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Through Life's Changes, God Provides: Bill's Story

STORYTELLER: Bill Johnson

I have learned many lessons during my 77 years of life: relationships matter, your word is your bond, and most importantly, that God provides. I have lived in Dayton all my life and have seen the city change. **IT IS EASY FOR MOST TO COMPLAIN ABOUT THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF THOSE CHANGES, BUT I HAVE HAD THE GOOD FORTUNE TO BE PART OF POSITIVE EVOLUTION OF DAYTON.**

I was born within sight of Miami Valley Hospital, but not in it. The good doctor attending to my mother would not pay the fee to practice at the hospital. So I was born at home one block north of the hospital in the South Park neighborhood. My family rented the house, and even though both were college-educated, my parents struggled to find jobs worthy of their education.

MADDEN HILLS



The economy still suffered from the effects of the Great Depression, and racism was alive and strong in the city. Despite these factors, my parents taught me to keep a positive attitude and the importance of a strong work ethic and integrity.

When I entered elementary school, we lived in Lower Dayton View, a mostly white neighborhood. As one of only five black children at the school, we experienced the negativity of racism, my older sister taking the brunt of it. But Dayton was changing. When I started High School in 1953, I was one of 1,250 students entering Roosevelt High School. This was its biggest class. When I graduated four years later, there were 350 students in the class. When I entered, 90 percent of the high school was white and four years later it was 90 percent of the students were black.

After high school, I followed my sister to Ohio University. **AFTER SEEING THE HARDSHIP OF TWO TUITION PAYMENTS ON MY PARENTS, I STOPPED AFTER A YEAR AND TOOK A JOB AS A LABORER WITH INLAND MANUFACTURING, A DIVISION OF GENERAL MOTORS.** Inland represented the one-time industrial and manufacturing strength of Dayton. They even needed to recruit workers from outside the city to staff the factories during World War II. But the manufacturing base of Dayton

was changing, too. Manufacturing left the vital neighborhoods that were built to support so many workers. The loss of manufacturing left the neighborhoods struggling, and in decline.

My work ethic served me well, and I was placed on a promotion track and eventually rose to General Foreman. My business experience counted for credit in an adult degree program at Antioch College. I completed coursework to receive a Bachelor's in Business Administration. Concerned about changing practices at GM, I left for a new direction. I joined CityWide Development Corp., the housing development division of the city of Dayton, rising to Director of Housing Development. In this role, I could bring positive advancements to Dayton neighborhoods.

My appreciation of the importance of home ownership came from my experience in 1966, when I tried to build my first house in the West Wood neighborhood. **LOAN SERVICES WERE NOT ATTAINABLE BASED ON MY SKIN COLOR AND CHOICE OF NEIGHBORHOOD, A PRACTICE KNOWN AS REDLINING.** At CityWide I managed a city-based lending program for home improvements and worked hard to extend services to the people in Dayton neighborhoods. My relationships led to other opportunities, and I ended up as the Manager of Housing and Neighborhood

Development with the City of Dayton. I was able to work directly on neighborhood redevelopment and restoring homes and properties in the city. I feel proud of the positive changes we were able to bring to Dayton neighborhoods.

In building my current home, I chose the Madden Hills neighborhood. I had worked on the Madden Hills Neighborhood project beforehand, which was the first urban renewal project in the city. Part of my work in retirement focuses on our neighborhood association. We are working on obtaining status as a nonprofit organization so we can buy or take over abandoned homes and apply for grants to continue to improve the area. This neighborhood has a good base of people, but the population is aging. There are no easily accessible stores for healthy food. Some of what we do as an association is to offer care for seniors who want to stay in their homes but need access to food. We encourage people to make wills and plans for their home to avoid abandoning properties when they pass on.

It is easy to look back at the changes in Dayton and identify the problems that caused them. But I prefer to look forward and be part of the developments that improve the city. **I'VE SURROUNDED MYSELF WITH GOOD PEOPLE AND**

HAVE WORKED TO TAKE A NEGATIVE AND MAKE IT A POSITIVE. GOD IS GOOD AND PROVIDES FOR US. I am grateful for the opportunities to serve Him and the people in the Dayton neighborhoods.