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The Story of Me

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STORYTELLER: Linda Burks

HILLCREST

I grew up in a large family; I have four sisters and three brothers. I am the oldest. We grew up in Dayton, Ohio. My parents had moved here from Kentucky. My father was in World War II. After the war, my mother and father moved to Dayton in January to find a job. My father got a job at the Veteran's Administration. My mother stayed at home and you can imagine what she was doing during that time: taking care of all of us. I grew up in a neighborhood of many, many children. We would walk to school, walk to wherever we wanted to go, and we could walk all over.

My father was a preacher, so my family was quite involved in church. My father also had to work several jobs to support all of us. I grew



up going to church every day, I was involved in everything at church. My sister closest to me and I use to sing together. I had a close-knit family; we would spend a couple weeks in the summer going back to Kentucky to visit grandparents. We would also do family things like go to the movies and have picnics. My mother was very protective. I had friends, but was never allowed to spend the night. All the kids came in at 6 o'clock to watch Little Rascals without being told.

School, I loved school. I always knew I was going to be a teacher. I taught all my siblings how to read and write. I taught my sisters how to read and write. By the time one of my sisters went to kindergarten, I taught her how to write everyone's name. In school, because I liked school, there was no problem. I loved math. It was my favorite subject, especially in college. My life was mostly involved in church and singing, helping out at home, helping do chores and reading. I was an avid reader. I read almost everything. By the time I was in the 8th grade, I was reading one book a day. I was not an outdoor person.

My neighborhood when I first moved in our house, we had white neighbors, but after a few years we had almost exclusively black neighbors. **WE LIVED A NEIGHBORHOOD WHERE WE COULD GO TO THE MARKET UP THE BLOCK. THREE BLOCKS AWAY WAS AN A&P SUPERMARKET. THERE WERE**

NO WORRIES ABOUT VIOLENCE. We were cautioned, but it never happened. We'd always be in groups, especially walking to and from school. We were always picking people up and dropping them off.

Our neighborhood right now in the Hillcrest area has changed since we moved here in 1994. The occupants owned all the houses on our street, but now several are rented. Crime used to be low in this neighborhood but has increased significantly. Some of our white neighbors have moved out and been replaced by black neighbors and many of the businesses on N. Main have closed. In Dayton, when I grew up, anyone who wanted to work, would work, jobs were plentiful. Since I went to college and went into teaching, my income was low. Teachers didn't usually get paid as well as everyone else. Everyone back then had a high school diploma; it was uncommon not to have one.

We as black people discipline and correct our children more today because from day one we are told to do better and be better and have to compete with others around us.

I LIVED THROUGH THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, THROUGH WHICH I GOT TO WITNESS THE FIGHT FOR BETTER JOBS AND BETTER OPPORTUNITIES. IT WAS A DIFFERENT FOCUS THEN. You could go to a restaurant and worry about not being seated because of your skin color. During this time, employment

and housing was not equal. Black people lived on the Westside, and the White people would be elsewhere. If you haven't noticed, the big divider are railroad tracks or a bridge.

I would say we lived through the best of times and the worst of times. We never heard racial slurs coming from our families, never. **WE JUST GREW UP WITH PEOPLE DIFFERENT THAN US AND ACCEPTED THEM.** Back then, we used to know our neighbors, and now we don't. We were unaware of discrimination. Our parents went through it but didn't tell us, they just told us later. Our teachers were our first line of African-Americans with degrees, so they were dead set on us being educated so we could do things in the world. The reality is that someone that looks like me is going to be killed, every weekend. **WE HAVE TO TEACH OUR KIDS OF COLOR AT A YOUNG AGE IF YOU SEE THE POLICE, PUT YOUR HANDS UP. TO US, AND MANY OTHERS, ATTACK ON PEOPLE OF COLOR BY PEOPLE OF UNIFORM, IS THE REALITY.**

There are many things that I consider to be highlights in my life. One of them has been able to travel around the country. One time we went to Washington D.C. for a family reunion. We got to go to the White House to see President Clinton. This was on the Fourth of July. We were on the lawn and they had big trucks full of dove bars and popsicles, the red white and blue ones. The Air Force band was also playing,

and then the Clintons came out and waved. We had our children with us. Clinton was our first advocate as people of color because there were people like us not just pushing brooms but, carrying briefcases in the White House. It was important to us that our kids could see this, so they could know they can be like those people someday. We grew up in a time when we knew we couldn't tell our kids they can be anything they want, which is why this experience was so important to me and my husband.