, scribbled the letters on the door panel inside his great-grandmother's car.

Matthew's mother, Naomi, was the center's executive director.

"What is that?" she shrieked, after seeing the pointed letters etched in ink on the car's white vinyl upholstery. "Where did you learn that?"

Matthew said boys at the center taught him, but he didn't know what it meant. He said he just liked writing the pointed letters.

We asked our boys about it. That's when they explained how YBB had somehow turned out taggers. They promised to disband the group, but the promise came too late to stop the shooting.

All the kids were talking about the incident the next Monday at the center. Naomi called all of the kids there that afternoon, about 20 of them, into our single classroom. She shut the door and stood in front of the children scrambling to sit down in chairs and on tables.

"Did you forget why the center is here?" she cried, tears welling up in her eyes. "Are we here for nothing? Do you know what it would do to Faye and your mothers if

you ended up with a bullet in you? Do you realize your little sisters and brothers could have been killed? And for what?"

"We're sorry."

Naomi worked full-time as a newspaper reporter and had written several stories on the gang truce sweeping Los Angeles that year. She got one of the gang members to come to the center.

Tony Bogard, who had started a non-profit organization called Hands Across Watts to further the truce, sat coolly at the front of our classroom and pulled up a leg of his creased blue jeans. A big chunk of his calf was missing. The new skin was thick and black like an old burn wound. He had gunshots from an AK-47 in several other places on his body, he explained.

He had survived; they had survived, Tony said. Next time, they might not be so lucky. About a year after Tony visited our center, a young man shot him in a dispute in the Imperial Gardens Housing Projects. Tony died on a hospital table, just like Dinnie.

Our young men broke up YBB and joined other center volunteers in painting over the defaced houses and fences. They also spoke in our classes discouraging the younger ones from following their old ways.

Now, for the first time in the three years I had known Lamar, Jason, Edward and Brett, they refused to listen to me. They were too caught up in anger like a lot of people that April 29th.

About 15 minutes after dropping off the younger kids, when I got to the small two-bedroom Hawthorne apartment me and Harris moved into after selling our home, I called Threetha Boyd, Lamar's mother, and asked if her only son had returned home.

He had. So had Edward, Jason and Brett, who all lived on Lamar's street. The boys never made it to Florence and Normandie. After walking and talking awhile, they decided to go home after figuring their mothers would be upset if they didn't come home that evening.

When news footage on television showed looting and fires and high-flying embers around Los Angeles, I felt the whole city was going to burn up, including Western Avenue. I wondered if my thoughts of closing our youth center had already been decided. Was the Al Wooten Jr. Heritage Center gone? Would I open another one?

I was so confused that night. And I had reached my end. I believed God led us to build a place to help parents steer their children in the right direction, a place to give kids constructive alternatives to adverse behavior. (That's how our first proposal stated our goal).

I had grown so attached to Carmelita and Donna and James and Susie and Shannon and Devlan and Theodore, Lamont and Kristin, and all the other dozen or so kids who came running from around the block at the behest of their friends to happily complete our first membership forms.

I also believed it was my destiny to be there for those children, God's purpose for my life. Something good was to come out of my son's violent death. Many more lives would be saved.

The term "safe haven" came to mind one day as a new term for our proposals when Devlan ran into our youth center, huffing, puffing, and holding his chest.

"What's wrong?" I asked, my heart thumping.

"They're after me," said Devlan, at the time a chubby-cheeked, happy 13-year-old who liked to sweep the sidewalk in front of the center.

"Who?"

"Those gang members. They slowed down and looked at me all hard. They asked what set I was from. I ran and they started chasing me in their car. I thought I was gonna get shot."

I took Devlan home later that night. The three gang members in the long black Cadillac never came back, but the incident hung like a deathly threat for all of us for many months.

Even if I kept one child from suffering what my son suffered, from lying helpless on the sidewalk, writhing from a bullet wound to the stomach, it would be worth it to me.

What if we hadn't been there for Devlan? Would he have become another dead body on the ground? Would he have died for looking like someone else, which is what police said Dinnie was possibly killed for.

At once pressured to join a gang, Devlan hung out at the center to avoid confrontations with the boys threatening him. He took our photography class and was so

enthralled with the trade he is now studying video production in college and says he wants to open his own youth center some day.

Kids like Devlan and the progress I saw them making made me hold on when there didn't seem to be a way to stay.

Another motivation was the thought of some mother feeling what I felt after my son's murder. The sleepless nights. The crying spells. Dunny's voice lingering in my head. Thoughts of wanting to take his place.

I was angry at family members and friends who didn't call me. Why didn't they call? I wanted to talk. I needed to talk.

I appreciated help like my niece writing letters to the hospital and police about the fact that it was 20 hours after the shooting and nine hours after Dunny's death before they notified me.

He had identification in his pocket with my address on it. I could have been there before my son died. Maybe I could have done something to keep him alive, encourage him to hang on, get another doctor.

The hospital and police blamed each other.

"That's not our job," they both said. "Besides, he was an adult. We didn't have to notify anybody."

"But Dunny was waiting for me," I thought. "That's why he didn't die right away. He knew I would come. He was waiting for me. He knew I would always be there for him."

"This is not happening," I thought. "This is not happening."

Even now, when I talk about Dunny's murder, I feel like I'm talking about someone else's child.

Despite my emotional turmoil, I didn't open the center to get over my son's death. It may have seemed like I did, but I didn't.

Neighbors, church friends, my pastor, people closest to me who I thought would support and understand my intentions treated me like I was temporarily insane.

"Really?"

"My goodness."

I was surprised and offended that people would treat me like I had gone over the deep end whenever I talked about the things I wanted to do for our neighborhood youth. I wasn't crazy.

I suppose I can't blame them for thinking I had lost it. After all, I was rushed to a hospital emergency room and tranquilized one day when I could not stop crying.

In the first few months after Dunny's death, I did shut up in my house and quit going to church. That wasn't the always friendly, attend-every-church-and-family-function-Faye everybody knew and loved.

Even many of my relatives felt my passion about the center would fizzle out as soon as I got over Dunny's death. They weren't thinking. I would never get over my son's murder, or the nagging thought that people would forever count him among Los Angeles' growing drive-by statistics.

That was one of my most painful thoughts, that the world cared little for my son's murder because he was another black man gunned down on the streets of South-Central Los Angeles.

He was more than that, I thought. I know. I'm his mother.

Dunny didn't make his 40th birthday. I wrestled with that fact while sitting in my office that April 29th morning. I stared blankly into his picture, his last photo, which was taken at my son Arthur's house the Thanksgiving before Dunny died.

In the photo, Dunny is as slim and casual as ever. His black shirt is open at the collar, exposing a gold chain with a Statue of Liberty medallion on it. That was one of the items the Brotman Memorial Hospital staff returned to me after their unsuccessful attempt to keep him alive.

Dunny's dark hair and beard are cut low in the picture. At one time living on the streets and doing drugs, he had started keeping himself up better after he got his own apartment. The edge of his mouth gives off a slight smile. He is staring like he is looking through you.

My son would never reach 40. I could never see him, hear him, or feel him again. All I have are photos and memories and a few trinkets I'll always treasure. Even though I have three children, the loss of one left me wanting to die too.

No more answering the doorbell and stepping aside while Dinnie kissed me on the cheek and walked through the house to the family room where we had so many long talks about politics, his favorite subject.

No more hearing him pronounce his philosophy, "That's life." No more trying to cajole myself with the fact that Dinnie had his troubles, but was alive.

No more birthday parties for my son.

I never imagined that any of my three children would ever die before me. That's not supposed to happen.

Dinnie showed so much promise as a youth and was always so serious and independent. Even when he contracted a sweat gland infection and couldn't work as a painter anymore because of the painful surgery under his arms, even when he started doing drugs and living in homeless shelters, he always insisted on taking care of himself and was always smiling slightly when he showed up at my doorstep out of nowhere. He was ever kind and affectionate to his mother, despite my constant pleading with him to change.

And he did change. A few months before his murder, Dinnie moved into his own apartment, his first since his decline started around the age of 26. He also enrolled in a class to be an unarmed security guard and planned to get a steady job.

He moved into an apartment on West Adams Boulevard using money I gave him and \$500 he and 40 other homeless persons each received from a class action lawsuit filed against the city of Los Angeles.

Dinnie was living at the Justiceville homeless encampment downtown with activist Ted Hayes when police officers raided the area and destroyed personal belongings. Dinnie took it as an opportunity.

An unknown gunman killed my son and his future. I could have sought revenge. A part of me wanted to succumb to that kind of bitterness and hatred, but a larger part of my emotions longed for something different.

Something that made more sense.

Chapter 2. No Matter What

Friday morning, May 1, 1992, the third and last day of the worst civil unrest in the history of Los Angeles.

Things had quieted down, for the most part. National Guardsmen were positioned on sidewalks, in parking lots and in streets blocking entrances to some areas. They were an apparent deterrent, trying to keep looters from snatching up more tennis shoes and arsonists from destroying more whole blocks.

Korean-owned stores got the brunt of the attacks throughout the city, reportedly as retaliation for the murder of 15-year-old Latasha Harlins.

At the Empire Liquor Store, just blocks from our youth center, a Korean merchant, Soon Da Ju, shot the young black girl in the back of the head after the two got into a brief scuffle over a bottle of orange juice the woman said Harlins was trying to steal. Police found the dead girl with \$2 clutched in her hands.

The murder occurred three days after March 3, 1991, when LAPD officers beat Rodney King as he kneeled on the ground and covered his head. Both incidents were videotaped and broadcast around the world.

Friday morning, driving along Western on my way to the youth center, I saw that the local swap meet had burned to the ground. The corner shopping center, also wiped out. The stationery store where we bought our supplies...gone. Bank of America, the home office for the center's checking account, a smoldering wasteland.

Threetha Boyd told me by phone the day before that our center was still standing. Had anything happened to it overnight? Burning embers go wherever the wind takes them.

Although entire street corners were eliminated along Western Avenue, the block where our youth center stood was intact. The barber shop, holiness church, nail salon, Park's Market, are all still there.

But why was park's still standing when so many other Korean-owned enterprises throughout the city were and remain gone?

The place was looted, completely stripped of meat and fruit, toilet paper and aluminum foil, potato chips and candy, cigarettes and liquor.

Broken glass covered the parking lot. I could not buy any chips, cookies and soda for the kids from our neighborhood market on this day.

I found out that afternoon that three black merchants on the street – a karate instructor and owners of a key shop and car wash supply store – had stopped a group of young men from setting Park's on fire the first night of the unrest.

Since all of the buildings on the street were connected, the three men explained to the angry group, any fire from Park's would probably spread to the other businesses – black-owned businesses. The young men left Park's alone.

I spent much of that Friday morning with the kids and Vivian Handley, Shannon's mother, sweeping the market's lot since Mr. Park obviously had other problems.

The rest of the day we spent walking around looking at the destruction. Our day ended at the center talking about what had happened.

The nearly two dozen kids present said they stayed at home and did not loot. When one of the boys tried to say he also stayed in the house, the other kids laughed, pointed at him and said, "You know you did. Your whole family was out looting."

Whatever the case, my mind was made up. The center was going to stay, no matter what.

Chapter 3. Tired of Talking

Rent day was coming and I didn't have a clue as to where the money was going to come from. I couldn't sell candy at any of the local supermarkets. They were either gutted by fire or layered with shattered glass and trampled boxes. Or, they were still under siege by pockets of looters.

I would be too uncomfortable selling candy in front of stores in white neighborhoods. Tensions were too high and I didn't know how people would treat me and my little African-American youths.

I was tired of calling board members and getting disappointed when they couldn't help or didn't show. Nobody wanted to sit with me in front of those supermarkets. Our board members, four out of five of them my relatives, were a big help with most fundraisers. But I was the only adult connected to the center it seemed willing to peddle for money in public.

The board members also agreed to pay dues of \$25 a month until our financial condition improved. Also to raise money, I found a company that supplied all the materials to make and package pizzas for sale. Kids and parents who joined us in making a mess out of tomato sauce and cheese helped make those frequent fundraisers successful and fun.

Meanwhile, we kept sending proposals to dozens of foundations and corporations. But despite our apparent fortitude, only one funder approved our request those first three years of operation.

The Liberty Hill Foundation gave us \$5,000 seed grant, doled out in two equal payments in 1991. Liberty Hill was the first funder to "Catch the Vision," as our literature encouraged people to do. They eventually added several smaller grants totaling about \$3,000 after their initial award ran out.

The grants were exciting for me because it meant somebody believed in what we were doing. With all the refusals and doubts we encountered, finally somebody was patting our shoulders. And it felt good.

I was also thrilled because I had actually written the proposal that won the Liberty Hill grant. I attended the agency's workshop to learn how to apply for their monies. I wrote something up and, as usual, gave it to Naomi to type and edit.

As usual, she took my words and spruced them up. Whenever she did that, I would say "Hey. Did I write this?" But it would be exactly what I wanted to say. She had a way of writing what I was thinking.

I wanted her to stay on as executive director as soon as we could pay a salary, but she kept saying her position was only "acting." I begged her to stay in the post, and she did, but really didn't want to. She had just got a degree in journalism and was in her first reporting job. That was her career choice, but I didn't want to accept that. Even though I felt she wished I would leave her alone, I didn't because I had come to depend on her listening ear and willingness to work.

Naomi kept saying she just wanted to volunteer and work with the students. She didn't like being boss. She was never comfortable with that responsibility and felt the position should have gone to me or someone who had done the work before. But I didn't feel comfortable either. Neither one of us had that kind of experience.

In my case, I didn't have a high school diploma. After opening the center, I enrolled in an adult school and took a correspondence course to learn more about basic subjects like grammar and math. I couldn't help the children in their schooling if I needed some myself.

With the good grades I got, now I could tell them that they could do well in class even if they had to overcome something as bad as having to drop out of school because their parents couldn't afford to send them across town to a segregated campus. That was my story.

Another benefit of my schooling is the board meetings and networking at community functions are less stressful now that I have more confidence in my abilities.

After taking classes in computers, management, accounting, proposal writing and more – me, at 50 years plus – I feel a lot more comfortable today being president of an organization with an annual budget well over \$200,000.

That figure palls in comparison to million dollar non-profits like the Boy Scouts. But it's a long way from nothing. None of us knew how long it would take to raise the

kind of money needed to run a full-fledged program with staff, equipment, supplies and a building. But, we always believed we could make it with help.

Despite our mood swings over finances, my husband, Harris, was among our most generous early benefactors. The building that ended up serving as our youth center was initially rented by Harris to expand our moving and storage company.

H&M Moving and Storage operated out of a storefront next to a location that had been vacant for months. When Harris paid \$400 to rent the second building at 9115 S. Western Ave., I asked him if I could have it.

I had been meeting with Naomi, her mother Mary, Ted Hayes, my daughter Barbara, my nephews Rick Holland and Charles Ross, and about a half dozen other relatives and friends at my house talking about opening a youth as a positive response to Dinnie's murder. Why not now?

I didn't know how we would pay for the place at \$400 a month, plus utility bills and program expenses, but I was determined to find a way.

When I got the building, it had been about three months since we had one of the monthly board meetings we had been having in my house. I just stopped calling the meetings. It was a bit much to keep hearing Dinnie's name tossed around. Besides, I felt like people were there because they felt sorry for me. It was a nice thought, but I had my pride too.

Most of all, I felt people were getting tired of just talking.

"Our kids need something else to do."

"Those parents need to spend more time with their children."

"There's no fathers at home."

"Drugs are ruining everything."

"We're killing ourselves."

"Nobody's doing anything."

I felt everybody was relieved when I stopped calling meetings. They didn't seem to protest much. I felt alone again.

When I got the building, I had a little attitude about it because I said to myself, even if they didn't come back, I was going on. I had a goal. But I knew I couldn't do it all myself. I hoped everyone returned.

And they did.

That building resurrected us.

Charged up again, our board members set out to organize the open house we had envisioned. They did more than raise money, which is what most board of directors do. They wrote brochures and press releases and fliers. They painted walls, mopped floors and cleared cobwebs. My sister, Mary, made hors d'oeuvres. My niece, Gloria, led the way as our event coordinator.

With the renting of a building, which came 16 months after Dinnie's murder, family and friends and a report from KFWB radio gathered on a Western Avenue sidewalk on a sunny October day in 1990. With passers-by wondering what we were doing, we sat in white chairs around a wood podium under a small white tent at the open house for the Al Wooten Jr. Heritage Center.

Miss Black Los Angeles was there. A City Council field representative presented a proclamation. Ted Hayes was there with his dreadlocks and fiery message about the phoenix rising from the ashes. Best of all, Jason, Devlan, Lamar and Brett, our first four students, took the mic and told how much they liked the center KFWB reported the good news.

Now, for the next step.

H&M, and the sale of my house, ended up paying the center's bills practically the first year before the Liberty Hill grant. Harris also gave us office desks and tables to set up shop.

The owner of the building had left two long white counters with shelves that ended up storing the Monopoly, Clue and other games my family members donated to the center.

Our teen-age boys painted the counters and a pair of built-in bookcases colors denoting African-American heritage – red, black and green. I told them the center was their place, so they could decorate it any way they wanted.

Among other furnishings at the center was an old color television I brought from home. My cousin, the Rev. Leon Martin, Pastor of Love, Peace and Happiness Church, loaned us about a dozen gray felt chairs. Dr. Anyim Palmer from Marcus Garvey Schools gave us a big green chalkboard. This is all we had when we opened our doors.

Two years later, I was wondering how we were going to keep things going because the money had run out.

Chapter 4. Flowing in Droves

Monday, May 4, 1992.

Sonia Nazario, a Wall Street Journal reporter, called me to talk about Los Angeles' civil unrest. What were people saying? Why did it happen? What were we doing at the center?

I had met Sonia earlier that year through Ted. She was looking for a local resident to quote in a pre-LAPD verdict article. Our interview ended up as a brief snippet of my opinion buried somewhere deep down in her article. I didn't want that to happen again. The center needed some real publicity.

"I'll talk to you again if you promise to give the center more attention," I told her. Sonia said she needed to talk to her editor and would call me back.

"We're going to make you a hero," she told me by phone later that day.

"You can't do that," I said.

"Yes we can."

I spent a lot of hours with Sonia the next two weeks, driving her around our torn neighborhood, taking her to 82nd and Central where I lived at the core of the 1965 Watts Riot. I said I couldn't believe that such an event could happen again because it was so painful and devastating things had to change.

Sonia interviewed children and parents at the youth center, board members and local merchants.

On May 18, 1992, three weeks after the day I reached my end, Sonia's article hit the streets. On Page One.

She told of my son's untimely death and how distraught I was. Still, I was determined, she said, to see something positive come out of Dunny's murder. She explained how Harris and I took money out of our own pockets to pay for the center, eventually closing our moving and storage business and selling our Inglewood home to pay bills that mounted.

She described Lamar's anger at the LAPD verdicts and how he vowed to go to jail. She told Jason's story, how the 12-year-old could hardly read when he first signed

our membership application. After improving in that skill through tutoring at the center, Sonia wrote, Jason found joy snuggling up to me to read books.

I knew the Wall Street Journal was a national publication, but it didn't hit me that our article would go across the country, not until a woman from Tennessee was the first to call me the morning the story came out.

She wanted to send us money. So did more than 100 people who called from across the country that first day. By the end of the week, our checking account had grown from under \$100 to over \$5,000. A few days later, a Beverly Hills woman came to see the center. She had lost her husband. We hugged and cried. She left a \$10,000 check and asked that her name be kept secret.

Another kind lady, Shirley Jaffe, asked if she could have her birthday party at the center. Her party invitation encouraged her friends to bring gifts to us, not her. We ended up with a large screen color television, basketball hoop and many other items. Stu and Shirley Jaffe surprised us with a seven-passenger 1985 Dodge Caravan van with a big red ribbon around it. Thank God. So far we had been packing kids in cars when we couldn't get a school bus from the city for our monthly field trips.

And there's more.

The Today Show on KNBC came out and did a 10-minute piece on the center. The result? More donations from across the country. When the checks stopped flowing in droves from the article and the broadcast, we had received about \$50,000, plus promises for monthly donations, many of which we still receive.

Chapter 5. How Did it All Start?

How did it all start, aside from the moment of my son's death?

How did we go from a group of angry relatives and friends meeting weekly in my family room to the establishment of a youth center housed in three adjacent buildings with about 100 kids enrolled, a dozen volunteers and staff and an annual budget of over \$200,000?

What happened in the six years it took us to get to that place?

Some people call our progress remarkable. I say we are blessed because we are doing God's will.

Faith kept us going.

Do you believe you will succeed? Can you stand through the hard times, whatever your motivation? Are you willing to trust other people's abilities and go out and learn what you need to know? Do you understand that things can only happen one step at a time? That's planning and patience.

Perseverance. Planning. Patience.

Looking back it really can be wrapped up that neatly. But I won't pretend it will be so easy. At least it wasn't for us.

Chapter 6. Naive and Zealous

I get a good laugh sometimes thinking about how naïve and zealous we were. Some things I had almost forgotten, until I started wracking my brain and our old files for this book.

When I say "our," I am referring to the 12 or so relatives and friends who met every Saturday in my family room for about three months after Dinnie's death. The group initially formed around my dining room table the day of Dinnie's funeral.

I wasn't there. After caravanning from the gravesite to my home for dinner, I resorted to the solitude of my bed while people chatted and ate.

Ted Hayes had been calling all week to see how I was doing. I told him I wanted to do something in Dinnie's name. Perhaps a scholarship for a homeless person.

The group at my table had other ideas in mind.

"I want the guy who did this," my nephew, Rick, said.

"We could drive around the neighborhood and help the police find out who shot Dinnie," my brother, Thomas, suggested.

"Why are we having all these shootings?" Naomi asked.

"Faye wants to do something in Dinnie's name," Ted added. "I say we meet here at her house next week and get something going. It's time. Talk is cheap."

With that, a loan collector, painter, journalism student, homeless activist and little shy me, among others, met a week later in my family room. For what, we did not know. We were all just angry and tired.

At the time, Los Angeles was having a rash of gang-related drive-by shootings. We all knew about various incidents because they were happening all around us. But, it seemed the problem didn't receive the attention it needed until an Asian woman became an innocent bystander in Westwood, an affluent Los Angeles area.

The drive-bys had gone beyond South-Central, and that was news. After the Westwood shooting, drive-bys were as popular in the local media as sports.

The Los Angeles Herald Examiner newspaper ran a story on Dinnie's murder. The January 27, 1989 headline read, "He lost battle to escape streets. Ex-Skid Row resident killed in gang drive-by."

Just seeing Dunny's story in the news helped fuel our resolve to try and stop the killings.

But we didn't know what we were doing.

Our first endeavor, one of our most innocent, naïve undertakings, was a symposium we called "Improving Inner City Schools."

Before the youth center, our initial goal was to do just that – improve inner city schools – and we believed with all our might that we could.

In our heated weekly gatherings, schools had become the ultimate culprit for all that ailed black Los Angeles. For some reason, public education had yet to become equitable, we argued. We pay taxes. Our kids should get the same service as kids across town.

Our talks went on and on, back and forth until we hit a consensus: If our neighborhood youths were better educated and could look forward to getting decent jobs, they wouldn't resort to slinging dope and guns.

If. If. If. If they had swimming pools and tennis courts to keep them busy. If they had teachers who cared about them and pushed them to excel. If administrators believed in our children's potential instead of directing them toward slower special education classes. If. If. If.

Without knowing it, we were using a strategic planning tactic where people take a problem and sit around and answer, "What if this, or what if that," until they come up with a solution or solutions that look pretty good.

Our criticisms of schools were bolstered by an excerpt from a Los Angeles county Office of Education newsletter, which we found at the library. The passage from the October 1988 issue of Trends read:

"It is tempting to reason that minority youngsters do poorly in school because of some inherent problem of self or the family. Not only is this mind-set wrong and a myth, it is a 'blame-the-victim' fixation, which solves nothing. The persistent problem of minority preparation and achievement is also a sign that something could be wrong with the school system."

Oh, we were ready now! Something was wrong and they knew it.

We also believed that everybody within the sound of our voices would be so thrilled when they heard that we were out to improve the schools. Oh, Lord! It's about time! Thank you, thank you, Jesus. Thank God for these people!

Surely everybody would be so happy to jump on our bandwagon and help us storm City Hall. Surely they would see that all we needed to do was demand that these ghetto campuses be cleaned up...and we mean right now, OR ELSE!

That was our plan. Storm city Hall. Never mind that none of us had ever even been to a City council meeting, except Ted, in his advocacy for the homeless. Nor had any of us ever been to a school board meeting, which is where we really needed to go.

We knew that we didn't know everything, and that's why we held the symposium and invited speakers like Dr. Anyim Palmer of the academically-acclaimed Marcus Garvey Schools in Los Angeles. Attorney Joseph Duff, who was incoming president of the NAACP Los Angeles chapter at the time, also joined us.

We chose April 29, 1989 as our symposium date. It was to be a symbolic occasion, held on Dinnie's 36th birthday, three months after he died. About 10 people showed up, most of them my relatives.

We felt there should have been a better turn out since the problem was so crucial, and especially since our announcement had made the Los Angeles Sentinel, the area's largest black newspaper.

Three months later, on July 27, 1989, another Sentinel article announced our new plans: field trips for kids.

The Wooten/Brown Foundation, as we were initially called after my son and a nephew who died in a drive-by two years before Dinnie, were taking a group of kids to the Black Family Reunion festival. The Sentinel and McDonald's gave us t-shirts and lunch.

The annual reunion sponsored by the National Council of Negro Women was held in various cities. In Los Angeles, it was at Exposition Park in South-Central. The event proposed to do what had emerged from our heated group meetings as another major concern: a need to encourage African-American achievement by teaching blacks more about their rich heritage.

Our children are especially destitute of pride and self-esteem, we determined in our meetings. We would help instill those traits.

The Sentinel article was printed exactly as we wrote it in our press release, explaining what had happened to our original goal to improve inner city schools.

"Although the foundation has not given up on this task," a passage from the article reads, "members decided to direct the bulk of their attention toward exposing black youths to positive images; a goal more readily attainable than affecting an entire school system."

Reality.

The symposium helped show us how big a task improving inner city schools was. We also saw that people like Anyim Palmer, Joseph Duff and Annie Richardson, a former Los Angeles school board candidate and another speaker at the forum, had been working for years to do what we hoped to do overnight.

Reality.

If we were going to have an impact and not end up spinning our wheels, we were going to have to establish some realistic goals and a realistic plan to attain them.

With that, we set these goals:

Get an office for our records and meetings.

Have monthly field trips to cultural and educational sites.

Get incorporated as a non-profit organization to raise funds.

Get a building for a youth center.

Develop programs.

Hire a staff.

Everything did eventually happen in that order. My garage became our office. Our councilman, Robert Farrell, gave us school buses for our field trips. Legal Aid helped us get incorporated (more on that later).

If I had it to do all over again, I wouldn't change anything because things have worked out so well for us. Even still, textbooks say it would probably have been better if

we had first learned how to run a non-profit organization. Instead, we got our youth center before we knew anything about administering one.

But we had a concept.

In our meetings, Naomi kept harping on "we ought to start a youth center." She talked about it so much, relaying her own experiences as a wayward teen-ager, that my sister Lillie told her at one meeting, "I'll buy you a youth center if you'll just shut up."

Still, Naomi's ravings about a youth center that helped change her life in 1976 was convincing. It seemed like a good idea to me, especially since my own three children had attended a local Teen Post, a government-sponsored youth recreation program that has all but vanished today.

In the 1960s when the program started, Los Angeles county had over 100 Teen Post youth centers. Thirty years later, there are four. We wondered what happened to them. We also noticed that as the number of Teen Posts decreased, gang violence increased.

Couldn't the government see what was happening? Did they care? Perhaps citizens should take things into their own hands.

Perhaps we should start our own youth program and encourage other people to do the same.

Chapter 7. Help from On High

It was our most helpful source, next to God.

The California Attorney General's booklet, "Guide for Charities," defines different types of non-profit organizations and outlines the six steps to become one.

Among other information, the 70-page red handbook explains procedures such as how a board of directors works. It warns of California laws such as those governing fundraising. (Statutes may vary from state to state and should be verified with your own Attorney General).

In the back of the California publication is a Directory of Services. This is where I found the Legal Aid Foundation, which helped incorporate our youth center at a total cost of \$205, about \$800 below what an attorney in a plush office tried to charge us. The \$205 was for filing fees. Legal Aid's service was free.

I can't imagine how things would have turned out if we had not found Legal Aid and our Legal Aid counselor Mary Ochs, who had a passion for our program.

Before finding the agency, we went around the table with a young Century City attorney who, we discovered several months into the game, knew as much about incorporating a non-profit as we did.

Our problem wasn't going to an attorney, it was going to the wrong attorney. Take note: If you prefer using a private lawyer, find one who specializes in incorporating non-profits.

We found Legal Aid after the attorney asked for more money because, he discovered, the filing fee was higher than he originally told us. That's when he admitted he really didn't have the expertise, but was looking things up, just like us. We got our money back.

Talk about disgusted. Now what? What do we do not?

While we were looking for someone else to help us incorporate our program, Naomi took a class at the Center for Non-Profit Management in downtown Los Angeles and came back with the Attorney General's booklet. I read it from cover to cover and ran across the Legal Aid referral.

Finally, we connected with the right people.

About a year after we started working with Mary Ochs in writing and filing our incorporation papers, we received a letter in the mail granting us non-profit status or exemption from taxes and the right to solicit donations.

We were a 501c(3).

Let me take a moment here to explain the difference between a nonprofit organization and a charity.

A nonprofit organization may or may not be a charity. The three most common nonprofits are:

Mutual benefit corporations

Religious corporations

Public benefit corporations

Mutual benefit corporations are usually organized to benefit their members. They include professional associations and homeowners groups. Religious corporations are organized for religious purposes.

The majority of California nonprofits are public benefit corporations, which includes youth centers, hospitals and schools.

A public benefit corporation cannot distribute profits to any person and must be formed for charitable purposes.

Charitable purposes?

According to Guide for Charities, charitable purposes under state law includes, "relief of poverty, advance of education or religion, promotion of health, governmental or municipal purposes, or other purposes which are beneficial to the community."

Relief of poverty. Advance of education. Promotion of health. Our youth center does all of that.

How about your program? What service do you provide? The answer to that should be outlined in your statement of purpose, which is to be included in your Articles of Incorporation, one of six documents needed to become a nonprofit. The papers to be submitted to the Secretary of State and the IRS are outlined in the next chapter.

It's a defining moment to see your dreams take form on paper and to receive the government's stamp of approval.

In incorporating your organization, your dream or vision must be outlined in a statement of purpose. Our original statement, in Section II of our Articles, says:

"The specific purpose of this corporation is to provide recreational activities and programs for the academic and cultural enrichment of disadvantaged youth and adults. Programs shall consist of tutoring of standard educational curricula, sports activities, field trips to cultural and recreational sites and workshops on topics such as effective parenting and self-improvement."

While some organizations deviate from their original statements, we grew into ours and to date do everything listed.

We didn't have all the expertise at first to do the things we planned, but we envisioned what we wanted. And we knew we could do it all – with a little training and a few volunteers.

We were soon disappointed to find that people often will not help you until they see you have something.

We would hold our gospel concert fundraisers and some of our closest friends wouldn't show. We'd organize a parents' meeting to solicit their help and the same two or three would come.

We put announcements in newspapers asking for volunteer tutors and maybe one or two ever responded. (We get more offers of help now since we've gained some recognition and gotten better at presenting our needs.)

I don't want to diminish the help we did receive. Parents like Threetha and Vivian, who did things like bake cakes, scrub toilets and supervise classrooms.

Relatives like my sister Pearlene, who as board secretary, sat at her home computer with an aching back after surgery, typing our meeting minutes. Her son Rick has been with us since the meetings in my family room. He has chaired our board meetings and is famous as the stern voice that has quieted many bus rides on our field trips.

My sister Mary was in a wheelchair after knee surgery. Besides catering functions like our Christmas parties, she used her telephone at home to call the Arsenio Hall Show and other places to schedule field trips. Her daughter Gloria is a whiz at organizing events and coordinated our first community festival. She was also our first recreation leader.

It was hard for my daughter Barbara Clark to sit through our board meetings with all the talk about her brother, but, since our beginning, she has been a faithful treasurer and keeps our bank account straight to the penny.

My youngest child, Arthur Wooten, took a different route after Dinnie's death. As a Christian minister, he took to the streets to steer people away from drugs and gangs and ended up founding a church. He said my perseverance at the youth center inspired him. He and his wife, Jackie, have over 400 members, many of them former drug addicts and gang members.

Elmore Richmond, a retired military man and human relations consultant, has been a center board member since the day we held planning meetings in my family room. We could depend on him to do anything, from moving furniture to keeping board meetings organized and peaceful.

Other volunteers like Frank Elmore and Lawrence Gutierrez have never received a dime, but showed up on time to teach their learning skills and writing classes.

Ted Hayes has always been there for us but had to stay focused on his Justiceville homeless shelter program. Still, he found time to attend our functions and teach a monthly black history class.

These are just a few of the first faithful ones to show the range of services and skills that made our programs possible. And they were all volunteers.

You can do more with a small crew of dedicated people than you can with many who are just there for some kind of compensation.

Wanda Ross was our most faithful volunteer for several years. She lived over 20 miles away in Palmdale, but would come by herself every Monday (a 20-something young lady) to sit with kids like Donna and teach them phonics. She came to the center after reading about us in the Wave Newspaper, a weekly publication in our neighborhood.

Because of Wanda's help, when she was about nine years old Donna went from a D to an A in reading in one semester. Her teacher wanted to know what she was doing.

"I go to the center," Donna told her teacher.

She's about 13 now and still attends the Wooten Center, as the kids call us.

We knew that some folks didn't want to waste time with us since we were obviously amateur. In other words, we hadn't paid our dues, hadn't passed that point where people say you have made it.

Funders are good about waiting for organizations to accomplish this, and for good reason: there are a lot of people requesting money. In deciding who to give thousands or millions of dollars to, funding committees typically consider track records.

There are few hard rules to follow in grant solicitation. The dozens of foundations and corporations who eventually gave us money did so at different stages of our development and for different reasons.

Some were simply touched by our story. Others had goals to fund youth programs in "disadvantaged" areas. Ask any of them how they came to the conclusion that we were a viable program worthy of assistance and you will probably get different responses.

As for other supporters, most neighborhood organizations I've seen only had a few people to set their foundations, in many cases, only one. And they all contend with workers coming and going.

Nevertheless, you can sustain things if you maintain your motivation come what may. Stay focused on your vision. Keep chipping away pieces until you reach to the top. If you have to catch your breath, do it, but start climbing again.

Giving up isn't an option when you understand that to be successful you will experience some hard knocks. Don't be too shocked by it. If you feel like letting go, don't. You might miss your blessing.

It could be time to regroup, to collect your thoughts, to ponder and toss out a few options, to perhaps change a few things. Isn't that how we grow, by making adjustments as we learn?

Look for that helicopter in the sky, that way out.

Develop a plan, start at the beginning and keep going.

Chapter 8. Step By Step

There are six basic steps for incorporation of a public benefit agency, according to the Attorney General's Guide for Charities.

The six steps are as follows:

1. **CHOOSE A CORPORATE NAME:** Call the Secretary of State to make sure your name has not already been taken. After clearing the corporate name, you must send a check to the Secretary of State's office to reserve the name.

2. **FILE ARTICLES OF INCORPORATION:** The Articles of incorporation basically states your corporate name, the type of nonprofit such as public benefit, your purpose and that you are not organized for the private gain of any person. There is a format you need to follow. The form is available from the Secretary of State and must be filed with that office.

3. **FILE YOUR BYLAWS:** Bylaws are the basic rules for operating your corporation and typically include information such as number of board members and procedures for their election and removal. Formats are also available from the Secretary of State, which also receives this paperwork.

4. **FILE APPLICATIONS FOR INCOME TAX EXEMPT STATUS:** Form 1023 must be filed with the IRS to become exempt from federal taxes. This is the filing that will classify you as a 501©(3) organization or legal charity and exempt you from federal tax. Forms are also available from local Franchise Tax Boards for state tax relief.

5. **FILE APPLICATION FOR EMPLOYER IDENTIFICATION:** Federal form SS-4 must be submitted to the IRS to receive your employer identification number. The number is needed for donors to receive tax write-offs. Foundations and other large funders typically ask charities for this number.

6. FILE AN ANNUAL STATEMENT BY DOMESTIC NONPROFIT

CORPORATION: This form will be sent to you by the Secretary of State after they have approved your Articles of Incorporation. This filing designates an agent for service of process, in case someone decides to sue you. You must re-file every year.

That's it. Not too difficult, right? Not difficult at all, especially if you have samples to use in drafting your paperwork. There are also computer programs, online services, attorneys and agencies like the Legal Aid Foundation that will guide you toward completion of your filings.

My sister Pearlene and I found books with examples of Articles and Bylaws at the California Community foundation, a Los Angeles agency that has a library to search for funding, and a charitable arm for awarding grants.

By the time we got to Mary Ochs at Legal Aid, we already had much of our information written. She put the professional touch to it, cleaning up our mistakes.

Samples of our incorporation paperwork are listed in the back of this book. If you like, you can tailor it to fit your own unique program. That's what we did to somebody else's work.

Chapter 9. Stating Our Purpose

Our statement of purpose chiseled forever in our Articles of Incorporation eventually evolved into a mission statement. The latter is typically a single paragraph that summarizes an organization's purpose.

Potential supporters often consider the mission statement in assessing whether or not a program is viable, or workable. It tells whether or not you know what you're doing.

In an organizational development workshop funded by Liberty Hill and directed by Loretta Randle, a United Way consultant, we wrote our mission statement about three years after we opened our center. (Told you we learned after the fact.)

At the private workshop held in our center, representatives from our board of directors, staff, parents, youths and volunteers took an entire afternoon to hash and rehash the following mission statement:

"The Al Wooten Jr. Heritage Center is a neighborhood approach to the revitalization and empowerment of a community in crisis.

The Al Wooten Jr. Heritage Center provides a safe and caring learning environment, whereby the youth of our community can share, grow and develop into productive citizens in our society."

It was harder coming up with our mission statement than our statement of purpose. In developing the former, we had learned all the buzz words like revitalization and empowerment and wanted everything just right.

In your contacts with the worlds of funding and community relations, it's often not enough to have a successful program, you have to act and look like it. In other words, be professional.

Imagine dealing with a man who wants you to support his program. Your first contact with him was a letter he sent you all smudged up and full of errors.

Okay, you still give him a chance. But then you meet him and he isn't prepared. He doesn't have anything written up and has trouble explaining what he wants to do. His

program just doesn't seem to be well thought out. If you have dozens of other people also looking for help, chances are you will find someone who looks like a better risk.

First impressions can become bad impressions. If someone came to our center and saw kids running around out of control, torn books on the floor, dirt smeared on walls, they would probably figure we were incompetent and careless. On the other hand, if they came in and kids were sitting at neat workstations, studying or talking to teachers, their opinion would most likely be different.

Your brochures should be neat. Your proposal should make sense. Your place of business should be clean and organized. Persons answering your phones should be helpful and kind.

If not, don't be surprised if people pass you by. Your program might be great and hopefully people can look past trivial things. But when you're just starting out, chances are most won't. That's why I don't resent the people who snubbed us in the beginning. We were amateurs. They didn't want to waste their time with a group of zealous people mourning the death of a loved one.

Expect criticism. Expect people to do more talking than helping. Expect feelings of loneliness and rejection sometimes. Everybody won't understand you. Everybody can't relate to what motivates you because they aren't looking through your eyes or in your heart. But like Jesus said, "Don't do your alms before men to be seen of them." Just do what you have to do and move on.

It would have been nice if more people had helped just get out of non-profit purgatory, but the amount of help we needed to shine as a viable option required time. I understand that. When people need to work and you can't pay them, you can't expect a whole lot.

* * *

We've all seen organizations come and go. The majority of groups I've seen quit because they ran out of money or never did get any. Other times their programs simply didn't attract the clients and supporters.

In most cases, for one reason or another, the groups failed to make the necessary adjustments.

If you don't have the money, for example, why not? Really ask yourself this question – and be honest. Did you really invest the time needed? You don't have to spend eight hours a day everyday to get things going. One hour a day could be enough to at least get your bylaws and articles together.

Perseverance.

Could you have sacrificed more to get what you want, or did you throw up your hands and say, "I gotta live too!" If you really want this thing, would it be so bad to perhaps live in a smaller accommodations and eat spaghetti and beans for awhile? Add some cornbread and life will be good. Can you take the time to go to the market and cook at home, instead of burn up cash at the take-out counter? Any other adjustments you can make or could have made?

Planning.

You shouldn't have to shut things down or refrain from getting started for lack of something like a brochure or even a building. Do you really need those things to get going? If so, is there some way you could get them? Can you wait until you do and make other preparations in the meantime?

Patience.

If you don't have the money to pay for the classes you feel you need, can you save a few dollars here and there or apply for scholarships and grants? There are agencies and corporations that give "seed," or start-up money, although nowhere near as many as those who prefer groups with track records. In that case, you will probably have to depend more on fundraisers and personal donations to keep you going until the grants come.

The grant the Liberty Hill Foundation gave us was a "seed" grant. They planted the seeds for our growth by paying a United Way consultant to help write our mission statement and direct us in reorganizing our board of directors and staff.

Before then, we had been working mainly by committees comprised of about eight board of directors and five parent advisory board members who did everything from paint walls to teach classes and organize fundraising events.

The United Way consultant, Loretta Randle, helped us establish job descriptions for our board and staff. One of our big problems was determining who was supposed to do what and who had the authority to see that those duties were carried out.

Loretta said the board's primary responsibility is raising funds and approving programs developed by staff. Staff members carry out board orders. The director is responsible for managing things daily, with other staff reporting to the director, who reports to the board.

Since our director, Naomi, had a full-time job, I was the daily contact, opening the center, greeting kids and volunteers, setting up classrooms, settling disputes, talking to parents, among other tasks. Although my position was president of the corporation, Naomi and I shared the director's responsibilities.

She would come in after work to play with the kids or teach a class, or do things at home like prepare monthly reports for our board meetings. Our abilities complemented one another. I was the business manager, the budgeter, the driving force and inspiration for those who came. She was the writer, the speaker, someone I could depend on.

And no one at the center received a salary for at least the first three years, besides a part-time teacher, Voddie Baucham, who received a \$100 monthly stipend from the Liberty Hill grant. Our first full-time paid staff member, Linda Miles, was hired as an administrator to handle the flow of letters and donations that came in after the Wall Street Journal and Today Show reports. Before we hired Linda, she had volunteered at the center writing press releases and articles. She is now our associate director.

Jah'Shams Abdul-Mumin, our current executive director, became our second paid staffer. He had also been a volunteer, writing our first comprehensive proposal. It was better than anything we had up to that point. His arrival marked a turning point in our development. We were getting more professional.

After receiving enough donations to hire a director as our second paid employee, I asked Naomi to come on the payroll. She suggested that we hire Abdul instead.

I agreed that he could help take us to another level. But I wanted Naomi to remain as executive director, which she did as a volunteer while working full-time as a reporter.

Abdul became our associate director and two years later, our executive director when Naomi resigned to focus more on our public relations.

I became our third paid staff member as corporate president, which was helpful since I was spending all day at the center and had closed my moving business. Our current recreation director, Clifford Sanchez, a former high school basketball coach, was

hired next. Since then, we added a volunteer coordinator and a secretary, at times, employing our students part-time.

Your organizational structure should be appropriate for you. Whatever works.

Chapter 10. Learning Our Lessons

After taking classes at the Center for Nonprofit management in downtown Los Angeles, I finally understood what people were trying to tell us when they said, "You need to develop your programs."

We did have something written up on paper. But it was just four paragraphs explaining the things our youth center did. It wasn't much, but it did give us some direction.

We figured the single page was all we needed. We had never really developed a full-fledged program description, including budget and staff requirements.

The following are programs that we plan to start within September. We intend to expand these programs and add more programs (arts, recreation, college advisement, etc.) in the future.

ECEL (Educational and Culturally-Enriched Learning)

Combines assistance with homework, math and reading lessons and exposure to black achievements. The intent of the ECEL Program, which is geared for grades 3 through 6, is to foster academia while promoting self-esteem. We anticipate accepting a maximum of 30 students beginning in September.

FIELD TRIPS

Field trips to cultural sites and events will be offered one Saturday per month for children ages 8 through 18 and their parents. Currently, we are scheduled to take a group to the Black Family Reunion in August.

ADULT DISCUSSION GROUPS

A monthly adult discussion group will be held, focusing on topics in politics, education and cultural awareness. We will invite leading speakers to facilitate each meeting. An example of a political topic for discussion is the Civil Rights Act of 1990 – its implications for the Black community.

YOUTH RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES

The Center will be open at various times to allow youth to come in and read books from our "Black Educational Library," to play board games with friends, to look at selected videos and to generally have a good time...staying off the street.

By contrast, here are excerpts from the proposal for our current "Boys to Men" mentoring program.

Al Wooten Jr. Heritage Center BOYS TO MEN PROJECT

STATEMENT OF NEED

The African-American male is an endangered species. The 1990 U.S. Census Bureau figures show that the leading cause of death of African-American men between the ages of 15 and 24 is homicide. And, while representing only 6 percent of the population, African-American men represented 49 percent of prison inmates. Only 4 percent of African-American males attend college, while 23 percent of those of college age are either incarcerated, on probation, or in prison.

PROJECT GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The major objectives with respect to the target population are to: (1) Provide services to a minimum of 60 adolescent African-American males over the first year of the grant period; (2) Provide each participant with educational remediation and enrichment services; (3) increase literacy levels; (4) Promote a sense of belonging, good citizenship and community pride; (5) Empower participants as young leaders; (6) Improve family, peer and community relationships; (7) Reduce juvenile delinquency and gang activity; and (8) Provide participants with African-American adult mentors and role models.

METHOD

Mentoring is a vital part of strengthening the character of young African-American males. The Boys to Men project will draw African-American adult male mentors from

local industry and the community to help facilitate the learning process by providing the leadership, guidance and support for the project. It is the adult mentors who are the heart that make the project come alive and become meaningful for the participants.

PROJECT COMPONENTS

Project activities are structured into several comprehensive components that prepare, motivate and inspire young African-American males to take charge of their lives. They will learn how to prepare for a service, how to perform the service and reflect on what has been learned. The following are the key project components.

1. Youth Leadership Training: Participants are taught assertiveness, resistance to negative peer pressure, decision-making and independent thinking.
2. Community Youth Service: Provides community involvement experiences so participants can develop the confidence needed to become active in the community in which they live, develop community pride, as well as the chance to experiment with future vocational opportunities.
3. Personal Growth and Development: The youth are involved in a summer retreat where they are provided the opportunity to reflect on what they have learned and talk about the many changes they have experienced.

The Boys to Men project is rooted in the values of traditional African and African-American cultural institutions. These include an emphasis on the extended family; spirituality; the notion of "elders" as teachers; the high value placed on education; a sense of responsibility for each other's actions and behaviors; and a sense that the individual's deeds reflect on the community.

EVALUATIONS

The evaluation will also describe the flow of project activities, the factors that hindered or facilitated the implementation, participants attitude, behavior changes and satisfaction with the experience, the impact of the project on the community and recommendations.

FUNDING

The Al Wooten Jr. Heritage Center is funded in part by membership fees, revenues generated from its own mini-market and a compliment of individual donors who are committed to make future contributions. Board members made individual contributions and program participants are charged a fee based on their ability to pay.

The Al Wooten Jr. Heritage Center is supported by a variety of corporations and foundations. Our donor list includes the Mary Hillman Jennings Foundation, Liberty Hill Foundation, Common Counsel, the Ralph M. Parsons Foundation, the Unitarian Universalist Church, the McKesson Foundation, the California Community Foundation, the Garland Foundation, the Amateur Athletic foundation, the Ella Fitzgerald foundation, the Heal L.A. Foundation, the Ahmanson Foundation, the ATT Foundation, the California Wellness Foundation, the Seaver Institute, Long Beach Bank and Rhino Records.

OTHER SUPPORT

The Board of Directors has authorized the first capital campaign in the Heritage Center's history, called Change a Child's Life. Beginning in 1995, the Capital Campaign's goal is to generate \$300,000 over the next two years to help meet project expenditures.

Program development is the cornerstone of any organization. You can't have an organization without a program, right? And a program is little more than a plan to reach a specific goal, whether preventing youths from joining gangs or teaching disabled persons to walk. How will you do that? What steps will you take? What's the plan?

Program development may sound bothersome, but the going is easier when you know where you're headed.

You may ask, "What is there to plan if all I'm going to do is tutor kids and take them to a baseball game?"

Well, what grade levels will you teach? How many students can you handle and how will you determine what kind of help they need? Will you just open up a book and go at it or will you give them a test?

If you give a test and it shows problems in math, will it also show that the cause is actually poor reading or poor eyesight? Will you address those concerns or refer the children to some other program?

What kind of tutoring will you give a child who is 13 and cannot read? Will "Hooked on Phonics" work for him, or will he think that too corny? Will you put him in a group with other teens who cannot read, or would that child respond better to more individualized instruction?

And, finally, how will you check to see that your program is working? Will you test students every week, every six months, every year?

You can do a better job and avoid certain pitfalls if you think things through before you start. Write your plans down and adjust as necessary.

In a nutshell, program development includes identifying: 1) needs; 2) possible solutions or objectives; 3) costs and other requirements; 4) how you will evaluate or see if your program works.

It is typically written as a proposal to submit for grants.

Funders particularly want to know if the proposal makes sense. They look for some "rationale." Can the needs you identify really be helped by the solutions you propose? What makes you believe a youth center will help keep kids out of gangs? Any statistics? Any testimonials or endorsements from children, school officials? Has this worked before and is your program any different or better?

Are there important costs that you did not include, such as rent for the building that is key to your center? Do you have other means for providing that need, or should it have been included in your proposal? Can you really pull this thing off? Would your program be a waste of their money?

After writing your proposal, read it through and think about it. Does it make sense?

Your evaluation method could range from conducting classroom surveys to doing a full scrutiny of every level of your program. You can do an in-house evaluation or have an outside auditor check things out. The evaluation that's right for you depends on your unique program and how you figure you can best determine whether or not it works. Funders wanted to know how we would gauge our success. We hadn't thought about that.

As for grant solicitations, funding libraries like the California Community Foundation are indispensable. At its downtown Los Angeles office, the foundation has scores of books listing funders, and bulletin boards displaying RFPs (Request for Proposals).

RFPs are put out by private and public agencies announcing their intent to award a specific amount of money for a specific purpose, such as reducing teen pregnancy and discouraging smoking. They want you to develop a program to address the concern.

The best idea wins, hopefully in more ways than one.

Chapter 11. The Man From Kellogg

The second time the man from Kellogg came to visit our center, he was business-like as usual. Nice suit. Handshakes. Pleasant smile and manner.

He didn't joke or laugh, or give me a big hug like so many people did when they walked in our doors. Still, I knew Dr. Robert Long really cared about our programs. Why else would he wait so patiently while we wrote and rewrote our proposal over a six-month period? He said he loved what we were doing, and I believed him, despite all the formalities.

Here was the program director from Kellogg, one of the country's most sought-after foundations, at our doorstep, inside our doors. He was just passing through, we presumed, on his way back to his home office in Battlecreek, Mich.

I invited Dr. Long to sit down in my office. Picking up the phone and pushing the intercom button, I called Abdul. He was there in a couple of moments since his office is only two doors away from mine. Linda's office is between our rooms, which are only big enough for a desk, file cabinet and a couple of chairs. Abdul helped maximize our space by getting everyone wall bookcases.

In an adjacent room, our secretary and student helpers greet visitors at our Western Avenue entrance. Down the hall, children bring life to our three adjoining buildings in a billiard room, library, computer classroom, television lounge, arts and crafts area and outside basketball court and garden.

Clifford's office, with its picture window, is in the center of all the action.

Toward our back exit is a room where loved ones of murder victims are making quilts covered with bracelets, baseball caps and other trinkets that belonged to their deceased loved ones. The "Face to Face Memorial Quilt" is patterned after the AIDS Memorial Quilt. Our project highlights victims of violence.

I wanted the quilting room to be private and away from all the ruckus because I knew people needed and wanted a place to sort out their emotions. I still have those moments. Some things you keep to yourself because you feel no one can really know how you feel about the sudden death of your son, your wife, your best friend. Other things you want to talk about.

That's one reason so many quilting participants are attracted to the project. It lets them connect with others who've experienced their pain.

Since we started the project in July 1994, we've connected 26 panels on two quilts, each stitched with colorful pieces and embroidered messages surrounding color-copied photos of the victims.

* * *

Abdul entered my office, smiling and shaking Dr. Long's hand.

"Where's Clifford?" Dr. Long asked.

I buzzed Clifford and prepared to just shoot the breeze for a few moments. In the back of my mind I was thinking, "We really do need this money. We can really do something with it."

"You've been approved," Dr. Long said with a smile.

"Ooohhhh!" I screamed, trying to retain composure. But it was hard.

"I can't believe it!"

Abdul and Clifford got a little excited too.

We started hugging each other, hugging Dr. Long. The man with the business suit smiled and said, "Congratulations. You earned it. You paid your dues."

I didn't know how to feel. It was all so unexpected, like most of the blessings we've received. But this time, I felt something different.

Not to minimize anything we had received before. We've had some wonderful gifts from some wonderful people who sacrificed time, resources and God only knows what else.

Mr. And Mrs. Tally have become our super volunteers, spending much of their retirement years, at least two days each week the past three years, giving our youngsters reading and papier-mâché lessons.

The idea to make a quilt honoring victims of violence came from a friend of a very special person at the center. Actor Ron Glass, best known as one of the detectives on the television sitcom, "Barney Miller," is on our board of directors but started out as an occasional volunteer. He brought a friend to the center who brought up the idea to make a quilt.

We met Ron through another special person. Ira Pelofsky was the manager of the Beverly Hills branch of Long Beach Bank when he read about us in the newspaper and called to offer assistance. At first his support came in the form of the bank paying our printing costs. Long Beach Bank printed the four-panel blue brochure with photos that prompted our receiving a grant from the Kellogg foundation.

Since then, Ira has been a close friend and consultant, as has a number of other people including my agent, Michael Hamilburg, who has never hesitated to buy tickets to our fundraisers since the day he called us after reading the Wall Street Journal article. Attorney Bert Deixler, who represents wealthy clients including financier Michael Milken, has reviewed papers, drafted documents and more, for no cost.

It would be hard to mention all of the people who have helped further our programs. The help has been small and large, every bit of it getting us by one more time.

In the first grant awarded to me personally, the California Wellness Foundation gave me a \$50,000 leadership fellowship, which paid for my new office furniture, computer, laser printer, software and management training. Also under the grant, I serve as mentor for two of our teen-agers, who join me at the foundation's workshops and conferences held in various cities.

Our help has also come from our parents and students.

Through the Parents of the Wooten Center, or POW, parents have baked cakes, organized parties, supervised classes, chaperoned field trips and sold banquet tickets.

Children have swept floors, tutored and counseled their peers, moved furniture, and worked the cash register in our mini-market.

Every ounce of help given meant people felt the burden.

But despite the growing amount of assistance we were receiving, there remained that ever-illusory funding our bank account needed so badly to ensure that bills would be paid for the next six months, preferably for at least, help us Lord, a year.

I had always felt that when donors turned down our requests for major funding it was like we had some ugly mole that turned them off, like there was a door we could only pass through after initiation, But what was it? What did we need? How could we get it? What were we doing wrong?

Surprisingly, it was a single brochure that first captured Kellogg's attention. Someone at the foundation received our brochure from a group that submitted it as an example of what they wanted to do. But Kellogg called us and requested our proposal.

After all the longsuffering and let downs by people...after selling candy and pizza and holding gospel concerts and community festivals...after working day and night for no pay and dipping into our own pockets...after taking time from our families to be with someone else's child.

After six years of believing that I was fulfilling my life's calling, with the Kellogg grant I felt I had reached another wave, another phase of our development.

After all the longsuffering, strangers in Battlecreek, Mich. Believed in us enough to pay for our program – for a whole two years!

The Kellogg grant was more than money to me. It also said they believed in us after we put so much effort into trying to convince people that we really were serious and were prepared for the long haul if we could just pay for the things we dreamed about.

I held back the tears when Dr. Long said we were approved. It was time for business.

Dr. Long didn't have a confirmation letter. He just knew we were approved and wanted to let us know personally. Our proposal didn't even get to Kellogg's board of directors, he said. Their staff approved it immediately after their first review. They liked our "Boys to Men" project that much.

The letter and the check would come soon, our new friend said. When it did, it was for \$103,000. A second installment of \$53,000 would come the following year.

It is unfortunate that money or the lack of money can have such an impact on the lives of people.

Only so many in-kind donations will come. We received gifts of computers, cameras, office supplies, sewing notions. But cash has always been necessary too, whether for rent or utilities or to help some girls get their drill team uniforms.

Those of us who work for a better day are not all wealthy enough or adequately equipped to put out every fire.

Every murdered son, every battered wife, every starving child tells us there is more to be done.

Until more people help out, things will always be overwhelming. Until more people do something, the task will always be more than the few can bear.

PART II

Chapter 12. The Mother's March

I had never been in a march before. I didn't know what to expect when I arrived at the elementary school campus where the "Mothers' March for Peace" was about to start. I somewhat expected to have the red carpet rolled out when I got there, along with the three other mothers whose kids had also been killed in those most troublesome days on the streets of South-Central Los Angeles.

I had my niece, Naomi, by my side that Spring morning in 1989. She had become my confidant, my closest ally besides my husband Harris in determining how I would respond to my son's murder.

Most everyone else had decided that I had gone plum crazy, that my resolve to do something in my son's honor was only a temporary state of mind. I really can't blame them for thinking that I was losing it. From all indications, I was changing from the same quiet, reserved, sensible Faye they all knew and loved.

In the days and weeks after my son Dinnie was murdered, I spent most of my time in our family room slumped in my brown leather recliner. I sat bundled in my favorite crocheted blanket, staring at our big screen color television. I should have been soliciting clients and paying vendors for the moving and storage company Harris and I owned. But I didn't care about that. With Dinnie gone, I didn't care about much of anything anymore.

I was consumed by my depression. I didn't think I could ever stop thinking about Dinnie. I didn't think I could ever stop thinking of how he had been doing so well. I didn't think I could ever accept the fact that at 35 years young my son had become a statistic, another black man gunned down, another victim of a drive-by shooting in South-Central Los Angeles.

Meanwhile, our secretary worked in our home-based office, in our converted garage, handling our business calls and taking messages for me as our business manager. Harris did his part to help out when he was at home. He answered phones, cooked and

cleaned the house. Otherwise, he was out on jobs most of the time with our truck and van and two other movers.

Most of the time, I was the only one not working. Occasionally, I mustered up enough energy to answer our business line in the private office added onto the back of our house. But even then, there would be tears welled up in my eyes as I explained to callers that I needed to get back to them later.

Tears sometimes falling, sometimes streaming down my face, I started writing a good-bye letter to Dinnie. I had started seeing a therapist at Los Angeles County's Victims of Violent Crime Unit. A social worker there had suggested that I do it. I had told her that the most difficult thing for me to accept about my son's murder was that I never had a chance to say good-bye. The social worker said writing Dinnie a good-bye letter would give me opportunity to do that. It would also allow me to release my thoughts and hopefully, let them go.

The social worker suggested that I write daily for a few weeks. I wrote almost daily for an entire year. My first entry was on February 22, 1989, a month after my son died.

February 22

Dear Dinnie,

The pain I feel right now is so bad. If it was possible for me to trade places with you I would. I love you more than life itself. I just can't say good-bye. It's too painful. Without you I don't want to be here anymore, but I have to stay for your sister and brother and Harris. If you were here you would tell me to stop crying about you. But if it was me you would probably do the same thing. I feel so empty inside, like what's the use. There is nothing to look forward to. I just can't get you off my mind. Why did you have to go away so soon just when things were coming together for everybody?

My sisters said it was unfair for me to leave Harris struggling to work the moving jobs and keep up with all the records and orders I had once managed.

"You could go bankrupt," my sisters said, truly worried that we might lose everything we owned. Our lovely Inglewood house, our white Caddy and moving van,

not to mention our five employees, including me and Harris. And we weren't getting any younger, my sisters warned.

"I don't care."

If my husband of 24 years wanted to leave me over this, he could, I snapped. I just couldn't say when I would be back to work.

I also stopped going to church, blaming God for my troubles. How could a God who loved me take away my son when I had been praying so earnestly for him? I had rarely missed a Sunday service since I was a youngster back home down South in Texas and as an adult in bright and sunny Southern California. As a kid on the sharecropping farm where I was born in 1931 in Chisholm, I would steal away to my prayer place behind the one-room church built by my preacher papa.

Bible in hand, I dreamt about becoming a missionary in Africa or maybe a teacher like my cousin Roberta. As much as I loved it, my missing church was in itself enough to show how unstable I was becoming. I proved them right one day when I couldn't stop myself from shaking and crying.

My daughter Barbara worked near my house. She would stop by during the day to see how I was doing. She had a key to my home and found me one afternoon sitting in my chair bundled in my crocheted blanket, crying and trembling.

"Mama, come on, stop crying," she said, tears welling up in her own eyes.

"Mama, please, stop crying."

I grew worse. Barbara called my sisters Pearlene and Lillie B. They came over. So did my pastor. Harris came home from one of his moving jobs. It was early evening. I was screaming by then. I wouldn't talk to anyone. I wouldn't eat or move from my chair to the bed. I was upset about Dinnie and embarrassed at the same time. My family had always known me as so even-tempered. I didn't like losing it like that in front of everybody, especially Elder Brewster.

I didn't want to go to the hospital. I didn't want people looking at me crying like that. But I was in such bad shape. I couldn't have fought them if I wanted to.

I had to ask people what happened that day because I was so unaware of the things around me. All I can recall is driving in the back seat of a car to the hospital. I couldn't even remember which car. Pearlene says Harris was driving our Cadillac. Barbara was in front next to him. Lillie B. was in the back with me and Pearlene. I was in the middle hugged up with Pearlene, my baby sister, my head resting on her shoulders. She says I was trembling so bad she thought I might snap. Later on, Corene told me that my pastor said he had seen many grieving mothers in my condition. He told her to prepare herself because they never come back.

I cried all the way to Daniel Freeman Memorial Hospital in Inglewood near my house, everyone wiping wet faces. In the emergency room, they took me straight to the back treatment area. I cried the whole four hours or more laying on a gurney, Harris sitting quiet next to me holding and rubbing my hands.

"They killed my son! They killed my son!"

That's all I could say. The doctor told Harris he could give me a tranquilizer to calm me. Instead, he said, it would be better for me to cry until I stopped on my own. He said if he gave me anything, it would only be a temporary fix. And that wouldn't help.

"She can't cry forever," the doctor told Harris. "She'll cry herself to sleep eventually."

Harris took me home and that's what I did, cried myself to sleep.

I awoke the next morning and called a therapist. A week later, I was writing to Dinnie.

February 23

Dear Dinnie,

Today I just feel sad and alone. I don't feel very good. My stomach is in pain. I don't feel like crying, just sad. I am glad I didn't get many calls today. I've been thinking about you all day; when you were a baby and when you started to school. Remember every night you and Arthur had to have a spanking before you would go to sleep? Your room was always messy until you got your own room. We had a big laugh because your room was always clean and Arthur's was messy. I am so sorry I spoiled you. Maybe that's why you

got mixed up with the wrong guys. Good night for today. Maybe I will write some more tomorrow.

The march organizers had told the mothers to have a speech prepared to give at a rally that would conclude the Mothers' March. I told Naomi what I wanted to say and asked her to speak for me. I didn't think I could talk about Dinnie in public, not without another break down. I was very nervous and shaky that day.

There were television cameras at Dinnie's January 26 funeral, but I wouldn't talk to any reporters. On the news that night, people only saw me stumbling down the front steps of my church, grasping my nephews' arms, face awash with tears.

"Another drive-by shooting...."

I welcomed the chance to have something said on my behalf, to put a face to the families of drive-by shooting victims. On television, you would see the parents and other loved ones hugging and crying. After that, you rarely ever saw them.

I was determined that people, especially gang members, would know how the families were suffering. I wanted people to remember my son and know why he was murdered. The Mothers' March for Peace was my first platform.

My other purpose for participating in the event was to gather information. I wanted to know what our community leaders were doing. They had to have something to offer us. Gangs and drugs were major problems in our community. "Innocent bystander" was becoming a common term. Children playing in front yards. Grandmas cooking in their kitchens. We heard the stories so many times we got used to them. Not to mention a whole generation locked away in juvenile detention camps; families torn apart over drug addiction. Our leaders had to provide us with some direction, give us some hope.

But that didn't happen, at least not for me. I went away from the Mothers' March for Peace feeling very dejected and very disappointed.

Pulling my white Cadillac into the driveway at South Park Elementary School, I wondered for a moment how safe my car would be while I was away marching. We were

on the "bad" side of town, at Manchester and Avalon, on the Eastside, now famously mixed with South-Central. However, South-Central officially lies more west, centered around Vernon and Western avenues, at one time the city's hottest residential district.

Today, this slice of Los Angeles is about as inner city as it gets in Southern California. It's a ghetto of black and brown, a working class area with some of the nicest and most dilapidated neighborhoods and thoroughfares lying side by side. The highest levels of robbery, aggravated assault and other conditions of poverty, they're all here too, accompanied by that ever-present threat of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"I don't care," I thought.

I didn't care about much of anything anymore. My car, my clothes, my business, my canary yellow house in Inglewood's coveted Morningside Park area. We had achieved a comfortable middle class existence by most standards. Harris and I were about five years away from a planned retirement in our cozy little home; two bedrooms, two baths.

With Dinnie's murder I felt ashamed and angry that such meager possessions had mattered so much to me. My worldly goods could all disappear in a heartbeat. I had seen that with Dinnie.

I gave most of my church clothes away, practically my entire closet full of suits and hats and matching handbags and high-heels. Those Sunday, mostly pastel outfits, some "special event" red, some "first Sunday" white, represented the Myrtle Faye Rumph I no longer liked. Besides, I didn't know if I would ever make it back to my pew at Mount Olive Church of God in Church, especially after a young man walked in our church and, not finding his wife, shot and killed one of our choir members and a church mother. Like Dinnie's murder, the shooting spree up and down the aisles of my church also made headlines. I wasn't there when it happened. I did attend the memorial service. It would be my last service as a member at Mt. Olive.

I wanted to die myself. Yes, I was thinking suicide. And I didn't try to hide it. My son Arthur and daughter Barbara felt bad that I talked about dying when I still had them. My wanting to die, I told them, didn't mean that I loved Dinnie any more than I loved them or my seven grandchildren, including Dinnie's daughter. I just didn't want to be here any longer. I didn't think I could take the pain anymore. My head and especially my stomach ached with every waking moment.

A parent's grief is unlike any grief there is. You just can't see how your child can go before you, especially by murder. There's a certain amount of guilt that goes along with that, especially when you feel that maybe you could have done something to prevent it.

Waking up in the morning, I would see the sun shining through my bedroom curtains, striking our king-size bed and waking me and Harris.

"What a beautiful day," I would think, sitting up in my bed, which was forever plush with rosy comforters, bed ruffles and pillow shams.

Then it would hit me. Dinnie's gone. That sunny day, it became cloudy. I missed our family reunion that year, the first time since its start about 10 years before. I would have been missing Dinnie too much. Besides, I didn't want to spoil anyone else's fun, just because I couldn't smile anymore.

"If I had to deal with this pain all day long, no matter where I went, what's the use?"

My two kids kept me here. I kept from doing myself in knowing how much it would hurt Barbara and Arthur with them losing two people. I had enough sleeping pills to end it all. The psychiatrist I started seeing at the Victims of Violent Crime Unit after my break down had given them to me.

People thought my sanity existed in running around to events like the Mothers' March. I had also started attending a multitude of community meetings to see what others were doing to stop the madness. For the most part, those activities did make me feel better. They gave me purpose and hope. But my children and my grandchildren kept me from putting myself to sleep forever when the pain was unbearable.

And I suffered a lot knowing that I could have been there when Dinnie was dying. My son had three pieces of identification in his pocket. Checking for wounds and rushing to save Dinnie's life, paramedics cut his clothing off and left them at the crime scene. Police dispatched to the area retrieved Dinnie's clothing and checked the identification. One of the IDs gave my home address. All three of them gave Dinnie's full name, Alton Wooten, Jr., and his new apartment address.

About 11 p.m., police officers went to Dinnie's apartment down the street, just a couple of minutes away from the shooting area. Dinnie's girlfriend said she told them that Dinnie had a mother he always talked about. She was so insistent about it, screaming and cursing at police, they took her to jail and kept her overnight. She told my brother Thomas they came to her cell the next morning and told her that she didn't have to worry about them not telling me anymore. Dinnie was dead. I would find out soon enough.

The security gate at Dinnie's apartment was locked when the police officers arrived the night of the shooting. They later told me they left without talking to anyone because they couldn't gain access. It was late, they said, and they didn't want to use the intercom to wake anyone. They took Dinnie's shirt and pants and three identifications to the hospital. They said they left them there, in the hands of hospital staff, and called it a night.

Despite receiving the clothing and identification about an hour after Dinnie was wheeled into emergency, the hospital workers left him tagged as "John Doe." They later admitted to having never checked his pockets to find something that would lead them to his identity and his family.

The nurse on duty when Dinnie arrived said they thought the police had called the patient's next of kin. The police blamed the hospital staff for not doing their job. They both said Dinnie was an adult and therefore, no one had to call me until he was dead.

That devastated me. I just couldn't get beyond that. I was thinking that maybe if I had been there, maybe Dinnie would still be alive, maybe I could have gotten another doctor or made those caring for him be more attentive. I would never know and that was killing me. Maybe he would have at least heard my voice and knew I was there with him before he died.

Dinnie lived overnight after undergoing emergency surgery. Although he reportedly never regained consciousness, I figured he had been holding on waiting for me to come. He knew I would come. He knew I would have never let him suffer alone with something like that. No matter what, he knew I would never let him down.

I believe that when my son couldn't bear it any longer, he let go, the way many dying people do when they give up, the way the Bible describes people as "giving up the ghost." They start saying good-bye, putting their house in order, trying to comfort others,

the way Jesus did on the cross. They get this peace about themselves, accepting their lot, releasing their spirits.

I figured that had also happened to Dinnie, except nobody knew for sure. If he ever woke after his surgery, if he ever had that peaceful look about him, nobody saw it. They said he was already gone by the time the nurses reached his bed in recovery.

Two Los Angeles policemen called me and came to my house 18 hours after the shooting, eight hours after Dinnie died, about 3:30 p.m. on a Thursday afternoon, January 19, 1989.

Family members arrived one by one, climbing on my bed beside me as I lay under my yellow comforter. All through the night, my bed was full of relatives either crying softly or wondering aloud what might have happened to Dinnie. The policemen didn't have all the details when they came to our front door.

My sister Corene was laying behind me facing my back and rubbing my arm as I cried with my eyes shut. Corene is our oldest sister in California, the first one of us to arrive here. She is always taking the lead and setting things in order. I felt relieved that she was there to help me through this.

She wanted to know if Dinnie had any burial insurance. He didn't.

"Don't worry, we'll help you," she assured me. "Everybody will chip in."

My son Arthur is a minister and is accustomed to helping others through their grief. He did better than I did in handling the necessary arrangements. Arthur called the hospital and asked if we could come and view the body. The nurse said they had already sent Dinnie to the morgue. The morgue said we couldn't see him until he was sent to a mortuary. They said they were backed up and it would probably take two weeks.

All I could do was lay on my bed and cry, uncomforted.

Chapter 13. Too Young to Die

February 24

To say good-bye to you is like someone putting a knife in my heart. I must do it because you are not coming back and I must go on living for the others we both love. I will have to start with April 29, 1953, the night you were born. It was a rainy night in Dallas, Texas at 1:05 a.m. The doctor told me I had a boy. I will never forget the feeling I had the next morning when they put you in my arms. It was love at first sight.

I felt that Dunny was too young to die. His murder cut him off before his time, I felt. Some say the shooter mistook my son for a drug addict the man was looking for. Detectives said they believe it was a gang initiation. According to the police report, there were two black men in a passing car. Witnesses said a black hand and gun extended from a car window and shot several rounds at Dunny and two of his friends. They were walking together at 28th and Montclair, near Adams and Crenshaw in South-Central.

Witnesses said the assailants sped away and shot into another group down the way. Dunny was the only one hit out of both crowds. He was struck with one bullet in the stomach and died the next morning around 7:30.

Dunny was no angel. He had abused drugs and alcohol for more than five years. He had lived in homeless shelters from time to time when he couldn't stand living with me and hearing his stepfather Harris scold him about drinking and not working.

Honestly, I think that's why I was so bitter with my husband. I had let him keep me from bringing Dunny home with us on various occasions. I let him convince me that I was doing the right thing, that "tough love" was the way to go. We ultimately agreed that Dunny had to take his lumps and learn his lessons, to grow up.

Other than that, pride kept my son from returning to my home rather than sleeping in a cheap downtown hotel. He always said he hated the thought of his mother having to care for him when it was supposed to be the other way around now that he was grown.

I felt my prayers had been answered one day when Dunny met a man named Ted Hayes. Ted was and remains an activist for the homeless. He spent considerable time talking to my son, encouraging him to pull himself together and earn a living.

Dunnie's story taught me a lesson about homeless people. Most were not born on the streets. Many are not living there because they are lazy or uneducated. Dunnie wasn't.

Dunnie would joke about living downtown, but I wasn't laughing when I saw his picture on the front page of the Los Angeles Times Metro section. I still have the Monday, October 20, 1986 clipping. Harris pointed the story out to me as we sat at our breakfast table over coffee, eggs and bacon. Sure enough, it was my son, along with a couple of other black men and a couple of police officers downtown at 5th and Main near a building with a sign that only read "Hotel."

March 29

I was frightened of you one time because you were so high until you looked like you were out of your mind. You said you felt like you didn't have a family. You felt you were in the world alone. I did my best to let you know how much I loved you. No matter what you were doing you were still my son and I loved you very much. Sometimes you came around in a different mood and I'd be angry with you and we argued about you coming around high. Sometimes you would leave and sometimes you would just sit down and go to sleep until you sobered up. We went through so many changes.

Dunnie went from pillar to post, staying with me a night here and there, staying for a long spurt with my sister Lucille until she put him out for stealing her sleeping pills. I used to drive the streets downtown looking for my son when he went too long without calling me. He called me out of the blue once and said he was still living downtown, but this time in a tent encampment started by a man named Ted Hayes, the homeless activist I had been seeing on the news.

I started visiting Dunnie downtown at Ted's Justiceville/Home for the Homeless encampment. I would take food and clothing to share with the 50 or so people living there. Dunnie said he tried real hard to find something bad about this strange African American man in the long black dreadlocks and scraggly black beard. He just couldn't believe that Ted, a former fiery Pentecostal preacher, had actually left his nice, comfortable suburban home to live on the streets with homeless people. Dunnie questioned his motives. I'm not sure what made him start trusting Ted's sincerity. But I

remember very clearly Dinnie saying that Ted was the most honest person he knew. He said he had a lot of respect for him. I can only imagine what they must have talked about late into the night under the stars. I'm just glad that they talked...and that Dinnie listened.

With Ted's encouragement, my son became one of the chief volunteers for Justiceville. Ted would always compliment Dinnie on his leadership skills and his "gift of gab." He told him he should use that God-given talent for good, to help other people. From what I could tell, Dinnie was doing better himself, supplementing his \$300 monthly disability check by selling greeting cards and various cheap gifts on downtown street corners. I still have a Mother's Day card he gave me out of his inventory. Inside the pink and white lace card is his inscription, "To mom with love. Happy Mother's Day. Dinnie."

Dinnie showed other homeless people how to run their own sales enterprises and helped counsel them to stop abusing alcohol and drugs. Dinnie had already done so, he told me, cold turkey. I believed him. I could tell by the long, fruitful conversations we had resumed having. I could tell by the way his face, once full of pox marks, was starting to fill out. Dinnie had always been rail thin, like his father. But the drugs and alcohol had made him even thinner. I also saw that changing.

Dinnie had always been my talking partner, like a friend more than a son. Our friendly discussions only happened occasionally when Dinnie was on drugs, if I could find him to even have a conversation. We were back talking again and I was loving it. Dinnie had always liked politics and was passionate in telling me who to vote for. He knew more about the issues and candidates than I did, having learned much more about things working downtown with Ted.

Another major turning point for my son came in 1988 when the city of Los Angeles included him among 42 homeless people to receive \$500 each as compensation for the destruction of their belongings by police officers. Police had done a "sweep" of the Justiceville encampment, using two skip-loaders and two dump trucks to scoop up the people's clothing, makeshift tents, dishes and other personal items and cart them away to a San Fernando Valley landfill.

Many of the homeless people used their funds for a few good nights in a downtown hotel. Dinnie was among those who put their settlements to more long-term

use. In Dinnie's case, he enrolled in a trade school to become an unarmed security guard. With additional funds from me and Harris, he moved into his own apartment -- his first apartment since losing his last one some three years earlier.

I had spoken to Dinnie the morning of the shooting. He sounded very happy and upbeat. Aside from having to take care of a few jaywalking tickets that had turned into warrants, Dinnie said he was happy with his life, the way things were going for him. He talked about getting married to a girl he had met. He said he wanted to bring her over to meet me and Harris.

I told him I was glad for him and said that returning to church would also help him get his life back together. Dinnie said, "That's right." I said you need to start reading your Bible everyday. He said he would start reading it.

I told him to start with the 23rd Psalm, my favorite scripture. I said, "Start today." He said, "Okay." I wouldn't let Dinnie go until he promised to read the scripture before the day was over.

We found a Bible open in Dinnie's apartment after his murder. It was laying on a nightstand next to his bed. I still have the book. I keep it in a small box of Dinnie's belongings in my bedroom closet.

I folded the page that was open. The page is in Psalms, just beyond the 23rd chapter. I feel that Dinnie read what I told him to read and kept going because he loved reading so much.

It was several months before I realized that the scripture could possibly have been some comfort to my son as he lay dying on the ground and in the hospital.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me."

I started crying again. But this time, with tears of joy. God had been with me too, I thought. I just didn't notice. If God had answered my prayer when Dinnie met Ted why wouldn't he continue to do so? "He didn't bring us this far to leave us." I knew the lyrics so well. Maybe there was a greater purpose at work here.

A detective told me that Dinnie was on his way to his girlfriend's house when the drive-by occurred. My son was shot just a few blocks away from the apartment where he had lived in happiness and hope for six months.

A Los Angeles Herald Examiner article spoke of my son's murder. The front page headline on Friday, January 27, 1989 reads:

"He lost battle to escape streets. Ex-Skid Row resident killed in gang drive-by."

Chapter 14. Your Name Will Never Die

April 3

I am telling you now your name will never die as long as I have the strength to carry on. Your dying will not be for nothing. I am a changed person since you died. I am real committed to help make this world a better place for your daughter and all other sons and daughters to live in.

Walking toward the school auditorium, the starting point for the Mothers' March, I was more afraid that things might be too boisterous for my tastes than I was of being killed for denouncing gang violence. Other demonstrations I had seen on television always seemed to get out of hand. The demonstrators seemed too rowdy for me, yelling and screaming and hollering to get their point across. I was afraid that might happen.

Of more importance that day was the feeling that I was discovering something divine, my niche in life, my reason for being. If I needed to change my way of thinking, sacrifice my usual comforts for something more meaningful in life, so be it.

I had mixed emotions being there. I had never done anything like this. I wanted to be there and was proud of myself for getting out of my chair and out of my comfort zone. But at the same time, I felt like a hypocrite. If Dinnie hadn't been killed, I would never have even considered participating. I would have just watched the march on television and felt sorry for the mothers, thanking God that it wasn't me.

The march organizers had told the mothers to meet them in the school auditorium. Walking in, I wondered how many out of several dozen women inside were also surviving mothers. There were only four of us I discovered. I had expected more than that, what with all of the gang killings, some 507 the same year as Dinnie in L.A. County I have now learned.

The march greeters gave all of the mothers corsages, which we gladly pinned onto our dresses or blouses. Following instructions, we each had a photo of our sons glued on a poster board. I had Dinnie's 5x7 photo fixed on cardboard with a cord to hold it around my neck.

The photo I used was the last picture my son had taken. It was taken at our last Thanksgiving dinner together, at my son Arthur's house. The picture is a close-up of Dinnie sitting at the table, short curly hair, black v-neck shirt, gold chain, slight smile, brown skin.

We mothers were feeling real special, like the community and our public officials really cared about our circumstances and our children.

We stood on one side of the auditorium for awhile, waiting for our next orders. We mostly stood alone talking to one another, sharing our stories, hugging those whose eyes started to well with tears.

I hadn't expected it, so it took some time for me to realize that the mothers were not the main attraction. Mayor Tom Bradley apparently was. He was running for reelection, along with several other local black politicians. State senators. Assembly members. City council and school board candidates. They were all out at the march.

I knew all of the incumbents by name and face and a few of the up-and-comings. I had been watching most of them on television. Dinnie had given me instruction on the best ones to support.

The organizers hurried us outside to get ready for the march. That's when we saw Mayor Bradley speaking to reporters outside the auditorium entrance. The news people had their cameras positioned on him, reporters jotting down the mayor's words in their notebooks.

We mothers stood a couple of feet away, behind the line of cameras. We thought they might want to talk to us. But when Bradley was finished, the news people were finished too. When Bradley walked away, so did the reporters.

That should have been an indication to me of how things would turn out at Fremont High School, where the march would end with a rally. I was naive. I know that now. Hearing what the mothers had to say (and offering us solutions) weren't really all that high on the day's agenda.

I kept hoping things would turn out okay. After all, they did give us corsages and position the mothers at the start of the march. We felt real special sharing that space with Mayor Bradley and about a dozen other politicians. About a hundred or so community members did all the yelling, screaming and hollering.

"Stop the killings!! Stop the killings!!"

Walking about nine blocks north on Avalon from Manchester to 76th Street, I felt uncomfortable seeing the tiny trails of people staring at us from their apartment balconies and the sidewalk. I felt like a target with my picture, my black dress and flat loafers. Many of the front row marchers were like me, in professional attire.

We must have looked like the bourgeoisie come for a day in the 'hood, for a photo op.

"What are they doing? It's not going to help."

The people had hopelessness in their faces.

"Ain't no march gonna stop no shooting."

I was thinking like that too. Walking past the liquor stores and boarded-up storefronts, the graffiti-strewn fences and rows of apartment buildings with cracked white paint and unkempt yellow green lawns, our march seemed so out of touch, so symbolic of the complacencies the way we were passing by everything.

The people watching us probably didn't know what to make of us or how to respond to our presence at their front door. They didn't know if they should shout a cry of support or protest or remain quiet. So they stood frozen. When our marchers started to yell "Stop the killings," I started to bail from the front row. With signs blaring "Stop Gangs," "Stop the Madness," and "Drugs Are Not Cool," it dawned on me that somebody out there might not like what we were saying. They might take it as an attack on them, which it really did seem like. I was a bit confused by that. I wasn't certain that this was what I wanted.

The week before Dinnie's funeral, I told Ted that I wanted to do something in my son's honor, a scholarship for a homeless person perhaps. After the funeral, at the repast at my house, Ted, Naomi and several other family members talked about how we should all respond to Dinnie's death. About five of them sat around my dining room table talking about the killings.

They talked about the drugs and the weapons that had also increased dramatically in those days. Ted told them how I had expressed interest in doing something to honor Dinnie. They agreed to meet again to talk about how we could do that. Speaking to Ted

after the funeral, I agreed that a meeting sounded good. Ted suggested we hold the meeting at my house, because of my condition.

We had our first gathering on a Saturday morning, February 18, about a week after my breakdown, three weeks after the funeral and several weeks before the Mothers' March. Twenty people showed up at my house, most of them my relatives. We had a sense that we were doing something important, that our meetings would be historic. We used a cassette player to record all the sessions. Barbara was in school training to be a stenographer, a court reporter, and brought her stenograph machine to each meeting to document our proceedings.

For about three months we met weekly, every Saturday morning. Vowing to inspire but not lead our group, Ted did most of the talking. Family members and friends would offer their own causes and solutions or voice their approval or disapproval of what others said, sometimes rather bluntly like my feisty big sister Lillie B. with her silver gray hair to her shoulders and hint of a Southern drawl. Ted, always articulate, was the most vocal. Too confrontational and too political for some present, he caught a lot of the flack. I usually sat quiet in my chair, listening to all the talk.

From one of our meeting tapes:

Ted: We've got to recognize that we are in an economically-depressed situation as a people. We've got to recognize that we are overcrowded and concentrated, particularly in South-Central Los Angeles. And a lot of the job opportunities and recreational opportunities, etc. have been taken out of the community. Even our brightest minds have left the community. I've got mines, you get yours and I'm gone. Or, when I get into power, when I have a record, when I'm an actor making money then I will come back and do, but they don't come back and they do keep going because they don't want to be reminded of what they came out of. It's understandable, but that's the way it works, so we have got to recognize that all that has left our community and what little bit is here, it creates turfdom; warfare over that little bit that is there, in all groups, right on down from the 40s and 30s to the 20s and into the teens.

Lillie B.: Can I ask a question?

Ted: Sure.

Lillie B.: So, we need to first establish, um, a body of people. I ain't saying the right words. We need to organize and then create a cooperation and get established.

Ted: Yes. Yes.

Lillie B.: That's the word that I want, we need to get established and even get an office or building or something and incorporate.

Ted: Yes, yes, I agree.

Lillie B.: And then we can get all sorts of help, a nonprofit corporation.

Ted: That's right.

Lillie B. And then the police and everybody will know that we are there and we've got our telephone and we are there and we are incorporated. So, this is going to bring a lot of people. They're going to be looking for us because we are doing something. But just to come here and sit and talk, it's going to be hard to get out to the people. But if we organize and have cooperation then we can reach them.

Ted: I agree. And in order for that to happen we have to have an agenda.

Lillie B.: Yeah.

Ted didn't know it at the time, but Lillie B., eight years my senior, had operated a youth center with her husband for many years. She knew about nonprofit corporations. As pastors of St. Mary's Church of God in Christ in Pasadena, she and her husband the Rev. Jim Watkins ran their youth center as part of their church ministry. At one time, in

the '60s and '70s, St. Mary's was the only Christian organization in Pasadena running a community outreach effort like that.

My family was accustomed to me being soft-spoken and quiet and non-combative, so it was no surprise when I didn't comment on dialogue like Ted's and Lillie B.'s. What they didn't know was what I was thinking.

I was wondering what would make the greatest impact, what we could realistically do. A scholarship for a homeless person? A fund to help gang members start their own businesses? A protest calling for improving inner city schools? A demand for hospitals and police to notify next of kin right away even if the victim is an adult? A youth center so kids could have a safe and caring hang out?

In our first meeting, Naomi insisted that a youth center was our best option. In the early 1970s, as a teenager, she was living on the Eastside with her family when she joined a new gang calling themselves "Crips." Her neighbors and schoolmates and her older sister Jackie had encouraged her to join. The group was only about a year old and had been founded on the Westside (now called South-Central) by a young man named Raymond Washington. Since she was only 13 when she joined, Naomi mostly ran with the "Baby Crips," the Avalon Boulevard set.

Addressing her daughter's growing truancy and belligerent behavior (and unbeknownst to her mother, also daily drug abuse and occasional drug dealing), Naomi's mother, my sister Lucille, enrolled her in an after-school program called Anti-Self Destruction. She also sent her to church telling her, "Maybe those church people can help you."

With the church giving her moral instruction and the youth center encouraging her to find new friends and enroll in college, Naomi changed at the age of 16 and, with the center's help, graduated from high school and enrolled in a university through their Equal Opportunity Program for students from under-privileged backgrounds.

"Why don't you study journalism?" her mother suggested. "You like to write."

"Journalism? What's that?"

"I got in a gang because that's what was available," Naomi would harp at our meetings. "I didn't know anything else. Kids need alternatives. I probably wouldn't be here if it wasn't for that youth center, if I didn't have something to do besides get in

trouble while mama was out working. Mama and my counselor Voddie Baucham schemed on me, talking about how they could help me and I'm glad they did. Voddie helped me fill out my college applications. He got me my first journalism job at the Los Angeles Sentinel newspaper. I used to write photo captions with Brad Pye, Jr., you know, the man on the radio now.

"Brad Pye was real nice. He encouraged me to keep going when I didn't think I could do nothing. Voddie told me to never, ever forget where I came from and that's why I'm here. We hardly have any youth centers anymore. We used to have a lot of Teen Posts, but where are they? The government closed them down. Why don't we have anymore Teen Posts? Why? Why?! What happened to all the youth centers in our comm...."

"Would you shut up about a youth center!" Lillie B. snapped at her niece. "I'll buy you a youth center if you will just shut up!"

That was a good one. We laughed and laughed and laughed. It was kind of irritating listening to Naomi going on and on like that, like she had all the answers. She talked about youth centers like they were the key to all of our problems. She talked about her counselor like he was God. It was hard to even believe that she had been a gang member. I always knew her to be so quiet. From what I knew, she had always been a bookworm in school. When did she get the nerves to be a gang member and, good Lord, a drug dealer? No way.

We hadn't actually intended on the outcome, but found ourselves in our meetings defining what we believed to be the root causes of gang violence. We felt we already knew what the kids needed and thought we would just walk in and out of our gatherings and come up with solutions overnight. But with so many ideas on the table, we realized it would help if we first identified the reasons for gang involvement. Then we would look at ways to address them.

In more technical terms, we were doing a "needs assessment," except we didn't have the social workers, demographers and analysts that would normally do one. And we certainly didn't have the money to pay for the professional help. And so, we went to the library and looked at reports available to the public. Pouring through government and private studies at the Inglewood Main Library, our group consisting of a journalism

student, a couple of preachers, a printer, a carpenter, a bill collector, an assembly line supervisor, a housekeeper, a couple of secretaries, a homeless activist and one college-degreed person, my son Arthur who had a bachelor's in business administration, found that government officials shared our homespun reasoning.

"There is nothing else to do; they have no hope and see no alternative but to join a gang."

That analysis came from a 1989 study called "Gangs: Problems and Answers."

Our kids have too many bad choices. And they have less constructive alternatives after school. We discovered that the federal government had closed more than 100 Teen Posts in Greater Los Angeles in the 1980s, along with Naomi's Anti-Self Destruction. At one time, in the late 60s through the 70s, kids would flock to the government-run youth centers for games and field trips, tutoring and counseling. By 1989 when gang violence was at an all-time high in Greater Los Angeles, there were only four Teen Posts left in the area, with little if anything provided to replace the ones that had been closed. We were sure of that. We visited their headquarters to question them about it.

My kids had attended those free after-school programs. As a single parent working as a salad maker downtown at Bullock's, I felt fortunate to have a place on the corner by our housing project where my kids could receive supervision and instruction while I was at work. It was a God-send.

It struck me hardest in our meetings when somebody said that Dunny would probably still be alive if somebody had intervened in the life of his killer, if the young man had something constructive to do that day. I couldn't stop thinking about that.

That made a lot of sense, but I didn't think I could help those who were already deeply entrenched in the life of a gang member or drug dealer. I didn't think I could help anybody who would go so far as to commit murder. I was willing to forgive Dunny's assailant. I had convinced myself that revenge would only hurt somebody else's family. But I also knew it would be much harder for me if I had to deal with kids I knew had been murderers. I would always wonder if one of them had killed my Dunny.

I was thinking about the little ones, before they become teenagers, before they join the gangs. I didn't know the terms at the time, but we were talking about developing a prevention program, as opposed to an intervention effort.

Perhaps we could help prevent kids from becoming gangbangers. That seemed workable and along the line of my own growing vision to stop the killings. If Dinnie were here, I felt, that's what he would want. But first, I wanted to talk to some gang members, to see what made them join, to see if we really were on the right track.

My niece Pearl brought two gang members over to my house to talk to me.

The two boys couldn't have been more than 12 or 13 years old. One of them, the eldest, I was surprised to learn, was my grandnephew, another niece's son. This thing was hitting home from all directions. It was an eye-opener for me.

The boys didn't look any different than any other kids. I couldn't classify them as gang members just by looking at them. They didn't have on the red or blue bandannas or the sagging pants that were becoming popular. Perhaps Pearl made them dress differently. To keep from upsetting me.

"Why did you join a gang?" I asked them.

The boys shrugged their shoulders and held their heads down, eyes fixed on the tan pile carpet on my family room floor. I was sitting in my chair with my feet up on my footrest. The two boys sat across from me on the matching brown leather sofa.

We had our weekly meeting earlier that day. As usual, I had been crying afterwards. My eyes were still red and my hair was shuffled. I was sitting back relaxed, taking my time talking to the boys. I didn't have much energy to do otherwise.

The two boys kept looking away from me, staring into the wall-length mirror concealing the sliding door closet where I had once lovingly stored my many church outfits.

"Why did you guys join a gang?"

"I don't know."

"I don't know."

The kids seemed more nervous than I was. They kept shaking their legs and looking back and forth into the mirror and up at a pair of hanging rust-patterned lamps over their heads. They looked around at the bookcase on one wall, the magazines on the wood coffee table in front of them and at the big screen television, even though it was turned off.

I asked what they thought about Pearl's son Frederick, who was 21 when he was killed in a drive-by shooting near Pasadena five years before Dinnie. I knew that Frederick had been in a gang and that he was possibly killed because he owed somebody money. They said my nephew was gunned down on the sidewalk after walking out of a store. I remembered how we had to have police helicopters and patrol cars escort us to his gravesite because the gang members had threatened to harm Frederick's family.

That had stunned and hurt me, but not like my son's murder.

"Why was Frederick killed?" I asked the two boys.

The youngest-looking one said he didn't know.

I could have kicked the other one, my grandnephew, Frederick's cousin, when he gave his answer.

"It was for the cause," he said flatly.

"For the cause?!" I exclaimed, leaning up in my chair. "The cause?!"

I could tell my grandnephew was sorry he had answered me like that. He didn't speak again and would hardly look up from the carpet.

"Do you remember what Pearl looked like when her son was killed?!" I demanded to know, looking square at them.

"Yes," the youngest one said.

"What if you were murdered?! Would you want your mother to look like that?"

"No," the boy said, tears rolling down his chubby golden cheeks.

"Look at me! Do you want your mother to look like this?!"

"No!" crying harder now.

"Think about your family, your mother and your sisters and brothers! Think about what they would go through if something like that happened to you! If somebody killed you!"

Leaning back in my chair and wiping tears from my eyes, resting again, I was through. I had gotten my point across, I felt; even though my grandnephew had grown silent. We had talked for just about 10 minutes. I never did find out why they had joined a gang. Obviously, something about the gang life had to have been more appealing -- whether because of peer pressure, sheer boredom or both, like Naomi.

I curled up in my chair under my blanket and waved them out. They walked out the sunken family room, up a couple of steps into the formal dining area through the living room and out the front door. Pearl knelt beside me and hugged my neck tight. She kissed me on the cheek and said she would talk to me later.

I was glad it was over. I kept hearing my flesh and blood tell me, "For the cause." "What d--- cause?" I remember thinking.

Chapter 15. Figuring it Out

May 9

I feel angry with everybody, I guess with the world. I don't know who I am angry with. I hope I can figure it out someday.

My nephew Rick, a bill collector, knew who he was angry with.

"I'm going to find 'em and kill 'em," Rick said, big as a football player, tears welling up in his brown eyes under his wire-rim glasses.

"They can't do this! They can't kill my cousin! Dinnie ain't going out like that."

We were at my house in one of our weekly meetings. Rick wanted to find and kill Dinnie's murderers. He started a wave that spilled over to a second nephew, Paul, a construction worker.

"Yeah, that's how we should deal with this," said Paul, the older of the two 30-somethings and Dinnie's former running buddy.

My brother Thomas, a preacher, had already been traveling the streets around where Dinnie was murdered, looking for the killer. He would drive his car, with Dinnie's girlfriend beside him. She knew what the young man looked like. One day, they spotted him. But the girl was too afraid to stop. She dropped down in the front passenger seat and begged Thomas to keep driving. They never found him again.

Thomas never told me what he planned to do if he did find the guy. Whatever his plans, it was against my wishes. I was afraid that my brother might also get hurt. I called the detectives on the case and asked them to talk to Thomas. They did. They called him on the telephone.

"It's too dangerous," they told him.

Thomas promised both me and the police that he would stop driving around the neighborhood, sometimes parking his car and waiting.

"Hold it!" I piped up in our meeting, rising from my chair and slapping the arm rests. "Hold it. Hold it. Hold it. Ain't nobody else getting killed, and I mean it!! I don't want no more talk like that! You guys stop it and I mean stop it right now!!!"

"Yes ma'am."

"Yes ma'am."

Like Thomas, Rick and Paul promised me that they would stop talking about looking for Dinnie's assailant. Like Thomas, they didn't. Someone told me later that after the meeting my two grown nephews were out in front of my house still talking about killing the young man who killed their cousin.

The march over, we entered Fremont High through a chain-link gate topped with iron stakes. We mothers and other marchers traveled the last leg onto the grass football field. The mothers and other special guests were escorted to the platform. The rest of the people to the bleachers. Mayor Bradley to his limo and out the gate topped with stakes.

The covered stage had about three rows of chairs separated into two columns. At least 30 or 40 chairs in all. A center aisle between the two columns led up to a podium and mic. The four mothers with the pictures of their sons were ushered to the back seats. The rest of the seats were filled with dignitaries and organizers.

Speaker after speaker made their way to the microphone. We waited. More than an hour must have passed. We waited some more.

They talked about the upcoming elections, about throwing the gangbangers behind bars. We waited again.

And then came the dismissal.

A man sitting near me whispered to the speaker and reminded her that the mothers were waiting to talk.

"Oh, yes. We have some mothers..."

I don't recall what the other three mothers said, or what Naomi talked about as I stood silent next to her as she stood at the podium, my hands trembling, heart beating, tears falling as I held my head high and gripped Dinnie's photo, holding it waist-high for everyone to see.

I went to Fremont looking for people to talk about solutions. To clue us in on some workable options. To let us know what the government was doing to address our deadly crisis. I wasn't looking for anyone to get up talking about an election or about

stopping the killings by locking up gangbangers, the more popular solution it seemed that day.

One speaker after another talked about imposing stiffer penalties to keep the gang members off the streets, like they weren't talking about the children of the people sitting there listening, or up and down Avalon. I was thinking how gang members, kids, must have felt hearing adults talk about how much they wanted them in jail, as if that was the only solution. I was thinking that if the kids had any hopes for themselves they had to feel as if noone wanted to help them.

"Forget them, man. I can take care of myself!"

We mothers were sitting on that back row with our hearts broken. Locking up kids in jail seemed like an awful solution, especially to us mothers. Mothers will always harbor hope for their children. They will always want the best for their kids. Children aren't born drive-by shooters. It's a learned behavior. As adults, it's our job to teach them different, to deprogram them if necessary.

Mothers against this, dads against that. I knew right then at that march that I would never say that I was against anybody's child. I would say what I was for. I didn't want to hear that word "against" anymore. I wondered to myself, "Are you FOR helping the kids, FOR getting drugs off the streets, FOR getting rid of the guns?" Throwing our young people in jail seemed like a joke to me. Too many of them come out worse.

I left the Mothers' March realizing how much I had always depended on our leaders to heal our social ills. I left knowing that whatever I was going to do I had to do it myself.

I went to the march looking for our government leaders to give us solutions and hope. I walked away knowing that they could never do it all alone. Even they admit that.

To address the rising tide of gang violence, Los Angeles County had instituted the Victims of Violent Crime Unit to help families pay for funerals and burials for their loved ones. The two policemen who came to my house and told me about Dinnie had given me the unit's business card. The program awarded us the maximum \$2,800. A social worker would call me every few days to see if I needed anything else, if I wanted someone to talk to. I told them no thanks, I didn't think so.

"You will," the social worker told me.

And she was right.

The day after my break down, I called her back and made an appointment.

The first thing the social worker told me when I arrived alone at the office was, "I know you don't believe it now, but you will get better." She also told me that my depression was typical, that I, unfortunately, wasn't alone. She said I would go through the normal process of grieving, including denial followed by anger and acceptance.

Right again.

Thinking about it now, it seems ironic how grief over our communities can also end with acceptance. I had always been troubled by the ugliness in my neighborhood, but I became accustomed to living with it. When I would see the graffiti on the walls and trash in the streets, I felt it was the city's responsibility. The empty lots full of garbage, well, that was from the '65 riot. Didn't my taxes pay the city to take care of that?

Looking at run-down properties, I felt it was the owner's job to improve things. It wasn't my responsibility to tell somebody to clean up their yard or business, just as it wasn't on me to tell a parent how to raise their children.

I feel different today and have learned that it does take a whole village, and not only for the children. People do oftentimes need help cleaning up their property, improving their business, and yes, dealing with their children, just as Ted helped me with Dinnie. And the city depends on its residents to be its eyes and ears, to bring problems to its attention and oftentimes provide solutions, whether through referendum or grass roots involvement.

We can choose to let our grief end with acceptance, or take things another step. We can help prevent someone else from experiencing our pain, whether over death of a loved one, or robbery or rape or hunger or homelessness. Whatever the tragic event, there is something about the human spirit that makes us compassionate, that makes us want to help one another. We long to share the knowledge we gained through suffering, especially with those who suffered similarly. That has always been a goal of mine.

While I can't do everything, I have learned, I can do something. I can paint over the graffiti in the alley behind my home. I can encourage somebody else's child to do better in their classes. I can commit myself to spending some of my time, even sacrificing if necessary, to make our community better.

I didn't always think like this. My son had to die for me to adopt this philosophy.

At the end of a speech he gave in Los Angeles in 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave some encouraging words that are applicable for me and many other people.

"I say good night to you by quoting the words of an old Negro slave preacher who said,

'We ain't what we ought to be and we ain't what we're going to be. But thank God, we ain't what we was.' "

Chapter 16. God is in Control

July 3, 1989

Today I am so mixed up about everything. One thing I do know is that God is fully in control of my life. I know this by what my interests are. I feel happy and contented when I am helping others who are less fortunate. Mostly, the children I want to help. We need a plan and to organize it and put it into action.

I attended the Los Angeles Wrigley Field event where Dr. King appeared as keynote speaker on May 27, 1963. He was on a speaking tour a month after his famous bloody encounter with Eugene "Bull" Connor and his dogs and fire hoses in Birmingham, Alabama. The March on Washington was held later that year in August.

Aside from finally, for the first time exercising my voting privileges at the age of 29 when John F. Kennedy, Jr. was running for president in 1960, the King rally was my one venture into the Civil Rights Movement. I went there with a female friend from Mt. Olive.

It was a Sunday afternoon after our morning worship service. At 32 years young, I was a single parent living with my three children. We were on the outskirts of Watts in a two-bedroom house behind one of our church elders and his family. Barbara was 11 years old in junior high. Dinnie and Arthur were in grammar school at ages nine and seven.

I was also in school, taking sewing classes at Will Rogers Park near my home while the kids were in their classes. I wanted to become a seamstress and open my own sewing shop. I was about a year short of reaching that goal. Meanwhile, I took in ironing from whites in Huntington Park and supplemented my approximately \$200 monthly income with a \$25 welfare check.

I was making a pretty good sum, I felt, considering my arrival in Los Angeles some six years earlier with only \$5 in my purse.

Having kept the records for my father when he managed the sharecropping farm where I was born near Chisholm, Texas, I had always been good at managing money. With my meager monthly earnings, I saved \$150 to buy a powder-blue 1954 Chevy from my pastor. I drove that car to the King rally.

Also on program with Dr. King at Wrigley Field were Mahalia Jackson, Sammy Davis, Jr. and Melba Moore. So was California Gov. Edmund G. Brown and Los Angeles Mayor Sam Yorty, among others.

Arriving late for the program, my friend and I joined thousands of other people sitting on grassy areas outside the open baseball arena. Nobody was leaving. That's how bad people wanted to see Dr. King.

The organizers had put speakers outside so we could hear the program. They also decided to have two sessions. We got to go inside the second time. Like with the first program, the triangular arena was packed to its capacity of some 20,000.

It was magnificent. I had never felt so inspired and so full of hope for our country. Hearing some of our brightest stars and minds tell us that the walls of racism were coming down and the windows of opportunity were opening up, you couldn't help but believe them.

To heavy applause, rising to the podium on a raised platform on the arena's grass field, Dr. King encouraged participants to join what he called the "fight for freedom." He said we could participate by contributing funds or traveling to our nation's capital to join the Washington march. I did the former when the offering basket passed.

Dr. King told the celebrities there that their presence would encourage other people to join the movement. He electrified the masses present with his resounding, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we're free at last!"

I wanted badly to help Dr. King and his Civil Rights Movement. But what could I do? I was a mother with three children. I couldn't afford to lose my life in a demonstration down South.

Like a lot of colored people in those days, I was glad to see events like the King rally working on our behalf. However, unless you heard about the events on the news, or knew somebody who kept up with such things, many of us knew little if anything about any protests, especially before the advent of television.

Growing up as a youngster in the 1930s, a pastor's daughter, it seems I should have at least known about all the demonstrations growing in earnest. But I didn't.

As far as I knew, if there were any protests in Texas, they didn't come to Chisholm. If there were any such events anywhere near our farm, I didn't know of anyone participating in them.

Surrounded on all sides by some three miles of cotton, my family of two parents and nine kids lived a somewhat isolated existence. Unless traveling into Chisholm or Terrell to buy flour or meal for mama, penny candy or ice cream cones for the children, we didn't encounter too many people other than the dozen or so Negro families also working their allotted plots, in addition to land reserved for the farm owner.

An experienced farmer and former lumber mill worker, my father was foreman of the Griffith League farm where I was born. My dad also served as pastor at the one-room church that he built on a flat hill in the midst of our Texas homestead.

Aside from an occasional white visitor, only black people went to Griffith League Church of God in Christ. And these were no rebel-rousers like the black congregants we hear of in today's history lessons. I don't recall ever hearing one word about demanding our rights as U.S. citizens. At Griffith League, we were as uninformed about the growing movements outside our farm as we were about the fact that our home was named after a former Confederate brigadier general named John Summerfield Griffith. I doubt that my father would have named his church for the landowner and congressman had he known about his part fighting for the Old South. I only recently discovered that bit of history myself.

Griffith had been dead and gone for more than two decades by the time my family arrived at his place in 1929, two years before my birth. Tom and Nora Lewis, the overseers at Griffith League, were the only white people I would see at any time on a regular basis, aside from the children I crossed daily on my way to the black school about a mile or so from our house.

The first time I recall ever protesting anything occurred on that Griffith League roadway to school. Our school teacher was a black woman, Mrs. Roberta Bryant, who was married to my cousin Clarence. Cousin Roberta would walk me and my siblings to school, instructing us to step aside when the white children approached on their way to their school house.

That would always anger me. I couldn't understand why we had to stand in that muddy black dirt so the little white kids could pass by. One day, I decided I wouldn't move at all. When a girl approached me, I only moved my arm. I nudged her as she went by.

The next day, the girl's father came to our school and complained to cousin Roberta. He threatened to straighten us all out if our teacher didn't do it herself. Cousin Roberta asked who hit the little white girl. No one spoke. She would have been surprised to find out that it was me, which she never did. I was so quiet. I was also her pick of the class. She would have never suspected little Faye. Not her pet and after-school helper.

Because of my action, cousin Roberta spent a lot of time that day telling us how striking a white person could get somebody killed. I wondered about that and also wondered why we had to always go to the back door of Miss Nora's house. That seemed strange to me because it was okay for her to go to our front door.

I was a little girl who would run in the backyard and pout when Miss Nora came on our front porch calling my papa Enoch and my mother Adell. It bothered me for her to disrespect my parents like that. But I dealt with it thinking that maybe she could do that because she was the straw boss at Griffith League. I didn't know it was happening like that all over the South.

Looking back now, it seems I should have been more aware of the events happening all around me, or at least known someone in the NAACP, Urban League, UNIA or some other group operating on behalf of blacks in the '30s and '40s. But if my parents had any such connections, they didn't talk about it, not in front of their children.

Visiting Terrell, which was larger than the long dirt road that made up Chisholm, my papa would park our Model T Ford on what we called the back street. The back street was the alley behind the rows of dress shops, general stores, picture shows, banks and government offices along Moore Avenue, Terrell's four-lane main highway.

I didn't know we had been parking in the back because the law prohibited Negroes from parking in front of the buildings. I thought we went to the back street because there were no parks available on Moore Avenue.

To a little girl like me the back street did nothing to draw thoughts of discrimination in Terrell's city code. To me, it was an exciting place where Negroes

would pull up in their Fords or in horse-drawn wagons, talking about the latest happenings in their families, sharing whatever biscuits and corn bread and fried chicken and tea cakes they had.

Kids didn't get into grown folks' business in those days. That was mannish. And so if our elders talked about the evils of whites, they didn't do it in front of me, at least not until my family moved to Dallas when I was 13.

In Dallas, I heard my first stories about black people getting beat, lynched, fired from their jobs, harassed at the store. By then, I was taking note of how we couldn't do certain things or go certain places. That restaurant is okay, but not that one. That station over there will give us gas, but not this one. That bus driver won't send people to jail for refusing to give up their seats, but this one will.

It seems whites were even angrier at blacks when I was a teen during the Great Depression. And since in the city we were living much closer to whites, you could see the differences between us much clearer.

Again, I had to walk a long distance to go to school, about a mile like at Griffith League pass a whites-only school. For blacks and whites, the Dallas campuses were much nicer. On the farm, neither of our schools had playgrounds and brick buildings. In Dallas, the white school had both.

Dallas' black school was more than the one-room shack I had been accustomed to attending. We actually had separate classrooms and a different teacher for each grade level. But again, we studied with tattered books discarded by whites. And we didn't have any playground equipment like the slides and swing sets they had.

It was normal to go to school with all coloreds, so that never bothered me. Besides, many of your classmates would be your kinsfolk, especially in Chisholm where we all came from the same farm.

Like most of the colored people I knew, my family was far from wealthy, although better off than many. At Griffith League, for awhile we were the only Negroes with a car and store-bought furniture. In Dallas, with my father fixing cars, doing home repairs, pastoring the Chisholm church and a second one in Dallas, and running his own newspaper route for the Dallas Morning News, my parents bought the first house they

had owned together in 25 years of marriage. That was quite a feat to us since so many other people were losing their homes during the Depression.

My parents selected and bought a second house for my brother James and his wife Lenore when James came home from the Army after fighting in World War II. They used money my father had saved from the military allotment earnings James had been sending home. My parents bought a third home for my sister Lillie B. and her husband.

All three of the houses were within five blocks of one another and were also located by Corene's house. Corene was the first among us to leave the farm and move to Dallas. She had married in Chisholm and bought a house in Dallas with her husband.

With my father serving as a pastor, the Ross family, as we were called, drew a certain amount of respect, even from white people. My father, with the likely holy name of the Rev. Enoch Elijah Ross, had once thought that God would never allow a white person to make it into heaven.

"You have to love everybody to make it to heaven," papa said. "I ain't seen a white person yet that loves Negroes."

But that was before he met a wonderfully nice white preacher and his wife. The couple spoke a few times at our church. Always, they would come in and out kissing and hugging the black congregants, which was something whites just did not do in the South.

"I've changed my mind," my papa said. "I guess there's good and bad in all races."

Papa said we had to forgive all people for the wrong they did. He repeated those words often, instilling them in his children. My father's words were golden, as far as I was concerned. Like my brothers and sisters always said of me, "Faye never does anything wrong. She don't never cross papa." And so, when my father said love all people and make peace, I did my best to comply. That's why it was always a turn off for me when demonstrators would act rowdy and combative. That's how I was able to forgive my son's murderer.

My father refused to talk bad about people, no matter what they did. But that didn't necessarily make him passive. For example, a young gas station attendant called my father "boy" when he and my twin brothers stopped to buy gas. My father snapped, "The boy's in the back seat," and sped off without buying gas.

Another time, police arrested my father and brother James after my dad accidentally ran his car into a little white girl running across Singleton Avenue, the dividing line between black and white Dallas. My dad ran out and helped the little girl back on her feet. Thankfully, she was fine. But that didn't stop some men from calling police and holding my father and brother. The policeman were just as unyielding, even though the girl said she was alright and admitted to having run in front of my father's Model T.

The two white policemen carted my dad and James off to jail. They said my dad never winced or tried to beg for his life, even though he knew the ordeal could end in his death. I can only guess what might have happened to my father and brother if the girl's father hadn't persuaded the police to release them. They were going to press charges anyhow, the policemen said, even though the man, a preacher like my dad, was refusing to do so on his daughter's behalf. He had found out that my dad was a pastor.

"Turn him loose," the man told police. "He's a preacher man."

The man and my father became good friends after that. His family actually lived rather close to ours, just a few blocks past our house on the other side of Singleton.

In Dallas, I had my own close encounter with racism. It was on a city bus line in 1947, eight years before Rosa Parks made history by refusing to relinquish her bus seat. Mrs. Parks has said on several occasions that she wasn't the first black woman to buck Southern transportation laws relegating blacks to the back of the bus. She was right.

At 16 years old, like Mrs. Parks, I was also on my way home from work, from washing glasses at an Italian restaurant. Like Mrs. Parks, I was also tired mentally more than physically. Riding the bus to work day after day, I had grown tired of paying the same fare as whites only to be asked to relinquish my seat when one of them needed it.

Unlike Mrs. Parks, I fought the white man who wanted my seat.

The Dallas buses had a movable sign with "Whites" on one side and "Coloreds" on the other. On the wall above each row of two seats, there was a small jut with a hole at the top for inserting the short bar at the bottom of the sign. The "Whites" side would face the front of the bus. The "Coloreds" side would face the rear.

When whites came on board and needed more seats, they would move the sign back one row or more and take whatever seats had been assigned to Negroes. I was sitting in the "Coloreds" seat directly behind the sign.

The man of about 30 years and medium height and build asked me to move so he could take my seat. Usually blacks sitting behind the two signs on either side of the aisle would get up automatically when they saw whites come on board. Then, the white person would move the sign back and sit down. I was in the way so this man could do neither.

"I'm getting off at the next stop," I told the man, staring out the window and hoping he would be patient and let me be.

He wouldn't. The man grabbed my arm and snatched me from my seat, tearing my green chiffon blouse that I loved. I came up swinging. We wrestled until the man pushed me down in one of the back seats. I looked at two Negro men who didn't move to help me. I pulled the cord over the window to ring for the next stop and got off clutching my purse, restraining myself from swinging it at the man.

I must be honest and say that I was sorry I had done that. I didn't have any grand notions about changing the laws in Dallas. I didn't have anyone I thought I could turn to, like Mrs. Parks' NAACP co-workers. My hitting the man was just a natural reaction to someone grabbing and humiliating you. I realized too late that I could have been jailed or killed for that. I wasn't willing to go that far.

As a young woman growing up and setting my sights on becoming a missionary, I didn't engage myself in any kind of Negro movement, other than my own drive to get out of Texas. In Chisholm, I would always wonder what lie beyond the hills on Griffith League. In Dallas, I wondered if there was more to life than washing glasses. After my father's death, I found out.

Chapter 17. A Better Place

April 29, 1989

Dear Dinnie,

Today is your birthday. You would have been 36. But you are not here. I hope you are in a better place. My stomach is queasy and painful every time I think about you. But I will be alright because God promised he would take care of me if I trust him and do his will. That is what I am depending on to get me through the day.

I was 18 years old when my father died in 1949. He died of gallstones and a congested heart. My papa passed away sitting in his favorite chair nestled under a blanket. He went quietly, like he had gone to sleep, which made things a little easier for me and my other family members.

It was also more tolerable because we had expected the death of our revered head of the family. We had known for several months that he was dying.

Still, my mother wasn't prepared. Other than working on her parents' farm, she had never worked on a job a day in her life. And I know she never thought her husband would die so young. That left those among us who were employed chipping in to support her and our younger siblings. Mama had always allowed my father to be the disciplinarian. Because of that, it was strange living in the house with her after my father's death. She had never had a thing to say about anything, to my father, to her kids or anybody that I knew of.

The eldest among five children still living at home and in my first year as a legal adult, I couldn't wait to move from the house. I married the first man who asked. His name was Alton.

I left my husband several times for beating me. The first time, we were living in Dallas. I wrapped up my baby, Barbara, and walked about 10 blocks to my mother's house.

After another fight and separation, I went to the district attorney's office. Alton thought I was going to have him arrested. That's when he joined the Air Force, trying to avoid paying child support. I didn't even know he had gone until several months later

when he called me. He said he was in the Air Force and that I would start receiving a monthly allotment check of about \$150. We started sending letters back and forth after that and decided to get back together and live in Cheyenne, where Alton would be stationed.

I was hesitant about leaving Dallas. I was living with my mother and had started having good conversations with her. I was glad to find that she had more heart than I had known, that she actually had stood up for herself on occasion. The stories that surprised me the most were the tales of my soft and quiet mama brandishing a weapon. In one incident, my mother grabbed a shotgun and fired a warning shot at a man who was too flirtatious with her in her parents' house. The man had come to see my grandfather. He jumped on his horse and started riding down the road yelling back, "Tell John...."

"Tell hell!" my mother yelled after him, firing another shot.

Another time, mama pulled a handgun out of her apron and pointed it at a young man rumbling in the bushes with my sister Les. She fired several shots in the man's direction as he ran away, ducking and hiding in the Griffith League cotton fields.

I didn't want to leave my mother, not when I was just getting to know her. I went away sadly to Cheyenne with Barbara on my hip, wondering if I had made the wrong decision.

I got pregnant again after that; this time with Dinnie, the only one of my kids born without their father by my side. When I was pregnant with Dinnie, Alton received orders to go overseas for 18 months. He took Barbara and me to Dallas to live with my mother. Alton was aboard ship en route to Germany when his son was born.

Alton couldn't wait to see his boy. We corresponded back and forth about him. I had also sent Alton pictures. By the time father and son first saw each other Dinnie was 17 months old.

I was living in my own apartment in Dallas when Alton returned from Germany. He was on furlough coming to pick up his family and take us back to his home base in Cheyenne. A happy Alton surprised me when he knocked on our front door one morning, walking in giving me a big, strong hug and a long, wet kiss. He then wanted to see his children. Barbara and Dinnie were in the bedroom the three of us had been sharing alone without Alton for nearly two years.

Standing over Dinnie's crib, grinning at his son, Alton said, "Hi, man."

Dinnie started crying, not loudly but enough for us to know he was upset by Alton's presence. I felt bad for my husband. He had wanted so badly to see his son.

"That's okay," Alton said. "He's got to get to know me."

It took about three days for Dinnie to warm up to his father. He didn't cry when he came around. He just wouldn't respond to him like he was daddy. He didn't get giddy or romp and play like Barbara was doing with Alton.

And then it happened. Alton was driving our dark blue '52 Oldsmobile with Dinnie standing between him and me. Dinnie put his hand on Alton's shoulder. Alton said, "Look," pointing at Dinnie's little hand. He was looking at his son and smiling, pleased that Dinnie was finally getting used to him. That was the closest I ever saw them get.

A couple of days later, I was out shopping with Alton's mom, Clara. We returned to my apartment to the sounds of Dinnie crying and screaming. We could hear the sounds of a strap hitting flesh and Alton yelling about teaching his 17-month-old son a lesson. They were in the bathroom.

"What's wrong with you boy?!" Alton's mom yelled at her son, scooping up Dinnie off the floor. "This child is still a baby!"

"A baby? That's what's wrong, mother. That boy peed on himself. He's too big for that. He should be going to the bathroom."

"Are you crazy?!" Clara said. "You just got home! You should give him time to get to know you before you start beating on him."

Dinnie had been warming up to Alton, but he started running from him after that, oftentimes behind my legs. In Dallas and back in Cheyenne, Alton kept whipping our toddler with a belt and Dinnie kept running. Alton would slap me across the face for trying to protect Dinnie or for speaking up about most anything. I bled once, but not because of the licks. I hit my head running into a doorway trying to get away from my husband. He had come in drunk that night and started beating me when I complained about it.

The bleeding wouldn't stop so I asked Alton to take me to the base doctor. He said they would discharge him if they suspected that he had hit me. When Alton went to sleep,

snoring hard as usual, I drove myself. I had a hard time seeing at night, the blood was so bad.

The fights went off and on, about twice or more per month. Outside of his temper tantrums and nights out boozing and womanizing, Alton was a good family man, a good provider and a good lover. He adored his daughter Barbara and stopped beating Dinnie after Arthur was born. Alton wouldn't hit me as long as he was attending church. I thought I loved him and believed he loved me. It took nine years for me to leave him completely.

I was talking on the phone with Lillie B. about my desire to leave Alton. She was living in California in the Pueblo del Rio housing projects in a small Los Angeles district called Watts.

"Don't worry about nothing," she told me by telephone. "We'll take care of you and that man too if we have to. You know there's a lot of family here now."

It took a month for me to work my plan. I put a footlocker in our living room closet and packed it little by little with clothing, towels, and other items. I told Alton I was leaving him, but he didn't believe me. I had threatened that before. When I was ready to go, I didn't tell him.

My husband was always coming in late after a night on the town with booze and other women. He came in one night and passed out in our bed like he always did. I was glad he didn't pull on me and try to have sex like he would do. This was the night I had chosen to leave for California. I had been at church and kept my dress on.

Around 11 p.m. that April night in 1957, with Alton snoring and the children asleep, I took a cab to the bus station and bought tickets for the children and me. When the driver took me home I told him to return for the kids and me in one hour. I went inside and pulled the footlocker and our suitcase to the porch. I didn't want to do it later when it might have awakened Alton.

I dressed my kids and took all three with me outside. I had to shush them several times to keep them from crying because they were tired. I didn't feel safe until we were on the Trailways bus heading away from Cheyenne.

I had been in California only once before. I had driven mama and my younger sister Lucille there to live with Corene. That was in 1955. My family was among scores

of blacks migrating from the South to escape the land of Jim Crow. Despite victories like the 1954 Supreme Court order to abolish school segregation and the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott that gave the city's blacks the right to sit anywhere on a bus, the departures increased. Things weren't changing that fast.

Arriving in Corene's Watts neighborhood, I was amazed by the number of blacks and by how nice things were. Most of the houses looked pretty new. Even those with cracked paint seemed a little spruced up with trim lawns, lush bushes and pretty flowerbeds.

Corene had a nice two-bedroom place where she was living with her husband. They were church folks and so didn't get around to the local night spots that brought the likes of Duke Ellington, Sarah Vaughn and Cab Calloway to a Central Avenue with lots of sparkling lights.

In Los Angeles, word on the street was that white folks wouldn't bother you as long as you stayed living on your side of town. Other than that, you could eat where you want and sit where you want and nobody said anything. No Jim Crow.

You could get a job at one of the plants by the tracks or at the docks or base out there in Long Beach. No farms.

You could buy a nice, big house for your family and have your own trees, yard, and garden. No shacks.

Corene was the first of our Ross family to move to the land of plenty. She came with her husband in 1952 when the Army transferred him there.

I was in awe of Los Angeles when I arrived there with mama. But I was married to Alton and was heading back to Cheyenne. It wouldn't have mattered, though, if I were single. I didn't want to live in California. I was afraid of the smog. I had heard too many bad reports about it.

"Your eyes burn when you go out in the air."

I was worried about that. I thought the smog might make you go blind. My mother, ever trusting God to keep her, said I was being silly.

Back out West two years later for a second arrival -- this time for good -- I was wiser and tougher and determined to make it on my own.

Stepping off the bus downtown at Grand Central Station, I arrived my second time in California with three kids, a footlocker, a suitcase and a pocketbook with \$5 -- all the money I possessed.

I was glad to see my sister Lillie B. waiting for us with her car at the bus terminal. I was depending on her to get us through until I could find a job or receive my next \$150 Air Force allotment.

Having never lived in a metropolis with skyscrapers and shopping centers offering more jobs and material goods than I had ever seen in any one area, I relished the opportunities before me in big city Los Angeles. And I especially loved the idea of a newfound freedom and independence in a city where the sun never seemed to stop shining.

Walking through Grand Central Station to the parking lot outside, I looked like most Southern ladies did in those days, black or white. Powder-blue headscarf tied under my neck. Scarf coordinated with the same color gloves and dress. Black shoes and purse also matching. Soft-spoken and petite, at about 118 pounds.

All four Wootens were bundled up for Cheyenne's chilly April wind. Baby Arthur was in my arms wrapped in a blanket. At 18 months, he had trouble walking with his left leg three-quarter inches shorter than the other. Barbara and Dinnie, six and four years old, were in their snowsuits.

I was wearing a long jacket, even though I knew from news reports that Los Angeles with its Spring season was bright and sunny. As I had hoped, we didn't need our coats in California. I took mine off at the station and unbundled my children when we reached Lillie B.'s apartment.

There, we lived happy but cramped in a three-bedroom, two-story flat with my sister, her husband and four daughters. Within six months, I had my own project apartment with store-bought furniture. I also had a job making salad at Bullock's and a car, the powder-blue Chevy I drove six years later to the King rally. I left the Bullock's job after six months to take up ironing at home because it was hard trying to pay for a babysitter.

For four years, from 1957 to 1962, we lived in "the Pueblos," as we called our projects. We paid \$53 per month for two bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs, a living

room, dining area and kitchen at the bottom. It was much nicer than our Cheyenne apartment. The Pueblos were practically new. We had fresh hardwood floors upstairs and tile downstairs that you could wax and buff till it glistened. My kids had many happy days playing on our own green lawn out front. In Cheyenne, there was only concrete.

I had always taken pride in my home. My mother taught me that. No matter how poor, you could always have a clean place with some comforts and decoration. To me, that meant bedroom and living room furniture, and glass and ceramic figurines, my prized possessions.

Since I was no longer receiving my 'lotment after Alton's discharge, I did go on welfare eventually, but by accident.

I had never heard of welfare. One day, I was telling a friend at work that I needed to make some extra money to get my car out of the shop. She suggested that I go to a place where they might help me with a loan. It was the county building.

Arriving there by city bus, I filled out the forms and interviewed with a social worker. She sounded to me like they couldn't help me.

"I just need to borrow enough money to get my car out," I told the black woman.

"We are not a loan agency," she said sharply.

"Okay," I said, rising from my chair and leaving the building.

I felt humiliated. In Texas, you worked for what you got. It was a shame to ask for handouts. It had taken a lot for me to go for help, only to be rejected so harshly.

About a month later, I got a check in the mail for \$18. Two more \$18 checks came within a week. I could see that they were from the county place that I had gone to. Still, I was afraid to cash them. I thought that maybe it was a mistake and carried them around in my purse for a few weeks thereafter.

I finally got enough nerves to call the social worker.

"What are these checks for?" I asked.

"It's a supplement to your salary. You don't make enough to take care of your kids."

She told me to send my pay stubs to her every month. Any county money I would receive each month would be based on my salary. I started getting about \$25 to \$30 per

month. I was ashamed to cash those first three checks after I found out what they were for.

Two years later after marrying Harris in 1965, I couldn't wait to tell the county that I didn't need any more welfare. I made an appointment to meet a social worker at my house and complete my final paperwork. It was common for social workers to come to your home like that, mostly to see if you were living too high to be on assistance. A television set, new furniture or a boyfriend sleeping over could get you cut off. I was tired of living under so much scrutiny.

Responding to my request to close my file, the white male social worker sitting in my living room told me, "I'm sure sorry to lose you."

I didn't understand. I thought they would be happy that I didn't need any more government assistance.

"You never bother us," the social worker explained. "We hate to see the good ones go. You never know who they will replace you with. Some people just bother you all the time."

I was glad to see the man go after I told him to stop my checks. I was surprised and a little angry about what he had said. Some people bothered him. And not only that, he would rather for me to stay on the county because I never called them for anything. He didn't say anything about being happy that I was on my way to doing better than ever before as a black woman with three children living on the outskirts of Watts in 1965. This was a far cry from the glitz and glamour I had envisioned on the bus ride into Los Angeles. I had to wonder, what else did this town have to offer?