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Writing Portfolio

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WRITING PORTFOLIO

By

Stephanie Sidney

A Capstone Project

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Professional Writing

in the Department of English

of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences

at

Kennesaw State University
Kennesaw, Georgia

December, 2012

College of Humanities & Social Sciences
Kennesaw State University
Kennesaw, Georgia
Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

Stephanie Sidney

Has been approved by the committee
for the capstone requirement for

the Master of Arts in Professional Writing
in the Department of English

December, 2012
At the (month and year) graduation

Capstone committee:

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Member

Margaret B. Walters

Member

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INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

After earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in English at Agnes Scott College in 1993 (at age 33), I pursued a career in journalism and worked in several media positions, which have included working as an obituary writer at the Atlanta Journal Constitution, a TV news producer with CBS in Columbus, GA and a public relations director at an Atlanta seminary. In these positions, the tasks I found most rewarding were writing obituaries and writing newsletter articles while working as a PR director because writing these pieces allowed me to connect small parts of history that made up people's lives. Both tasks fed my interest in life stories and the journey that makes each person the finished product they become. Whether a story is about a famous and beloved person or an infamous criminal, I find myself wondering: What was this person like at four years old? Did he feel normal or different as a small child? What is his favorite thing to eat; the last thing that made him cry?

Earning a Master's degree in creative writing became important to me as, for several years now, I have wanted to publish my memoir. I have wanted to share my lessons learned and life's questions that I still ponder. Although I realized that talented writing could not be taught, I sought graduate-level academic instruction to develop my ability to better show instead of tell my experiences through effective use of dialogue, metaphor, and character development. I also desired the regular interaction, energy, and expertise of other writers, and I wanted to gain respect as a colleague in this field.

I am glad for the journey I have taken in the Master of Arts in Professional Writing (MAPW) program at Kennesaw State University because I feel sure that what I have obtained in my classes has strengthened my writing across all genres. I have been enriched by my experience with fellow writers in the program and value the texts introduced to me—whether creative, applied, or rhetorical in nature. Class discussions were also invaluable, as were the comments and corrections by my professors, and the reading aloud of my own writing as well as that of my classmates. The deadlines, although I struggled sometimes to keep up, provided a welcome tool of accountability that I needed and wanted.

I learned from my creative writing classes about elements that a well-written work should contain, or that should be the writer's goal to achieve in mastering the art of telling a story:

- Create the drama and conflict as soon as possible (inciting incident)
- Create three-dimensional characters (actions, thoughts/emotions, and background)
- Establish what the protagonist wants
- Establish the stakes/obstacle(s) in the protagonist's way
- Create a reveal/surprise/mystery – a sharp reversal or twist
- Show a change in a major character
- Temper the use of adjectives and adverbs and the use of verb forms “to be” and “to have”
- Write dialogue that isn't simply chatter but that reveals something about a character
- Write effective settings, foreshadowing, and flashbacks

In playwriting I learned of the correct use and execution of elements unique to that genre:

- Stage direction
- Lighting

- Off-stage effects (sounds, etc.)
- Prop utilization for characterization
- Monologue

The MAPW program also helped me hone my style as a writer, as style establishes a writer's identity. Among the many explanations of style I read in Ben Yagoda's *The Sound on the Page* (while taking PRWR 7900, Style for Writers), the definition that most caught my attention is that style is about simplicity and clarity and the arrangement of the words. I am a proponent of keeping it simple in all aspects of life, including writing—whether I am the scribe or the reader. If a writer uses too many highfalutin or convoluted words, I start to skim, rather than absorb the content. Readers of my work consistently tell me that I am good at utilizing detail to draw them into my writing and in providing a visual. The caution of that is that I must always beware that my sentences are not too wordy.

My style of writing is also influenced by my audience. If I am conversing with friends on Facebook or by email, I often slip into southern slang or pop-culture colloquialisms: “y’all,” “dude” “doin’,” “nothin’,” “feelin’” or “not feelin’” (liking or not liking) something. In writing for school research papers or business I, of course, write formally, but even then I try to communicate in such a way to make myself stand out. I say this because I think that sometimes the style of formal writing style can alienate readers and keep them from appreciating the author behind the work. Even when I have applied for jobs I tried to express something meaningful about myself as a person. Subsequently, I noticed that the occasions when I received a response about a job application, it was usually when I spent extra time personalizing the cover letter, crafting

with an aim, so that the potential employer knows that I am writing to that specific company and am not using a generic letter that could be sent to anyone.

One thing I sometimes do in my writing is pose questions. My style is partly about my effort to persuade readers to think about what I've said, rather than persuade them to see a topic from my point of view. I suppose it is my way of trying to engage my audience rather than telling them what ought to be.

In describing my process of writing I must address the pesky objective of time management. I often long to simply clean my home, organize my things, read one of the memoirs on my book list, or just sit and listen to the sounds around me, especially if it's morning: the birds, the wind, my own memories. I have discovered that, like a member of some kind of 12-step program, it was necessary to put myself on a regimen: less TV, even lesser TV, finally no TV by giving it away five years ago. Still, like Kudzu, the internet creeps into my life increasingly, because of all the video clips and links, even if I simply want to check my email. Open an email from a friend: "Hey, check this out. Unbelievable." My yahoo account also tells me that I have five messages from people I know on Facebook: "Hey girl, you've got to see this" or I fail to resist reading the headlines for the day while online: "Click here to see the three-minute interview of . . .," so part of my writing process is guarding myself from my particular distractions.

As I recall, my earliest personal writing, that is, writing that was not a required school assignment began when I started writing my thoughts on paper at about age 11. My journal has been my confidant throughout any tumultuous years in my life. When I was a child, although I didn't call it journaling, writing my feelings down when I had a problem was how I coped. It was how I recorded my dreams and my pain, my questions

and my moments of clarity. Journaling was where I deposited my fantasies for safekeeping—the house I'd live in when I grew up, the kind of man I would marry, the career I would start after college. I would go in my room, sit next to my window and write in my school notebook about whatever it was, and what I wished was different.

I have some angst that I have no written record of where my head was between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four while I was a member of COBU. I still have everything I did write during that five-year period, but it's all bible study notes, plastic Jesus words written by a robot. Once I left the cult, I started writing again: essays, poems, fiction plots, and more journaling.

I envy those who freely speak of a love of writing. While I do find it rewarding to finish any project, it is compulsion that I feel as much as any positive emotion described by other writers. To me, obligation and passion don't go together. But at least I am neither a chain smoker, nor an alcoholic as I've read that many classic authors are. However, I do appreciate a green apple martini every now and then.

I try to find the balance between what I am driven to write and what fits with the current times. From there it fits to write about what is timeless. From the origin of humans to the day we no longer exist, surely what is the most timeless is our meaningful relationships—whether enriching or destructive, as we relate to one another and to our environment. I once wrote a piece about not enjoying being a girl, not enjoying my life as a girl. This statement was not about wanting to be a boy or man or do boy-man things; it was about wanting the charmed life of a girl. Writing was how I learned to sort out the mundane messiness I often saw instead, and how I learned to reflect by looking back at what I had written, and make sense of it, whether an hour, day or year later. I am

reminded of one of my favorite songs, “My Favorite Things” from the film, *The Sound of Music*.

Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens;
 Bright copper kettles and warm woolen
 mittens;
 Brown paper packages tied up with strings;
 These are a few of my favorite things.

Girls in white dresses with blue satin sashes;
 Snowflakes that stay on my nose and
 eyelashes;
 Silver-white winters that melt into springs;
 These are a few of my favorite things.

When the dog bites,
 When the bee stings,
 When I'm feeling sad,
 I simply remember my favorite things,
 And then I don't feel so bad.

Although my favorite things would not include some of the things listed in this song, since I wasn't raised in an Austrian village, it is the connection that I feel with some of the images that the words inspire: the warmth, the comfort, the simple certainty that some of the images provide. My list would include other favorite things like seeing shades of the color green; wearing shoes that feel good and look smart (a rarity for my size ten feet); eating peach or blackberry cobbler homemade by my grandmother or hot cornbread from the oven; hearing the rain or wind outside when I am snug in bed; and enjoying the quiet of an early morning when there are no cars, voices, or TV commercials. This kind of quiet is helpful to me as a writer. As with the absence of television, I do not play music when I am writing.

All of this, as part of my fight to resist procrastination, is part of my writing process. If I am working my day job or talking to someone, I usually do not get writing ideas. I get the most or best ideas to write and about writing while I am driving, perhaps because that is when I do the most thinking and perhaps because (with windows up) there is very little sound. Second most is when I am reading the works of others. For me it's like dancing. Seeing someone else's choreography of the written word inspires me to create my own. I liken my writing to a journey, its highs and lows determined by my emotional, mental, and environmental climate: stormy, sunny, overcast, gray of winter, colors of fall. It is not that any of these prevent or agitate my writing; it is that they determine my mood and thus the kind of writing I do.

As with many writers, one of my biggest struggles is getting the story in my head articulated onto paper, as well as getting past the frustration when I see that the words on paper are not as good as what I envisioned. Another challenge for me is finding the funny in my creative writing, since humor is what I admire most in other writers, especially while telling of difficult life experiences. Understandably, these seem to be most well-received. I realize that every piece of work need not be a comedy, but the stories that I want to tell I believe would be much more palatable if they were put in a humorous tone. I have been impressed for example by the memoirs of Margaret Cho (*I'm the One that I Want*) and Augusten Burroughs (*Running with Scissors*). I think of works like the musical, *Book of Mormon* by Robert Lopez, Trey Parker, and Matt Stone (creators of the adult animated sitcom "South Park"), and the films "Juno," and "Bridesmaids."

In 2010 I had a decision to make: remain in Los Angeles for the rest of my life or return to Georgia while I was still young enough to start over—again. Decide where to go to graduate school. Decide what to do with the rest of my life. There was something soothing I found in the mystery and strangeness of the big city vs. the familiar, dull, aching boredom of the small town. Yet as a single adult with no children, I felt I should ponder carefully whether to spend my senior years in California with no family nearby.

I come from a rural background where life is about being practical. Finish high school (at least), get a good hourly-waged job, get your own place, get a good car, and get married and have kids. Among my family members there was not much dreaming beyond that, nor entertaining the thought of doing anything outside the box. To an outsider, my extended family seems a friendly, down home people, but over the decades there have been too many instances of alcoholism, sexual molestation and out-of-wedlock births—events that bothered me from a young age. I am sure that my feelings about these dysfunctions in my family propelled me into the arms of religion. It was supposed to be my life insurance against any of these aberrations shaping my life. “Can’t nobody live holy in this world,” my mother would say. But for a time I sure did try. I kept my grades up, participated in school activities, made it out of high school without getting pregnant or into any other trouble and made it into college. I also became a member of a Jesus cult.

The Church of Bible Understanding (COBU) started during the Jesus Movement of the 1970s. This movement filled a religious spectrum from the socially recognized Calvary Chapel ministries usually found on college campuses, and which still exists today, to the infamous Peoples Temple headed by Jim Jones which ended in the tragic

deaths of 909 people in 1978. COBU sits somewhere in the middle of the spectrum: it began rationally but went downhill due to the dictatorship of its leader, and a remnant of the organization still remains in existence today.

My six-year experience in COBU was a pivotal crossroad in my own life. I was recruited to join this church midway through my freshman year at Washington, D.C.'s Howard University in February, 1978. I was a member from 1978 – 1984 when I was age eighteen to twenty-four. Once I broke free from the group, I coped with the conflicts of this experience through writing about my questions and discoveries about self-esteem and identity, sexuality and religion, the culture of being black, female, and Christian, and my core beliefs versus transient values.

The following capstone encompasses two parts, a memoir piece about my experience in COBU and a short biography about my maternal grandmother. I chose these two because I felt that these have been two of the biggest shapers of my life. The third would be my relationship with my mother but that has yet to be written.

It was in my Creative Nonfiction Writing class in the MAPW Program that I first work-shopped a manuscript about my time as a member of COBU during which I also experienced a sexual assault at the age of nineteen. In previous drafts, I toned down what happened and the resulting emotional damage it caused because I didn't feel that I had the ability to return readers to a bright enough light in proportion to the murky gloom of details I would write. For this reason, I appreciated reading Jon Franklin's explanation in *Writing for Story* of how to frame a story with a positive ending, even when it's not a happy-ending story. Also I aimed to incorporate Franklin's suggested five threads of a story: time, place, character, subject, and mood. It was a light bulb moment for me

when, in response to a question I asked in Creative Nonfiction Writing class, Dr. Niemann explained that a well-written memoir (or creative writing in general), should take readers through a range of emotions, not just one of them—as does life.

My reason for entitling my memoir piece “Small Revelations” is because surviving this experience was a form of coming of age for me, and the title is meant to be an ironic way of understating what was for me a life-altering experience. A fellow MAPW student who read a draft once told me that there needed to be some great revelation at the end because otherwise the story I wrote was just too sad. But I find that trying to write about some worthwhile lesson(s) in the experience remains un-gratifying for me, but it is my desire, as explained before, to include a sense of humor aspect in it. I am not there yet. But I so admire people who can do that.

The second piece in my Capstone, a biography of my grandmother, Mrs. Lou Bertha (Chop) Sidney, tells the story of a woman who was valued for who she was to the people around her in daily life, even though she wasn't rich, nor glamorous, nor a scandalous public figure, which seems to be the basis of so many biographies today. The areas I covered provide a portrait of a person who was not worldly or cultured. I tried to show her humor and her relationship to other people. I attempted to cover the major elements that I felt should be included in anyone's life: physical appearance; spouse and children and my grandmother's relationship with them, the geographic location where she lived and her physical dwelling. I also touched on some parts of her life that were a source of enjoyment and inspiration such as her cooking and her gardening, as well as her image and reputation. Regarding her beliefs and values, it was not Chop's way to verbally teach things, nor did she, because of her own upbringing, have an immense

amount of progressive thinking (in my opinion) about how life should be lived. My grandmother's modus operandi or precept for how to live seemed to be about hard work, which she displayed in her own way of life and demanded from her children (some adhered to that, some did not).

Due to the sheer lack of records and limited memories of the oldest individuals I interviewed, the period of my grandmother's life that I wanted most to cover was the most difficult to obtain: the period from 1935 to 1960, when she would have been around age 22 to 47. Among the interviews that I was able to conduct, I found it odd that so often people were not curious to ask the origin of a thing only because it is what they've always known. For example, none of Chop's children ever thought to ask her how she got the name "Chop." Fortunately, there were other basic questions like this one that I thought to ask her myself during the early 1990s when she was in her 80s and I, in my early 30s, had begun to be curious about my family roots. There is no end to what a writer can learn about a person. As I wrote this biography, new perspectives continued to pop up, such as the fact that even my mother, who is now 76, cannot remember Chop and my grandfather, Frank, ever sleeping in the same bed, yet they conceived 13 children together.

The biographies we read for PRWR 7900/03, Writing Biography class were certainly helpful in guiding me in the process of writing this piece. The books for the class included *How to Live: Or A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer* by Sarah Bakewell; *How to Do Biography: A Primer* by Nigel Hamilton; and *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* by Hermione Lee. For me, these provided examples of keeping the balance between providing accurate, researched

information while weaving a good story that is interesting to the reader. Hermione Lee's 10 Rules of Biography listed in her book provided a solid guideline, but in particular I aimed to make the story true; cover as much of my grandmother's life as possible; identify my sources; and attempted to provide some history of the decades during which my grandmother lived. I will continue pursuing interviews with individuals who are still living and old enough to share memories that will increase my knowledge about previous generations in my family.

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SMALL REVELATIONS

Off to College

“Do they have somebody to meet you when you get there?” my mother asked. I hadn’t thought about that beforehand, and I guess she hadn’t either.

“The D.C. bus station is downtown so I imagine there’ll be a taxi,” I said. We had been sitting in the bus station for an hour now: my mother, my seven-year-old brother, Shawn, and me. We looked straight ahead while sitting in the front row of the waiting area, not talking much, each thinking our own thoughts.

I had developed independence early, growing up with Shawn and my mother who as a single-parent worked as a seamstress in a men’s clothing store. By middle-school I was taking care of Shawn while doing homework, chores, school activities, and—from the time I turned fifteen—a part-time job. So my friends and relatives were not surprised that I picked a college so far away from home. Most of my graduating classmates were going to college in Atlanta, only an hour away from our small town of Griffin, Georgia. My three closest friends had enrolled in Atlanta’s Spelman College, the oldest institution of higher education established for African American women. But I wanted to be different. I wanted to be further than that from our small town life.

After an unmemorable goodbye to my mother and brother, I got on the bus. I hadn’t thought to bring anything to read on the 28-hour trip so, when I wasn’t sleeping I spent my waking hours looking out the window and fantasizing about my first year at college: Once I arrived in Washington D.C., I would get off the bus and experience my

first big city. I would take a taxi to my dorm on campus to start the college experience at Howard University I had been waiting for all year. Of course a very handsome sophomore, junior—or maybe even a senior—with a muscular build, sparkling teeth, and a white “H” on his navy blue sweater would meet me, gather my bags, and escort me to where the freshmen needed to go.

I’d saved my money from my part-time job at a local restaurant and coordinated all my outfits. Maybelline eye-shadow and flavored lip gloss completed my makeup regimen. Ironed and creased, all my bell-bottom jeans rested neatly in my suitcase. I’d practiced my dance moves: the robot and the hustle. I was prepared for this.

When my bus pulled into the station in downtown D.C., instead of the scene I imagined, I walked out onto the street and smelled the sharp odor of urine. In one direction, a crazy-looking man was yelling obscenities and twirling a belt with one hand while holding up his pants with his other hand. This was the first of the many homeless people I would get used to seeing in a big city, something I never saw in Griffin. In the other direction, taxis lined up along the street. Relieved that I didn’t have to walk past the crazy, yelling man, I walked to the nearest cab and tapped on the window. The driver looked up from reading the newspaper.

“Yeah, where ya headed?” he said as his cigarette bobbed up and down in his mouth.

“The main entrance of Howard University, please.”

“Sure, get in,” the driver said, tossing his cigarette out the window.

After the cab ride I somehow lugged my two suitcases inside the main brick entrance of the school. It was 1977 when I arrived at Howard, a 17-year-old from a small Georgia town.

My dream was to become a news anchor on the 6 o'clock evening news. Making good grades in reading and history and my love of talking (even though it got me Cs in conduct on my report card) steered me in that direction. The idea of sitting behind the desk, popping my head up from my paper and telling everyone all the important things that had happened that day appealed to me. I had no idea of what it took to get there as I would find out years later when I did before a news producer for a short time. Nor did it occur to me that all the news anchors at that time were white and male. It was my version of being a rock star. I'd scripted my personal life as well: get married by age twenty-five, have four children by the time I was 30 (two boys and two girls), and drive a green Volvo with gold interior (like my high school colors). Our house would have white siding and black trim, green grass, and a little white dog that played in the yard.

Campus signs hung all around listing activities and directions that explained where to go and who to see for whatever reason. There was so much to learn and do and attend. I made my way to the building where dorm rooms were being assigned. There wasn't enough space on campus to accommodate all the new students, and I learned that I was one of the freshmen who would have to live off campus. Seniors, of course, got first dibs, then juniors and sophomores. I landed in Meridian Hall on 16th Street in Northwest D.C., a twenty-minute shuttle ride from campus. I was disappointed to learn that I wouldn't be living on campus, for fear that I would miss out on something, and thought

about how if my father had married my mother, my last name would begin with “D” instead of “S.”

When I found my room number At Meridian Hall the door was already open. A young woman about my age and a woman who looked like an older version of her were examining the room: pressing the mattress, opening and closing drawers, turning the light on and off. A gentleman with salt & pepper hair, dressed in a suit was there as well, sitting in the desk chair. The younger woman turned as I walked in.

“Oh, hi, I’m Lana Jones. You must be Stephanie. This is my mom and dad, Sarah and Albert.”

“Hello, nice to meet you, Lana. I’m Stephanie. Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Jones.”

“And nice to meet you, Stephanie,” Sarah said as Albert walked back to the hall to retrieve Lana’s luggage. “Where are you from?”

“Georgia. I just got here this morning.”

“Well that’s good you made it safe and sound. We’re from Virginia. Neither of your parents could come with you, I take it?”

“No, ma’am. Not this time.”

“You and Lana will have to look out for each other,” she said with a wave of her index finger. “I was not too happy when I heard about my Lana being in the same dorm with upperclassmen.”

“Well, honey,” Albert said to Sarah as he reentered the room, “We’ve got Lana’s luggage all brought in. Let’s get going to the restaurant. Say, Stephanie, why don’t you come with us?”

“Oh, I—“

“Sure you will,” he said with a smile. “You ready, honey?” He put his hand around Sarah’s waist and expressed an “after you” gesture to Lana and me with his other hand.

During dinner, Albert rubbed the back of Mrs. Jones’ shoulders as he shared stories about his own college days. Mrs. Jones got a little misty as she talked about how much she would miss having Lana at home. Suddenly I felt like this was a TV show, but didn’t quite feel like I fit in the script. Here I was having a nice meal in a nice restaurant with nice people I only met an hour ago. On the way back to our dorm, I listened with wonder as Lana told me about her friends and life back home. I wondered what it must be like to be her.

Get Smart, Get Saved

My roommate, Lana, and I got along fine. But unlike me, she had a steady boyfriend who often came from Hampton University in Virginia to spend the weekend in D.C. so that he could visit Lana. We went through the typical juggling on many weekends that college students do when they want to have a boyfriend or girlfriend sleep over, e.g., coming home to a chain on the door and having to wait while there’s a lot of scuffling and fumbling before being let in. When Lana heard about a room opening up in spring semester she suggested to me how cool it would be if I had my own room. Knowing that she wanted the privacy for herself and her boyfriend, I didn’t argue with her about why I should be the one moving instead of her. So when we returned in January for spring semester, she and I both ended up being one among the few freshmen with the privilege of having a room each to ourselves.

My first months attending Howard had been typical for a freshman with endless lines for class registration, lots of socials, and a continual discovery of where to find things on campus. I'd never met so many different people from different parts of the country before: New York, California, Texas, Chicago, as well as students from the South, like me.

Social life and parties in general at college remained great. But for some reason when I'd return some days to my room, I would look around at the emptiness and burst into tears. I noticed I was having these sad periods for no particular reason. It got to a point where I didn't look forward to my shuttle ride because I knew how I'd feel once I got to my room. I hadn't expected to be homesick. How could I possibly be missing anything in Griffin? I'd just have to work harder at making friends.

One day on the shuttle ride to my dorm, a young man wearing a big red pin-on button that read "Get Smart, Get Saved" was handing out some kind of flyer. Warren Williams was in his late twenties and in his final year in dental school at Howard. He was over six feet tall, thin and wiry, with a thick afro and a big smile.

"Hello, this is for you and remember Jesus loves you," he said, as he pressed a religious tract into my hand. I looked at it and saw a picture on the front of a man in a purple and white robe, holding a lamb. At the bottom it read, "Our True Shepherd." Inside it explained how people were like sheep and had strayed away from their shepherd. On the back there were questions like:

--DID YOU EVER HEAR JESUS CALLING YOU TO FOLLOW HIM AND TO BE ONE OF HIS "SHEEP?"

--INSTEAD OF PLANNING YOUR LIFE ACCORDING TO GOD'S TEACHING DO YOU TEND TO LIVE ACCORDING TO YOUR OWN FEELINGS?

--WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE THE LITTLE SHEEP IN JESUS' ARMS?

At the bottom "GET SMART, GET SAVED" was printed in white letters inside a round red logo and underneath the words read: "WE'LL BE WAITING FOR YOU TO CALL US UP: THE BROTHERS AND SISTERS AT THE CHURCH OF BIBLE UNDERSTANDING (COBU)."

I placed the tract among my books as I got off the shuttle and walked down the short sidewalk to my dorm. As I reached for the door, Warren caught up with me and tapped me on the shoulder. "So what do you think about what you read?"

"Um, I already know all this is true," I politely responded. "I guess I could be living a more Christian life." I had always been receptive to religious things. Although I was raised in an extended family that didn't focus on religion, and only attended Baptist church occasionally, most members of my family would say they did believe in God.

"You know," Warren said as he pulled out a Bible from his book bag, "Jesus knew I would see you on the shuttle today, and he wanted me to let you know that he knows you by name."

Hmmm, where somebody knows my name would be nice, I thought. Contrary to what I'd fantasized when I first arrived at college, once the "Welcome Freshmen" parties toned down and the daily routine of classes set in, I found myself wondering if that's all there was to this part of life.

Maybe there was something to what Warren said. Maybe listening to what he had to say could help me understand why I had been having crying spells and why I felt like

something was missing in my college experience. We talked for about twenty minutes, with Warren showing me verses about securing my salvation and how it was important to do it while you're young. After talking with him, I agreed to come to a Bible study at his church.

It turned out that Warren's church, The Church of Bible Understanding (COBU), also known as the Fellowship, consisted of communes or fellowship houses throughout a number of Midwestern and Northeastern cities: Washington, Arlington, Baltimore, Trenton, Cleveland, and New York City, to name a few. Established during the early 1970s, the church had grown to about 800 members living in the fellowship houses, not counting the "less committed" who didn't live in but came over regularly for Bible study. Most members were under the age of thirty, but there were a few people in the thirty-to-forty age range. I would later learn that age, or youth rather, was a big thing in COBU and the younger you were, the more special to Jesus because as people got older, the more sins they accumulated and so became less willing to listen to God.

The day after I met Warren, I had returned to my dorm room from class one Friday afternoon, and the tract he gave me was the first thing I noticed on my study table as I threw my books on my bed. I picked it up and looked at it, then decided I would go check out the meeting. Since it was only a few blocks up the street, I walked.

The address led to a two-story row house on the corner of Park Road and Sixteenth Street. I walked up the steps and could see through the glass double-doors into the foyer. A poster on one door read: "Welcome All Who Believe in Him." I knocked. No one answered. For some reason I tried the handle. It was unlocked, so I opened the door and stepped into the foyer. There were posters on the wall, various illustrations of

Jesus on the cross as well as short poetic passages of scripture. One poster especially caught my attention. It was an apocalyptic scene with car accidents, bombings, shootings, and other forms of catastrophe all happening simultaneously. Some people were dying amidst the chaos. Others in the picture floated up while their street clothes morphed into white robes. In the middle of the sky, an image of Christ burst through the clouds surrounded by light and the people in the white robes were ascending up toward him.

I heard the door open behind me and turned around to see a young couple come in. Both around my age, they each held a bag of groceries. Gretchen and Ellis didn't seem surprised that I was inside, just curious as to who I was. I explained to them that I had met Warren and that he'd invited me to come for the Bible study.

"Warren isn't home yet from class," Gretchen explained. "But you should stay for the Bible study. It's going to be really neat. Come on." They escorted me up a short flight of stairs to wait in the fellowship room before going back downstairs into the kitchen.

We reached the top of the stairs and I saw a sparsely laid out décor. Straight ahead, two wooden benches sat in the extra-wide hallway. To my left I could see inside an office that had four big desks with black rotary phones on each one. A worn yellow and black shag carpet covered the office floor. Charts with numbers and dates covered the office walls. To my right, the fellowship room (most people's living room) was also sparsely furnished, with two worn sofas and a bookcase. A gray low pile carpet covered this floor, and a large window framed a view of the street.

Sitting on the sofa next to the bookcase to wait for Warren, I hoped that he wouldn't be too long. Since there wasn't much to look at in the room, I started to read the titles on the book spines: *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Josephus's Discourse to the Greeks concerning Hades*, *The Screwtape Letters*, *Joni*, *A New--*

"Stephanie?" a young woman asked with a soft smile as she entered the room. "Hi, I'm Doreen. Gretchen told me you were here." Doreen was about twenty with a narrow face and dark blonde shoulder-length hair. She sat down and started talking to me about God and being saved almost right away. Just like Warren, she showed me verses from the Bible about forgiveness and becoming born anew. I was trying to understand why she was telling me about this man named Nicodemus and wondering who the Pharisees were anyway, when she said, "Just ask God for his Holy Spirit to come into your heart."

Although this wasn't what I expected when I left my dorm room to check out Warren's bible study, Doreen's gentle manner and my pre-existing belief in God, made me receptive to what she had to say, so after thirty minutes or so, I agreed to repeat the sinner's prayer after her. When we finished praying, I opened my eyes and saw that ten other people had entered the room and started praying with us. Everyone was smiling at me and making exclamations like, "Praise God!" and "The angels are rejoicing in heaven right now!" and "This is so neat!"

This was all kind of strange but at the same time it felt good being the center of attention. This is love-bombing at its best. Take any young person who's even a bit disoriented about anything in life, inundate that person with lots of attention and it won't

take much after that to influence him or her. Who could resist when someone's focused on you with big smiles and wants to know everything about you?

Warren finally got home from class, and leaning his head in the door of the fellowship room, he said, "You made it! Praise God!" while pointing at me and looking around the room at everyone with a big smile.

"Yep, I made it," I said with a big smile as I waved back at him. But he and I didn't get to say much to each other after that, as other brothers and sisters were still engaging me in conversation about my life, my classes, where I was from and how big a deal it was that I was there. After hanging out at the Fellowship well into the evening, I went home that night feeling happy, like something special had taken place. Whether it was me or the energy in the room, everything seemed brighter. I was right with God now. I called my Mom tell her about my experience. "That's good," she said. "I'm glad you found yourself."

I started going to the Fellowship almost every evening after class. All these new friends of mine, male and female, who were so passionate about God and about reading the Bible, were not afraid to talk about their faith to anyone they met, considered themselves brothers and sisters and I was included. Whenever I went to the fellowship on Park Road, there was always someone to talk to, something cooking in the kitchen, someone playing the guitar and singing. It was like our own version of a family TV show. Growing up in a single-parent home and in an extended family of mostly women, seeing the take-charge way of many of the brothers was different than what I was used to seeing. This was another aspect that drew me to COBU. If I needed a ride from the

college library because I had missed the last shuttle, all I had to do was call and someone would show up.

One particular older brother made a big impression on me. Chris was a stocky guy, about 26, with short blond hair and glasses. He and his wife, Tammy, were newly married when they joined COBU four years earlier and now had a baby girl named Glory. As one of five or six Center Leaders in COBU, Chris oversaw the fellowship houses in the D.C., Maryland, and Virginia area. Bible studies every night were typical, but everyone regarded a Bible study from Chris as something special. A quirky thing about his personality is that he had a bit of nervous energy and managed it by walking in and out of the door of the fellowship room as he talked to the group.

Breaking his bible studies down verse by verse, he taught from the Gospel of John about practicing kindness; getting ready for the second coming of Christ; winning the war against the devil by putting on your spiritual armor (reading our Bible); and the meaning of prayer—all while pacing in and out of the door. Hearing these stories of the supernatural with the positive messages about life and how we should live filled me with a child-like wonder.

Chris would also talk about where he'd be without Jesus. When he told his life story he said he had plans to become a big time lawyer and win all of his cases. He sometimes made fun of the gospel music that some of the African-American COBU members would listen to, like the Hawkins or Andre Crouch, describing the latter as “An-dray Between the Sheepfolds”, meaning from the sound of his music which was very R&B-flavored, Mr. Crouch had one foot in the kingdom of God and one foot in the secular world. When the group would pray—which would be aloud, everyone on their

knees, some with heads bowed, some with their foreheads to the floor-- I would sometimes sneak a peek at Chris and he would be perched on his elbows and knees, hands clasped, with his eyes squinted while looking up.

By that spring of 1978, about two months after meeting Warren on the dorm shuttle, I moved into the Fellowship house on Park Road. In total there were about thirty members living in the row house. The sisters slept upstairs, three or four to a room, each furnished with bunk beds. The brothers slept in the lower level of the house where the kitchen was also located.

My experience living in the fellowship house began as a pleasant one. After moving in, I learned more about the realities of this community I had joined. Daily life focused on the Four Basics: praying, witnessing, fellowshiping (talking to fellow members about your faith and struggles as a Christian) and reading the Bible. Somehow the teachings about how it should be between males and female was interpreted as no dating and physical attraction was something I saw everyone try to suppress. Of course it wasn't taught that marriage was wrong. It was that a brother had to almost make a formal speech about his intentions toward a sister, and he had to be regarded as such a strong zealot for Jesus and most of the brothers were just not that confident. There would be times a sister would go to other sisters and ask for prayer for "strength to overcome the fantasies that the devil was putting in her mind about a brother." Because of this way of thinking then, and unlike the usual stories heard about cults, there were no multiple sexual partners or orgies, no chanting or denial of food or sleep. I think this is a point that people miss who haven't experienced or know someone who had experienced a cult – it's not all spooky vapid vacant behavior from the get go; the ridiculous and impractical

creeps in slowly but there's just enough positivity and good works to smooth over any uncertainties.

Aside from the living together and not having a formal church building, COBU was unorthodox in other ways from the usual image of a Christian church. Watching television was not allowed. To do so indulged the flesh. Taking a look at the newspaper was acceptable, as long as you didn't spend too long sitting and reading when you should be out witnessing. Career ambition and the pursuit of a college education were discouraged and were not necessary if you were living for Jesus and not for materialism. Consequently, I would become only one of a number of members who would eventually drop out of college after joining COBU.

The brothers operated a carpet cleaning business, Christian Brothers Carpet Cleaners, turning over all revenue to support COBU financially and to supplement household expenses for the Fellowship houses. A few sisters provided office work for the business. The rest of the women worked jobs and turned in their paychecks. Everyone received ten dollars a week allowance and tokens to get to work. Christian Brothers Carpet Cleaners became well-known and well-liked, often entertaining customers with a song when they arrived or during the cleaning. The business was even parodied on a Seinfeld episode entitled "The Checks." In the episode, Kramer warns George that the guys cleaning his carpet are part of a religious cult and George later gets mad when they *don't* try to recruit him after cleaning his carpet. Priceless.

Those who had been members longer taught us newer members that the way things were done in the fellowship was based on the Bible. They always referred to Bible verses for most things they said, such as, "Those who believed were of one heart and

soul, and had all things in common.” (Acts 4:32). This was the basis for the members living together and pooling our money to pay for rent and food. Every night two of the brothers gave a Bible study, which included giving “nuggies” to the lambs. We were taught that a short study of a verse from the Bible was like finding a golden nugget, which was shortened to nuggie.

“By the way, how long is someone a lamb,” I asked one night during a nuggie session when Eugene was teaching the Bible study. “And until what age?”

“It depends,” he said. “But oh, about nineteen and younger, if you’ve been saved less than a year. But even if you’ve been saved for like three years, you’re still a lamb if you’re only sixteen. Next you become a young sheep. “But like it or not,” he said, tapping me lightly once on top of my head with his Bible, “you’re still a lamb.”

I didn’t really mind this because I had begun to notice that things were easier and more lenient on lambs.

Stewart

Brother Stewart was a middle-aged man from Canada with gold-rimmed glasses, long salt and pepper hair that was thinning on top, and a gray Santa-clausy beard. But he was not jolly at all and instead had a stoic and stern countenance most of the time.

Stewart had started COBU in the early 70’s in Allentown, PA. Originally called the Forever Family, the other fellowship houses sprang from there. Stewart didn’t like to be called the leader or even pastor of COBU. One of the first things new COBU converts learned was that Stewart should be addressed as Teacher or Elder.

Rarely seen at the local fellowships, he lived in New York in his own private house with his second wife, Gloria, and his five teenage children from his first marriage.

A few blocks away, a townhouse in Brooklyn housed the unofficial headquarters of COBU. All members did see Stewart every three or four months when Big Meetings were held at a rented gym or unused warehouse. That's when all the fellowships met together at one time for several days of Bible study.

Gloria had started working as the church secretary at age sixteen, before later marrying Stewart when she turned nineteen. Every now and then a little gossip was able to make its way into the conversations of us members and I heard that Stewart's first wife, Maggie, got too irrational about him having Gloria as his secretary. Maggie was disobedient and backslid due to her bad attitude so Stewart had to divorce her, and he got custody of the children. I never saw what she looked like and oddly, in every news article ever written about COBU she only had good things to say about Stewart.

The first Big Meeting I attended during the July 4th holiday of 1978 took place about five months after I had joined COBU. I had never experienced anything like this. When I think back on it now, it feels weird, like some kind of strange dream. But at the time all of us there were very much into meeting and greeting each other, singing songs, sharing meals together and hearing the bible studies at night during which we all feverishly took down notes. Stewart's topics were about COBU's mission work in Haiti, the Second Coming, Witnessing, How to Raise a Lamb, and God's Plan of Creation. For the last session we watched *Pilgrim's Progress*, a film allegory of the Christian journey, based on a book of the same name by Paul Bunyan. I was so moved by the film that I cried during the scene when the load fell off of the back of Christian, as he looked at the cross and said, "Forgive me." I also felt proud to be part of the charity work in Haiti as

we looked at pictures on the projector screen of brothers and sisters with the children from the two orphanages that COBU supported.

The first time I met Stewart, I and Sandra, my closest friend in COBU, went up to him between Bible study sessions. Up close I saw that he was a tall, broad-shouldered man, and he wore that day what he always wore: an army-green buttoned shirt, dark brown painter's pants, and sneakers. He stood at the front of the large room where he had been speaking, holding an open Bible in his hands while pacing around in a small radius of footsteps, looking at the crowd of brothers and sisters as they mingled with one another.

"Hi Stewart," we both chirped as we walked up to him.

He turned and looked at us for a few seconds and then turned aside again as he said curtly, "Are we ready for Bible study?"

Sandra and I looked at each other and both said "Yes, praise God" in unison.

"Good, let's all get back to our seats then," he said as he started flipping through his Bible.

Sandra and I managed an "ok" as we fumbled back to our seats, feeling like we'd just barged into someone's room without knocking.

I don't remember if Sandra and I even discussed the incident, but I felt embarrassed and disappointed. Still, I justified to myself that maybe that was just his personality. When you're young and come from a culture that believes good people and God are always on the same side, you're often much more willing to overlook anything they do, even when they're rude or harsh. My excuse for his manner toward me and Sandra was affirmed by explanations from older members.

“Brother Stewart is really into speaking the truth and not playing phony games like we’re used to seeing with the unsaved,” they would say. I saw other scenarios with Stewart that I became used to, like his correcting a brother or sister by having them stand up in a Bible teaching session and telling them that something was not right about their spirit. Older brothers and sisters explained, again using Bible verses like “better is open rebuke than hidden love” and “faithful are the wounds of a friend.”

Quitting School

By the time I had been in COBU for ten months, my former life as a college freshman and my dreams of working journalism seemed a life time away. Because I was no longer around college students who had the same goals and daily routines as I had before and was now living in the Fellowship, I started to feel like I should quit college. I went to class during the day and at night did school assignments at home or at the library. But everyone in the Fellowship invested all their time in spiritual things. Following suit would show that I was truly committed.

“You don’t have to drop out of college, Stephanie,” Warren answered when I told him of my thoughts and asked his opinion. I sat and talked with him while he worked on a dental mold for one of his classes. Staying in college after joining COBU was easier for him. He was almost finished with his program, and dentistry was a form of medicine. With that kind of training he could help the Fellowship. Stewart had already talked to him about working in Haiti.

I also told an older sister, Sharon (who was only twenty-seven) of my intentions regarding school. She sounded so wise to me as she said, "I knew you would come

around. Jesus is always pleased when we put Him first.” It was close to the end of the semester. I didn’t go back to take my finals.

When I called and told my mom, she said, “Uh huh, I knew it. You’re up there in that cult wasting your life.” If only she had said, “I don’t think it’s the best thing for you. As a mother I am only telling you for your own good because I love you.” It would have made such a difference. But since we weren’t close and nurturing was never my mother’s strong suit, all I heard in her words were criticism of me, not of COBU, and I didn’t listen.

Delight

Since I needed to bring my share of money in and had office experience I was recruited to work in the office of the carpet cleaning business, answering phones and doing cold calls to make appointments. One afternoon I overheard a conversation that stayed with me long after I left the Fellowship.

Delight DuPont came from South Carolina to D.C. to attend Georgetown University. Adorably plump with curly hair and dimples that appeared when she smiled, she reminded me of a twenty-year-old Shirley Temple. A group of brothers and sisters had met Delight when they went witnessing one night in Georgetown. There was a movie theatre there that screened the Rocky Horror Picture Show every weekend and along with the kids who hung out in front of the movie house, COBU members showed up to witness and get some of them saved. Delight came back Park Road fellowship, stayed overnight and continued to stay overnight for weeks thereafter. One weekend, Delight’s brother and a female cousin came from South Carolina to find out what was going on with her and this new commune where she was hanging out. On that Saturday night

when they were sitting in the hallway between the fellowship room and the office, I could hear them talking while I was in the office doing my phone shift for the evening.

“But you don’t understand. I want to do Jesus’ will,” Delight said.

“Delight, what about *your* will, our *parents’* will?” her brother asked.

“Yeah, Delight, think of your family, your friends, home...I love you,” her cousin said.

Silence hung while Delight pondered their words. After a few more muffled exchanges, Delight’s brother said “I’m hungry. Let’s go get something to eat.” They left and Delight didn’t return that night.

Listening to the three of them, it occurred to me that no one ever came looking for me when I didn’t come home from school after joining COBU. Like spilled water creeping on a napkin, I felt a spread of hidden desire inside, wishing that someone from my family would come for me, that someone loved me enough to come from another state and show me that it mattered that I wasn’t back in Georgia anymore. But I quickly caught myself and said a prayer, “*Jesus, help me not to be led astray by deceiving conversations of comfort in the world.*”

Years later after I had left COBU, one of my best friends from high school, Jean, told me that her own mother had telephoned my mother once to inquire about me, even suggesting that maybe they should come up with a plan to travel from Georgia to D.C. and get me. But, according to Jean, my mom became hostile with Jean’s mom, basically telling her to mind her own business, so Jean’s mom let it go. Oh well, I appreciated the effort once Jean told me. I had talked to my mom on the phone a few more times since that first call when I told her I had gotten saved. Once she saw how deeply involved I

had become with the group she expressed her disdain to me over the phone, but that was the extent of it.

It had been six months since I'd been a member of COBU and as the summer ended I felt some melancholy about not going back to college. Despite the lack of closeness with my mom, this caused me to want go to Georgia to visit my extended family as a whole, something I would have normally done after getting out of school for the academic year. But anyone who was going to be away from the Fellowship overnight would have to ask permission from the household council, made up of the older brothers and sisters in our Fellowship: Debby, Kathy, Tom and Reggie had moved down to D.C. from New York. Debby and Kathy were 24 and 25, respectively. Tom and Reggie were both in their late 20s. These members from New York behaved differently than any of the other older brothers and sisters I knew before. They talked constantly about what they had just learned from Stewart. They were always serious and had a corrective response to most things everyone said. Everyone was uncomfortable around them, including me.

One Saturday morning I went into the Fellowship room to meet with them about my desire to make the trip to Georgia. Carrying my Bible as I walked in, I saw Debby seated on the sofa, picking at her split ends. Kathy also seated on the opposite end, was looking at a page in her Bible and making notes. Tom was sitting on the floor, and Reggie was standing before him, giving an animated description of his witnessing escapade from the night before.

Kathy looked up from her Bible, "Hi, Stephanie. Come in, sit down. So tell us about the trip you're requesting. I mean, what's your purpose for wanting to go?"

“Well,” I began, “Jesus has been showing me that I really should go visit my family,” I explained, trying to be calm and gentle in my speaking. I had learned that too much enthusiasm could be misinterpreted as being pushy, a big no-no for sisters in the Fellowship. During the months I had lived in, I had seen a few sisters get gently corrected with a verse about needing to have “gentle and quiet spirit” if they did or said anything that was a bit too loud or bossy.

Debby looked up from her hair and stared at me for a few seconds, “Do you see yourself putting Jesus first?”

“Yes,” I answered. “I feel it’s Jesus’ will for me to go. I haven’t gone since last year and I should let my mom see me in person so she’ll know I’m okay.”

“Who cares what *she* thinks,” Debby said, now twirling her hair between two fingers. “If Jesus is Lord..., you know what I mean? So what will you say if they start working you over about staying and not coming back to your brothers and sisters?”

I felt hot under my armpits and my face felt like a heater was blasting on it. “I’ve been praying about it and I plan to take a stand and let them know that I’m going to listen to Jesus, no matter what,” I responded, nodding my head steadily like a donkey. Again, I was trying to sound as genuine as possible without overdoing it. I didn’t want to sound like I was already determined to go without their approval.

“I don’t know Stephanie,” Debby said. “I’m not seeing in you a spirit of overcoming right now. You know, trusting Jesus and hearing his voice instead of leaning on your own understanding.”

“Well, Jesus knows my heart, so...” Running out of words, I shrugged my shoulders.

“Seems like you’re pushing us away right now,” Tom said.

We sat in silence for a few seconds looking at each other.

“So are you going to ghoule us now?” Debby said. (Ghouling was a COBU word for rude staring.)

“Sorry,” I murmured as I looked down and traced the letters B-I-B-L on my Bible in my lap.

“There’s no reason to be defensive,” Reggie added. As the Bible says in Genesis, ‘If you do well, will you not be accepted?’

More silence. Debbie closed her Bible with a clap. “Ok, we have to make the most of the time and get the weekly fellowship report ready for Stewart for our 11 ‘clock call with him. One of us will get back to you after the fellowship meeting tonight or tomorrow.”

“Okay,” I said, relieved to end the conversation. I heard them all say the standard goodbye as I got up to leave: “God bless you.”

I tried to be understanding of the responses from the council members. Too much communication with family and friends outside the group was unfruitful because the world was sinful and one's true purpose was within the group. If a member’s biological family was not in the Fellowship (as was the case with ninety-nine percent of us) they were part of the secular world and we need to watch for that.

Reading the council’s weekly report posted a few days later outside the fellowship room, I felt a suffocating squeeze of embarrassment. Among other topics like getting a new van for the carpet cleaning business and going after a backslidden brother named, John Karmac, was a topic about me:

Stephanie Sidney on visiting her family: Stephanie wants to visit her unsaved relatives in Georgia. Her reasons for going do not seem clearly to proclaim Jesus. We tested her spirit by asking her questions. And she was defensive. One older brother and two older sisters will be coming down next week. They will talk to her further to determine what Jesus' will is regarding her taking this trip.

Maybe I won't be able to visit my family this summer, I thought.

The next day I sat in the fellowship room writing letters to mail to my lambs when Chris came in stirring a cup of coffee with a pencil. "We decided you should go down South after all," Chris told me, as if giving me a new job assignment. "We decided you should go find Delight and let Jesus use you to draw her back into the fellowship," he said with a constant nodding of his head.

I thought that he must have had no idea how far South Carolina was from Atlanta or that, more importantly, I would have no way of getting there, since my mother didn't have a car.

"Praise God," I responded to Chris, hiding my worry. "I'm ready to do Jesus' will."

"Praise God," Chris said as he left the room. "We'll be looking forward to the testimony when you come back."

I took the Amtrak from D.C. to Atlanta to visit my family and remembered the previous time I made this trip in the opposite direction just a year earlier. It still didn't really hit me that my life and my goals had been altered. My aunt Donna picked me up from the train station and as we drove to my mother's apartment she asked me questions with concern. "You just don't seem happy, Steph," she said. But I couldn't really address what she was saying because I hadn't processed it myself. I couldn't see myself

at that point, couldn't see that I was a different person than the one who had left Griffin so starry-eyed about starting college and leaving my small town.

Visiting my family was like I was visiting people I didn't know very well. We were polite but really didn't know what to say to each other. The most normal was my grandma, Chop.

"You sure got a can to sit on, gal," she said with a laugh, referring to my behind, which had gotten wider in the past year. One thing about COBU, there was never any lack of food.

"And child, you need to not wait so long, to come down here and see us next time," Chop added.

"Ok, granny," I said.

My two other aunts had driven to my mother's apartment to visit me and having brought Chop along, we all sat in my mom's living room. I was perched on my knees on the floor, leaning over the coffee table, twirling my mother's figurines while they all sat around the living room. Our conversation couldn't have been about anything in-depth because I couldn't remember any of it later. I only had permission for a three-day trip, Friday to Sunday, and before I knew it, it was time to return to the Fellowship. I felt sad as I left.

* * *

"So did you want to come back?" Sonia asked.

"Of course, yeah, I wanted to come back!" I lied enthusiastically while eating my cereal. I had arrived back at Park Road the day before and a few of us sisters were sitting in the kitchen having breakfast. Sonia was an older sister (age 25) who had moved to our

fellowship house from Cleveland. Whenever I talked to her, I always thought about how she had lots of pictures of her family posted on her mirror that sat on top of the milk crates she used to store her clothes.

“So how did it go?” Sonia asked.

“My mom was ok,” I began. “Two of my aunts brought my grandmother to visit me. She talked about how big my can has gotten,” I said pointing to my behind. “But I know that’s her way of showing affection.”

“Grandmothers can do that,” Sonia responded with a friendly knowing in her tone. To my surprise, that was the extent of my having to report on my trip. I didn’t have to meet again with the council as they were busy with other issues Stewart had given them to handle and fortunately, Chris never asked me about Delight.

Southeast Fellowship

After I had been living in the Fellowship for about eight months, we received word that the Fellowship house at Park Road would be closed. Christian Brothers Carpet Cleaning would now only operate out of New York. Now everyone in our fellowship house, including the former carpet cleaning brothers, needed to find regular jobs and move to other fellowship houses in the D.C., Maryland and Virginia areas. There wasn’t enough space for everyone in the existing houses; however, so three new houses would be opened. I was among those assigned to one of the new houses and by some fluke we would actually get to pick who we wanted to live with.

Curtis had been one of my best friends at Park Road and he asked me if I wanted to live at the same fellowship house as he and I was glad to say, yes. My friendship with him was what I imagined having a biological big brother would have been like grown up.

We often went out witnessing together and he'd sing Christian songs as we walked. Before COBU, he had been in a singing group and had hoped to sign a record deal. Every now and then he'd even sing a song from a Motown group, like the Temptations, the Delfonics, or the Stylistics.

Curtis and another brother, Marshall, who had moved down from Baltimore, teamed up and started asking other members about forming a fellowship house together. Besides Curtis and Marshall, there was Paul, Big Mike, Country Mike (we called him that because the twang in his Virginia accent was so strong), and Gary. Besides me, the sisters were Denise, Toni, Linda, Dana, and Charlotte.

Our group was assigned to a townhouse that had been rented on the southeast side of D.C. Life for us at the Southeast fellowship house was a little different from what we'd all experienced at Park Road and other fellowship houses. We were all between the ages of eighteen to twenty-three and there were no older brothers and sisters correcting us. We actually joked and kidded around and had fun when we went out witnessing, laughing and singing songs. We sisters even started wearing makeup, plucking our eye brows, and going shopping once a month, although we couldn't buy much with our weekly ten-dollar allowances.

The Southeast fellowship included extreme luxuries by COBU standards, specifically a washer, dryer and dishwasher. The house was located in a middle class neighborhood and Toni even planted flowers in the yard. Dana and I kept the house spotless and all of the sisters took turns cooking dinner while the brothers took care of all heavy duty chores. Our nightly fellowship meetings began and ended with songs and

prayer, and an account of how many lambs we had prayed with and led to Jesus while out witnessing in our new neighborhood.

Stewart even acknowledged us in a positive way at a Big Meeting. Curtis had taken a picture of us sisters one day at the house, sitting around the dining room table, our arms around each other and smiling. Linda then sent Stewart a copy and when I stood up during one of the sessions at the Big Meeting to make a comment about a verse, Stewart pointed at me and said “You’re one of the sisters in the picture aren’t you? Let me see if I can find that.” He hunted through several notebooks on the floor and upon flipping to the page in one, he held it up. I saw that there were different sides to Stewart as this interaction was different from the one Sandra and I experienced the first time I met him. I reasoned that he just had to be approached at the right time. Ironically when I stood up, he had just finished correcting another sister, Greta, about her facial expression. He said her sullen look didn’t reflect a thankful attitude toward Jesus. “See that Greta,” he chastised, as he held the picture in the direction where she was sitting in the crowd.” Aren’t these smiles better expressions than the one you’ve got?”

“Yeah,” Greta responded.

“Yeah,” Stewart mocked.

To my surprise there were oo’s and ah’s from everyone else in the meeting when Stewart held up the picture. I told myself it was my imagination, but later it seemed that everyone was extra friendly to us for the rest of the meeting that weekend.

Twist of Fate

After I had stopped working in the COBU office, I had found a job as a front desk clerk at a printing company, but had a difficult time with Henry, my supervisor who

operated the engraving machine. He hadn't hired me; the woman who managed the shop did, but she wasn't there every day. Henry and I started out fine, but one day he saw me reading my Bible at lunch in the breakroom.

"Don't tell me you're into that stuff," Henry scoffed.

"You should try this 'stuff,' I responded. "Jesus is real and you should try faith in Him."

"Hey, screw the church man," Henry said in a way that sounded like he was ready to spit. "A bunch of fairytale garbage."

I went back and forth with him for a few minutes, before he finally left the break room venting a disgusted, "Aw, forget it," with a wave of his hand.

After that though, I could never seem to do anything right. If I sat on the stool while at the copier doing a big copy job, he ordered me to stand up. If I went to the bathroom and stayed longer than he thought I should, it was a problem. Once he actually came and knocked on the door, shouting. "Stephanie it's time for you to come out. It's been four minutes. You need to get back to work." I talked to the brothers and sisters about it, and they gave me permission to quit and look for another job. So as another Big Meeting was approaching that December, I gave notice at the printing company that I wouldn't be returning after the Holidays.

In the following weeks, since two other sisters, Barb and Mona, from another fellowship house were unemployed like me, we three job-hunted together. We decided that our two main avenues would be going through the want ads in the *Washington Post* and signing up with employment agencies. On our way to the first agency I felt a pinch of embarrassment when I realized I would have to explain to a recruiter why I was

looking for a job and not in college anymore. We arrived and sat in the reception area filling out our applications. Barb slipped a tract to the girl sitting next to her who was finished with her paperwork and was waiting to be called in by a recruiter. I finished my forms as well, just as a short black man with low-cut, neatly-cropped hair poked his head through the door.

“Stephanie Sidney?” he called out as he looked around the room. I raised my hand as I got up from my chair. “How are you this morning? I’m Robert Brown,” he said, extending his hand with a smile. He then escorted me into his small office just big enough to fit his desk and chair and my chair. “Give me just a minute to look over your resume,” he said.

“Oh, I see you’re from Georgia,” he said with a grin. “I have relatives there. I visited for the first time last year. It was a nice place. And—I see you went to Howard University from ’77 to ’78.”

“Yes I did,” I responded.

“Why did you quit?” he asked with a furrowed brow.

“Well, I became disenchanted and discovered it was not for me” I said with a cringe inside. All the things I had been taught in the months in COBU, spoken and unspoken were mashed together in this statement about school.

Recruiter Brown looked up at me and looked down again at my resume. After a long pause he said, “So, how far do you think you’re going to get on five-dollar-an-hour jobs?” He glared at me as he let my resume slip from his fingers onto his desk.

I mumbled something about how God would provide and even started to witness to him, telling him about the higher calling I had found when Recruiter Brown began a short tirade:

“I tell you, I get amazed at the number of young black people who come through here thinking they don’t need a college education. Yes, things are a lot better now in the 70s than they were twenty years ago. But you kids need to realize that you can’t do what the white kids do. They can play around try this and that and mommy and daddy will be there to catch them when they get through finding themselves. But you’ve got to think about the future.

I sat in my chair speechless while Recruiter Brown sat back in his chair and took a breath. “I’m sorry,” he said. “Sometimes I get a little personal. I’ve got two kids getting close to finishing high school and maybe you remind me of my daughter a little more than I realized.”

Recruiter Brown and I finished up our conversation after discussing the possible prospects he had that I might qualify for. After that day when I’d call that agency to check on assignments, I always got a response that nothing was available. I couldn’t help but wonder if it had anything to do with Recruiter Brown’s disapproval during my interview.

Pushy and Naïve Don’t Go Together

By February of that year, Barb and Mona had found positions, but I was still job-hunting and on this particular morning I prepared to go out job-hunting by myself. Winters in D.C. were extra cold compared to my home state of Georgia, and this day was no different. The Fellowship’s rule was you had to be out of the house by 9AM to start your

job hunt or for sure you'll be called out in the evening fellowship meeting to help you face and repent of taking advantage of Jesus and the brothers and sisters.

When I went out that morning, I was glad for the shining sun to soften the bitter cold. Waiting outside the Metro train station to take a bus to Reston, Virginia I planned to go door-to-door and fill out applications at the mall and also respond to want ads that read "come in person" to fill out an application at such-and-such address. As I stood there waiting for the bus, I continued to read the newspaper and a man came up to me. "How are you doing, young lady?" he asked. He looked liked he was in his late thirties, maybe forty and was wearing black pants and a green army fatigue jacket. He had a short beard and wore a black cap on his head. In COBU we were taught to use every conversation as an opportunity to witness, so I started to talk to him about Jesus.

When the bus came, I got on it and so did he. We both walked to the back of the bus for a seat, and I gave him a tract. "You should come check out our Bible studies," I said.

He told me he was a pastor himself at one time, and during the half hour or so bus ride, we continued to chat around various subjects, where we each were from, how it was to live in the D.C. area, etc. I explained that I was job-hunting and he told me about a friend who owned a clothing store and that if he introduced me to him he was quite sure his friend would hire me.

"Really? That would be great," I said, thinking inside what a relief it would be not to have to go out in the cold anymore to look for a job. He told me of perks that his friend would give me as an employee, like good discounts on clothes. I still loved buying new clothes and color-coordinating my outfits, just as much as when I'd left home for

Howard a year and a half earlier. I'd still sometimes fantasize that I was one of the models in *Ebony*. Only instead of a Virginia Slims cigarette I'd have an umbrella or purse in my hand and I'd be walking my little white Maltese or Bichon Frise.

When we arrived at the stop, we both got off in a mixed residential and commercial area and because he said it was just down the street, I decided I would walk to the clothing store with him to check out the possibility. It had snowed a couple of days earlier and even though the sun was out, some of it remained, melting on the ground. I'd always liked the white of the snow. It was pretty and bright and silent as it fell. But the sight of it after it had been soiled with the tar, oil, and dirt on the ground was always something from which I wanted to avert my eyes. When we had walked about a block, he said that he'd just remembered that his friend wasn't in the store at that particular hour. He then added that his friend's apartment building was just around the corner and he could still introduce me to talk about the job.

I'm sure some readers of this story by now are screaming "Get the hell away from there! Don't you see what's coming? But it's 1979 and I'm 19 years old. I didn't see it coming, ok? My mindset was that, as a Christian, Jesus was with me. Why should it occur to me that anything bad could happen? And no, I didn't think about the saying that bad things happen to good people.

When we got to the building it looked decent enough, I thought. A female clerk sat in an enclosed glass information booth off to the side. We walked across the lobby and went up in the elevator. When we got off he told me to wait in front of the elevator while he went around the corner to knock on his friend's door to see if he was home. After a few minutes I thought it was taking him too long to come back. I took a few

steps to look around the corner from where I stood at the elevator and saw him knock on a door, but then go to another door and knock as he looked behind him. I didn't register that he was probably trying to avoid someone actually opening a door that he had knocked on to see who was there. When you don't have evil in your own mind, especially when you're young, sometimes it doesn't occur to you that someone else may be up to something. (To the pure all things are pure. Titus 1:15) He walked back to me and told me his friend wasn't home and we needed to wait for him to come back.

"We can just wait on the stairwell of the fire escape," he said, so we walked through the hall door and sat on the steps. The stairwell was narrow and at one point he noticed that the side of my knee was slightly touching his, which I didn't even realize. He moved his away as he looked down in the space between us saying, "Excuse me."

We continued to chat for a few minutes. Then he said to me that he wanted me to stand up so he could take a look at my legs. Of course at this point an alarm went off and I hesitated, but did what he said. *Uh oh, how do I get out of this?* Why did I feel that I couldn't leave, that I couldn't just say no? I was in that weighed down state as if in the nightmare where your legs are stuck on the ground unable to move, sinking down into the floor. I felt trapped like the stupid girl in any Halloween film who, when she is able to run to another room, she hides without looking behind her or checking to make sure the monster didn't get there first.

I stood in front of him as he remained seated on the step. As if seeing my fear and hesitation, he said, "Young lady, I assure you I am not trying to see your body." As ridiculous as it was, I wanted to believe that. If I acknowledged my horror by thinking

otherwise, it would make what I feared was about to happen come true, but if I didn't let my mind think the worst, everything would be ok.

“Take off your tights, put your boots back on, and pull down your underwear,” he said in a monotone voice.

My hands shook as I did what he said. *How do I get out of this?* I was wearing a wad of tissue in my underwear because my period had started that morning. I hadn't remembered to go to the store the last time my supply ran out to restock on “ladies personals” (as I had somewhere learned to call them) so I had used the quick remedy that girls sometimes do, using bathroom tissue, folding it into a neat napkin. He reached and pulled the soiled tissue from my underwear, as I stood in front of him, like someone picking a piece of lint off a sweater. He folded and rested his hands over his mouth, his fingers interlaced while studying me, although I guess I was not a “me” or a person at all to him. He told me to sit on the steps and pull up my skirt and I did but by now I'm no longer there; I am watching this. He unzipped his pants and I winced as he tried to worm his way inside me. After his seeing that entering my body would not be easy because my insides were tight and his penis was flaccid, he settled for rubbing his penis on me. Because his face was only a few inches from mine, I looked him in the eye as he did this but he looked past me, past the left side of my face. Why was it that he wanted to be in the most personal space I had, while at the same time wanted to remain as impersonal and detached as possible? How could someone be doing the most personal, close thing you can do with another person and at the same time want to avoid eye contact?

I was finally able to speak and said, “If you have any human caring you won't do this.”

“I *don't* care,” he said in an annoyed tone, as he continued to do this on me with a strained facial expression like someone trying to open a jar that was fastened too tightly. “Circle your tongue around your lips” he instructed and I did it. With his own tongue he followed my tongue with his. After this day, years would pass, before I could tolerate any kind of lipstick or gloss on my lips.

Because of my wincing and whimpering, he whispered threats and ultimatums: “If you don't shut up, we gonna fuck for an hour,” while gritting his teeth close to my ear.

After that I stared at the wall behind him. There's a blank space between the moment this was happening and the two of us later walking again through the small lobby of the building. The female clerk still sat safely inside the information booth. I was numb and could not speak to her.

As this movie continued to play, I watched myself walk through the lobby, stepping back out into the day of sunshine and snow. He and someone who looked like me walked back to the bus stop. He slightly held my arm between my elbow and upper arm, as we stood there, like we *knew* each other or something. I couldn't pull my arm away because I was made of stone. What was the word beyond loathing?

“Are you ashamed young lady?” he said as we stood at the bus stop.

“What do you think?” I responded and continued to look down. I would not understand the first few years after this why people would criticize my facial expressions. “Why don't you look more pleasant?” “You always look like you're ready to fight.” “You think you're so tough.” “You always look like you have such a bad attitude.” I

would look at them and never say anything back, but inside felt confused as to why they would say these things.

Oddly this man quoted a verse from the Bible to me, “If you cause one of these little ones to stumble, it is better to have a milestone hung around your neck and be cast into the sea.” I continued to look at the snowy ground. After a few minutes the bus came and I got on it.

When I got off the bus back at the train station, I went to a pay phone to call the Silver Spring fellowship house because I knew someone would be home. Everyone from Southeast was at work. At Silver Spring, a sister named Anne was allowed to stay home during the day to care for a three-year old son. She also cooked and cleaned for the household each day while everyone was at work. When Anne picked up, I heard a dead voice speak from my end of the phone.

“Anne, this is Stephanie. I... I was out looking for a job and something’s happened. And I was calling to say I need to come there.”

“Is everything ok, Stephanie?”

“I can tell you when I get there.”

Sometime later I rang the door bell. Anne let me in and led me to a room where we both sat down.

“Oh, Anne,” I started to explain, holding my head in my hands. “I was out looking for a job. I started witnessing to this man. I went with him to find out about a job. We were alone on some steps, and..., and...” I started to sob.

“I figured something had happened to you,” she said.

Another blur of hours passed while Anne talked to each of the sisters about me as they each arrived home from their jobs. We sat together in one of their bedrooms as they talked with each other and tried to comfort me. Finally the sisters decided it was time to call Stewart for advice. One of the sisters told him what happened and during the conversation he asked her a question. I never did find out what he asked her. But her answer was, “Um, I know Stephanie can be pushy sometimes but— “

“Now wait a minute,” Stewart objected. “Pushy and naïve don’t go together. You all need to talk to her and find out what really happened.” His raising a question made them feel that they needed to go in another other direction with me. Before Stewart’s call, the sisters gave words of encouragement: “Remember Jesus loves you,” and “Trust that he will bring you through this.” But after his call, their comforting and kind words shape-shifted into questions like: “Did you try to fight? Did you try to keep your legs closed? Why didn’t you question his motives at the bus station?”

One of the sisters, Susan, pointed at me with a pencil she was using to take notes and slowly circled the pencil while still pointing it at me. “You see Stephanie. What you said before implied this was against your will. See, that’s not true, so you need to stop saying he forced you into it, because you could have gotten away. We know we’re not supposed to go anywhere with men. You need to face that your flesh wanted to indulge.”

After being silent and dumbfounded, I found the strength to say to Susan, “That’s just not true, Jesus knows my heart.” But from that point on, my conversation with them became a blur. We finally decided to stop at midnight and I went upstairs.

“Stephanie, Polly White’s on the phone for you,” Anne called to me from downstairs the next morning. I sat upstairs on the extra cot where I had stayed for the

night. I didn't remember going to sleep or waking up. My thoughts rolled through my mind like silent thunder clouds. I had lost track of time. Maybe, I thought, it would have been better for me to have lived during the witch hunts of Salem. That way, they could just burn me to death and it would be over quickly for me and for them. Instead, I shriveled slowly that night and over many days and nights thereafter by their words. That saying, "*Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me*" is a myth. I would come to believe the opposite: Your bones can heal automatically. But words go into your soul and your psyche and remain there like footprints in cement.

Polly was one of the older sisters I'd heard about from New York. I had seen her once before at a Big Meeting. Her husband, Jack, was a popular older brother and so she was one of the most respected sisters in the Fellowship. Jack was friendly and never came down on anyone, even though he was considered one of the pillars of COBU. He was one of a handful of members who were in their late thirties so this contributed also to the respect he received. He had even left the Fellowship and come back a couple of times. But he always had an upbeat and endearing demeanor about his personality, which somehow kept him from being "dealt with" as we often called it when someone was corrected. Polly had seemed nice enough, although I never had a conversation with her. This was not the way I would have wanted our first conversation to take place.

"Hello," I said, after dragging my 1000-pound self to the phone.

"Stephanie, this is Polly, one of the older sisters from New York. Do you know who I am?"

"Yes," I said.

“So, how are you?” Polly asked with a tone that said I should report my attitude, and thoughts to her in complete, concise and rapid form.

I couldn't say “fine” and I didn't know the words to express that I was a different person than I had been 24 hours before. I didn't know any other words to suffice so I said nothing.

“I really wish you would talk to me,” she said impatiently.

“I don't know,” I responded. I wasn't sure what she wanted me to say or even why she was calling me.

“What do you mean, you don't know? As women we always know. We always know what we're up to.”

I couldn't break free from the phantom that had its hand over my mouth.

“And why were you being snotty towards Susan?” She's only trying to help you,” Polly continued. “You should be thanking Jesus for having sisters who want to seek your good, and speak the truth to you in love.”

Still silence from my end of the phone.

“I really wish you would talk to me,” she said again in exasperation. After a pause she said, “I'll check on you next week to see if your attitude becomes better.” But I never heard from Polly again, and I never even saw her and Jack again, because a couple of months later they left the Fellowship, and that time, they didn't return.

After a few days at the Silver Spring fellowship, I returned to Southeast. There was a tight, strained feeling among us in the household now. The brothers and sisters there didn't know why I didn't come home for a few days. One of the Silver Spring sisters had phoned while I was gone, and only said that I needed to stay with them for a

few days. So at first the Southeast members thought it was because I didn't want to live with them anymore. When I did return, I came to realize that my housemates were told what happened and I gathered that what they were told did not look good on my part.

In the following months, I was required to keep talking to the older sisters so they could keep an eye on me. My conversations with them centered on their examining everything I said or did, especially if it involved interaction with a male. According to their view I guess if I was so lustful that I would find a way to have sex with a complete stranger then certainly I couldn't be expected to behave properly in day-to-day interaction with Christian brothers. There were many speaking-the-truth sessions that took place to get me to face my sin. Unfortunately, some of them were burned into my memory:

“You need to watch out for your young woman nature. Sin is crouching at the door but you must master it.”

“Where were you really coming from in your spirit when you were talking to that brother just now?”

“You need to watch out for being pushy and deceitful. You know that's your weakness.” “You need to just pray to Jesus, because the devil knows sex is your weakness.”

“A good verse for you is to ‘keep your sin ever before you.’”

“You need to be honest. That's the only way Jesus can heal you from your problem.”

Is there anything that gets you more lost than someone convincing you there's something wrong with your identity before *you* have a chance to discover what it is, or even decide what you want it to be for yourself? And at nineteen I hadn't made that

discovery or decision. I didn't understand why God wasn't showing them that they were wrong about me, so the only sense I could make of it all was that what they said must have been true. My prayers transitioned from "Jesus, please help me and show them the truth, so that they'll stop being so cruel and unkind." to "Jesus, please help me to face my sin so you can forgive me."

At any given time or meeting, if I looked like I was becoming withdrawn, some of the sisters would decide it was time for another speaking-the-truth session. So I learned to be too honest for my own good, to confess every stray thought, every time I didn't give a tract, every worry, every fear—always putting myself out there to be tested, in a self-crucifying effort to cleanse myself of what I felt I had become—an outcast. From a constant feeling of guilt and shame, I always ended up talking about the sexual incident. It was only after leaving COBU and years of therapy that I was able to call it a rape or sexual assault. My talking about it while in COBU was always as if I was a criminal who was expressing remorse about a crime committed. The response I got from most of the sisters was usually the same: "You should ask the Lord to show you how it was your own desire that led you into that situation so that you can repent and move on." The interrogations and stigma of what happened continued to color my life in COBU for over a year.

I had spent my previous time in COBU faithfully following its program of do's and don'ts, believing it was the way to be a faithful Christian. But now my view of myself, of God, and of other people had changed. I continued trying to do everything right, say everything the right way—to be accepted, to feel safe. In the midst of it all, I realized that as a girl, I was not protected, nor was I safe. I had to find a way to

camouflage or quiet what was putting me in danger. I remembered that Stewart had given a bible study once about how we all had three parts to ourselves: the Christian (the spiritual part), the person (the human part), and the young man or young woman (the flesh part). I had to put away the young woman. I began to wear my hair pulled back all the time, wore no makeup or skirts but instead only pants and jackets, and whenever I had to be around any brothers always joked with them in a hip, tomboyish way, so that (hopefully) they saw me as a pal and would not be threatened by any feminine wiles, or aroused.

Meanwhile, Stewart had decided that during each fellowship's weekly meeting, each house should vote on the weakest sheep and submit that person's name to the office in New York. This was a way to make sure that a brother or sister received help in case he or she was tempted to break the community of fellowship by leaving. Each week Marshall would insist that it was me, as I was still stuck in a constant sin-confessing mode.

"I vote Stephanie as the weakest because of consciously choosing to worry instead of keeping her mind on Jesus," Marshall insisted in one meeting as he looked around at everyone except me.

"Mmm, I don't know about that," Curtis said with an unconvinced look on his face. "I went out witnessing with Steph three times this week and I didn't sense worry at all." Still the big brother for me, his words were like finding exact change for a pay phone in the bottom of your pocket when you've lost your wallet on a cold rainy day.

Everyone else was silent after Curtis' statement.

“I mean, do we *have* to turn in a name every week, just because?” Curtis added. After a few more comments for and against, we finished the meeting and didn’t turn in a name that week. But one week Curtis’ intervention failed when Harold, an older brother from New York and the closest thing to Stewart’s right-hand man, came to visit the fellowship houses throughout our Center. He sat in on our meeting at Southeast and decided that because our house had a spirit that was one of the best throughout the Center, that any on-fire-for-the-Lord brothers and sisters from other fellowship houses in our Center should move to Southeast and anyone who wasn’t on fire should move out so that the spirit in the Southeast house would be kept pure. One conversation led to another and I was sent to the Maryland Fellowship. Eventually though, when Harold got through cleaning house, all of the original inhabitants of Southeast were replaced with newly-moved-in members from other fellowships.

Things Continue to Fade

Life in the Fellowship had changed from what I first knew. The focus of Stewart’s teachings during Big Meetings had changed also from the first one I attended as a new convert. It had transitioned from how to live as faithful Christians and get people saved because God loves us to how we were never doing enough to show that we were living up to the scriptural teaching we had learned. At many Big Meetings there would be hour-long silences where Stewart would simply stop talking and no one would stand up to speak or offer a Bible verse of encouragement for fear of being shot down with criticisms, whether by Stewart or other anxiety-driven members trying to play the heavy. Stewart’s teaching continued to widen a divide between the oldest and youngest members. Older brothers and sisters were always the bad guys that were bringing

everything down because there was always some way supposedly, that they weren't sold out for Christ. The younger members and lambs were always praised as being the most sincere because they always had a naturally high level of energy and motivation.

Starting Over, the COBU Way

It was 1982. I was 22-years old and had been a member of COBU for four years. My scarlet letter had faded and I wasn't confessing so much. There were more lambs to be found and brought into the fold and other areas of being responsible to Jesus among the fellowship houses. I was now living in a fellowship in Forestville, Maryland. Stewart had continued to teach that we were getting off track in making Jesus known and gathering lambs and that we needed a retraining program. He said it was too late for the older brothers and sisters but still time for the middle sheep, so he created a Young Sheep Remedial Program (YSRP) for 20-23 year-olds—those too old to be considered lambs but too young to be considered an older brother or sister. Stewart had considered calling it the Young Sheep Retard Program but changed his mind.

To start the program, everyone in our age range moved to a large institution-looking house in Philadelphia, formerly a home for the blind. In the YSRP, Stewart instituted a regimen of twenty rules for us to do each day. We each kept a chart of the list of rules to check off as to whether we accomplished each of them for the day. It included goals like...

--Talk to at least one person today about Jesus.

--Pray at least once today.

--Read at least one verse.

--Get at least two brothers and sisters to sign that they saw you putting your faith in Jesus today.

We each hung our chart on the wall of the Bible study room where each of us could see one another's progress. Seeing myself accomplish even this simple thing helped me to rise above the dark cloud that had previously hovered over me. This was COBU's version of starting over. I could do this. It was clear and easy on a piece of paper. I could look at it at the end of the day and say I did what I was supposed to do and didn't fail. Perhaps it was this way for most of the other brothers and sisters in the YSRP because we were all excited about working at the program.

While I was in COBU, only one couple got married with church approval. Even then, there was no wedding and I think that marriage was allowed because it covered up a blemish. One night a group had gone out witness in too rough a neighborhood. Some kind of scuffle broke out between the brothers and some of the hoodlums of the area, and one of the sisters, Rhonda, got taken by one of them who dragged her to a secluded alley and raped her. Rhonda became pregnant as a result, and gave birth to a son she name Alexander. Ironically he was the cutest little baby who smiled all the time and we all loved to hold him. When Alexander was about a year-old, a brother named Milton became interested in Rhonda and within a few months they were married. But even then there was no wedding.

Stewart claimed he was concerned about the lack of nuptials but the situation never changed. Per the standards that trickled down from his teaching, the woman had to be flawlessly submissive and the man had to be unwaveringly Zealous for God. Despite COBU's no romance or dating culture between brothers and sisters, from time to time a

crush did manage to surface among members. Most would try to camouflage it by going out witnessing together. Gretchen and her future husband Dennis (they married after they both left COBU) would actually sit in the car and kiss for a few minutes before they came in from visiting their lambs. Another brother Kevin actually stood up in a fellowship meeting to make his intentions known about a sister by the name of Stacy. Kevin was about six feet two, was in his late twenties, and there was something confident about him. Maybe that's why he didn't get too much flack about wanting to have a relationship with Stacy.

I had no trouble flying under the radar, until one brother for some reason did take a liking to me. George reminded me of a jack rabbit, or squirrel, or any furry animal that moved about with darting, quick movements. At twenty-three, he stood five-foot-six with thick wavy brown hair, an almost handle-bar, bushy mustache, and a face with a smooth peachy complexion. When he walked, he kept his arms straight down, instead of swinging them back and forth like most people do. Also when he walked, his legs and knees seemed to bend slightly as if he was about to go into a lunge and take off. Once at a meeting Stewart made fun of him when he stood up to read a verse by nicknaming him the bashful car salesman. George would always ask me to go out witnessing with his group and one night he asked me how I would feel about being married to a white brother. I told him something about how it wouldn't be a matter of a brother's race, but that I didn't think it was the Lord's will for me to marry anyone at that point in my Christian walk. Although we did continue to go witnessing in the same group, George didn't bring it up again. Sometime later I did think to myself, too bad I wasn't attracted to him. He was nice.

After finding a kernel of confidence from doing my steps in the YSRP at the Philadelphia fellowship house, I volunteered at one of the Big Meetings to work in Haiti as a missionary at COBU's orphanages. To my surprise I got a call from New York the next day. After a barrage of medical tests, shots and paperwork, I found myself on a plane to Haiti. It would be my first trip outside the United States. It was my first time seeing mountains. It was amazing.

There were usually between six to ten brothers and sisters at the two orphanages at any given time and we all had assigned responsibilities. Driving, managing the maids, managing the school and so forth. During the four months that I lived there, I helped dispense food to the poorest inhabitants who lived in the mountains. My individual responsibility was to take the children to their medical appointments and to give them their prescribed medications at night.

COBU's work in Haiti was the strongest element that convinced me of the group's legitimacy throughout my six years of living in the Fellowship. After all, how could any group that helped sick and starving children be wrong? There I was, in this geographically beautiful place where I also felt I was making a difference in the lives of these children who needed us so much. Yet, many brothers and sisters would leave COBU after returning to the States from working in Haiti. I think that for many of us, it was a last straw, after being in denial, about whether we were miserable, merely dissatisfied, or just unsure about what we were doing with our lives. Like other members, I found that I couldn't go back to being a cult member after leaving Haiti. For me, working in Haiti provided an unexpected clarity about reality. If you were saved and loved Jesus you should be happy, at least some of the time. And being in Haiti where I

was free to just be myself, made me realize not only that back in the states I hadn't been happy for a long time, but that I didn't need to continue living that way. The geographic distance of Haiti from the States also created a psychological distance from the Fellowship. It left space for those of us in Haiti to show our real personalities, to simply fulfill the purpose we were there, simply be happy, simply be.

Leaving COBU – SIX YEARS

After my return to the States I lived briefly at the Philadelphia house again, but moved to New York after a few weeks since my closest friends within COBU were living there also, namely Sandra, Gretchen, and Denise. I resettled there fairly quickly and found a secretarial job at Columbia University. But something that had held me in the COBU lifestyle before was no longer there.

By the time I learned that the friendliness and warmth I experienced on my first visit to the Fellowship was reserved for lambs and not for those who had been in the group a while, I was so indoctrinated that I couldn't justify to myself my feelings of wanting to leave. Leaving the Fellowship meant leaving Jesus. I would be returning to a world of materialism, laziness, and self-indulgence and avoiding my calling. "It's God's will that you're in COBU or he would not have led you to here in the first place," was a common mantra.

But now, having outgrown the box I had lived in before, I would lie awake at night or on the bus ride home from work thinking, "My life is empty, and living this way is a drag. If this is what serving God is, I just can't cut it anymore, and I'll just have to take the consequences." I started to wonder about my future, about what else there was to life. I also wondered for the first time why had God allowed me and all of us to go

through this experience if it made us question what serving God really was, or worse not want to serve God at all. But of course this line of questioning could go on forever, from the sincere to the ridiculous: Why does God allow little children to die or go hungry? Why is there poverty and disease? Why do bad things happen to good people? If God can do anything, can he make a rock so big that even He can't lift it? Someone I witnessed to once made that sarcastic joke, which I thought was stupid at the time.

Sandra and I would meet after work to take the train home together since our jobs were within blocks of one another. When I told her I was leaving, she was sad, but said she understood. It turned out that she was headed in the same direction herself, as she, Gretchen and Denise all left COBU a few months later. The day I took action, I had given one week's notice at my job, packed my same two suitcases that I first carried to D.C. six years earlier, and with as much as I could carry in my luggage, I caught the Amtrak to Georgia.

I was twenty-four when I left COBU, and as the first five-to-ten years passed, I slowly rebuilt my life and my identity. It was difficult. I found a job. I got my own apartment. That was all I could handle for a while.

As time went by, I waited to see if any or all of the things would happen to me that we were taught would befall us if we ever left COBU. But I didn't start drinking or taking drugs. I didn't become promiscuous. I wasn't decapitated in a freak elevator accident. I wasn't struck and killed instantly by a truck.

The new freedom from constant peer pressure was a relief but it did take time to adjust. Even though I was in my mid-twenties, I didn't know how to drive, pay a bill, or write a check. I hadn't gone on a date in six years and didn't know how to behave around

men after only dealing with males within the strict confines of COBU. My only regular activity was going to my secretarial job at a college and watching TV. I was mesmerized by TV (now enhanced by cable)—the variety, the romances, the color blue. Everything about it seemed so much more vivid than I remembered.

After a year or so I joined a small traditional church and attended there regularly for a while. It's odd how we return to the familiar, regardless of how it made us feel before. But I still believed in God, so I became an active member. There were many young adults my age at this particular church and it was nice to just hang out, and go to movies and hang out with my new friends.

When all my peers began to marry or become obsessed (the females anyway) with the idea I observed with curiosity. It was like watching celebrities sing and dance, secretly wondering what it was like, fantasizing about it, but not having the courage to try my own hand at being on stage. Although I desired it, I didn't know how to get there. I didn't know how to flirt, didn't know how to stop feeling that I was doing something wrong if I started up a conversation with a guy at church who I happened to think was cute. Sometimes I even had to remind myself (so that I didn't get some new silly crush every other week) that just because a male talked to me in a friendly manner—instead of reprimanding me, it didn't mean he liked me *that way*.

But I started skipping service when I felt the pressure of their version of conformity: dress in proper church attire; attend every service every Sunday (unless there's illness, death or work). Sometimes I wanted stay home and spend time with myself and read or spend Sunday visiting a family member. But I found that to miss a service meant getting little questions, although jovial, about my absence.

“We missed you yesterday.” (Long pause.) “The word of the Lord went forth like never before. You shoulda been here.”

“God gave me a word for you, but I couldn’t give it to you. . . since I didn’t see you last Sunday.”

Around this time I had re-enrolled in school at Agnes Scott College. With constant pressing homework I had a valid reason often enough not to be there until, finally, I stopped attending.

I attended a second church where I became a very active member for about five years. I grew there as a person, perhaps because it was so big with about 12,000 members. It was a positive environment with psychological space to still be me. The pastor there gave practical sermons for everyday living. It was an interracial church which I think reminded me in a good way of my initial experience with COBU. I even participated in a dance ministry (a group of dancers who performed ballet and modern dance while the choir sang) which was a great source of joy in my life. But then some scandals of sexual affairs occurred between several of the assistant pastors and female congregants which caused a mass exodus of members and that church was never the same. This occurred about the same time that I moved from Atlanta to Columbus, Georgia, to work at as a news producer at a TV station. I had finished at Agnes Scott College with an English degree and after working part-time at the Atlanta Journal & Constitution writing obituaries, was now going to what I considered my first real journalist position.

At some point I realized that being a Christian was my social life. Instead of clubbing or serious one-on-one dating, I went to singles events, sang in the choir, went to

bible study to find fulfillment and avoid being lonely. I saw that I looked too much to church life to make up for the relationships that were faulty in my personal life. I still hold specific religious convictions and attend church occasionally so religion, Christianity specifically, is still a part of my life, but I am never completely comfortable with it. I still believe that going to church is a positive thing if people go for the right reasons.

My perspective on COBU is this. I believed in what I was doing at the time, but certainly can look back and remember feeling wrong about some things. For me it was a perfect storm: I had come from a family background where I saw there were some problems. I was searching for love, affirmation, and acceptance, and the right way to live. I received what I thought was enough of it in my beginnings in COBU to elicit my staying even after it didn't feel good being there. I think many of us in life put up with a little bit, maybe a lot of crazy (in a bad marriage, a lousy job; a codependent friendship) to get something that we want or need.

I think there were right and wrong reasons that drew me and others into COBU. At the beginning I was simply drawn to the group because of the acceptance and friendliness. Also these young people I met had confidence in what they were doing and believed it was right and I was impressed by that also. Third, doctrine of bible understanding impressed me because I happened to be at a time in my life when I had an innate curiosity about the Bible.

On a deeper level and as a first year college student, it was my first time away from home with no meaningful relationships with any adults in my immediate surroundings. I had never known my father and my relationship with my mother was not

the best, hindered by unresolved resentments between her and my grandmother. The physical distance added to my sense of alienation, and I think I was looking for a sense of belonging that the fun of college life couldn't fulfill. But I don't want to paint a blanket image of a typical cult recruit. There were some members in COBU who came from stable two-parent families where they felt loved. Perhaps it is a wrong place, wrong time kind of thing.

Ironically, a byproduct of COBU is that its structure provided security in a competitive world. It kept us from reckless sex during the height of the sexual revolution. It kept us from getting high before just saying no to drugs was the national anti-drug slogan. This was the opposite of some of the behaviors I had seen in my extended family growing up. The confines of COBU provided a freedom from worldly responsibility. And so I think these factors also played a part in the appeal to those of us young people who were concerned about more than just having a good time.

I am changed in some ways that I think might not exist were it not for my cult experience. For a while, I became very much a cynic. Although I'd like to think I am much better now, I remain far too analytical for my own good—according to most of my family and friends who have no problem telling me when I am annoying them. I never take anything at face value, but analyze and question everything, no matter who the authority is supposed to be. I probably take too long to decide about things that most people would consider a simple matter. I wish I were one of those who say they wouldn't change a thing about the story of their life's journey. In honesty I am not there yet, but I am hopeful because the rest is yet to be written.

People tell me I probably wouldn't be as strong as I am, if it weren't for enduring this experience. It has indeed made me sensitive and more patient with other people's mistakes and flaws. I have learned to be more discerning and to be better at reading people. I reclaimed my intuition. I have learned to validate myself rather than waiting for validation from someone else.

Although I still feel some sense of loss when I think about those six years, I do consider myself fortunate. Unlike the tragic cases of some cults, there were no resulting deaths in COBU. And there are many ex-members who still hold a level of bitterness and resentment such that one would think we all went through the experience several years ago instead of several decades. I am not angry, but I have made peace with the scars I bear as a survivor. I am reminded of a quote by Dr. Maya Angelou: "I can be changed by what happens to me. But I refuse to be reduced by it."

A Biography of Lou Bertha “Chop” Sidney

Sankofa: a word from a tribe in Africa associated with the proverb, “It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten.” One illustration of sankofa is depicted as a bird reaching back to get an egg off its back. It is about taking what is good from the past and using it in the present to gain knowledge for personal development and self-awareness.



INTRODUCTION

My reason for writing this short biography is to remember from whence I came. Hopefully this project will also serve a purpose to those who read it and find that they can relate. As I grow increasingly aware of my own mortality, I also find myself thinking increasingly about my family roots over the past century, scant as that information may be. Many of us know of women like Ida B. Wells and her fight to stop lynching in America, Fannie Lou Hammer and her work during the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, of Rosa Parks and many other famous women of African descent. I also think of the many non-famous women who lived their lives during the Great Depression and the Jim Crow south, who worked extremely hard throughout, took care of their husbands and raised their children with none of the household conveniences often taken for granted today. This is one of their stories.

Much of my information for this biography on my grandmother, Lou Bertha (Lee) Sidney, came from a number of conversations I had with her during the early-to-mid

1990s, well before her death in 2005. Throughout this paper I will refer to her by her nickname, "Chop." She was in her eighties during these conversations, and already had trouble remembering the distant past. Many names she recalled do appear in census records with an age, approximate birth, county and state of residence. Yet seeing their names only brought more questions and emotional angst for me as a researcher. Who were these people and where did many of them go, since there remains no other trace of them aside from the census and Chop's recollection?

* * * * *

After the forty-minute drive headed south on I-75 from Atlanta, and then driving through the rural and winding High Falls Road to visit Chop, the first thing that comes into view is the remains of the old store across from the house. When Frank was alive on many a Sunday afternoon he would say to his wife, "I'm goin' for a nap, Chop," as he would walk across the yard in his overalls to his prepared pallet that he kept among the corn husks on the floor. Aside from the corn husks, there were old mattresses, iron bed frames, tattered magazines, empty containers, and other pieces of old furniture that Frank wouldn't let Chop throw away. Turning into the yard, there are still the little red, glow-in-the-dark lights that has kept visitors from going in the shallow gully that youngest son Eddie built to catch the water when it rains.

Frank and Chop's house is about twenty miles off I-75, located between Henry County and Macon, Georgia. The house, weather-beaten, with gray clapboard siding and a tin roof, still stands today as a landmark to the number of years my grandparents lived on the property. Even after Frank died in 1974, Chop continued to live on the land

owned by the family for whom she and Frank had worked for several decades. But more about the Weavers later.

As matriarch of my extended family, Chop was loved by almost everyone who knew her. She was the magnet that drew her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren together for holidays and frequent Sunday afternoon visits. To her children, Chop was the One, the center of all family gatherings—whether Thanksgiving and Christmas or Easter and 4th of July—Chop’s house was where everyone wanted to be. People would sit in the front room to watch TV and talk, or sit on the porch and chat while the occasional car passed by.

Chop also had a tongue that could slice you into thin strips of yourself when she wanted to. Many can testify that elderly people often do that. They say what they want to say and “Damn it, if you don’t like it, you can take your ass back home.” But ironically, with Chop, if you were a visitor, distant cousin, or family friend, she would always bend over backward to make sure you felt welcome. She might offer one of her treasured plants which her grandkids had better not even think about bumping into while playing, the last food on her stove, or the best seat in her home. Something about her stories and funny comments too, her simple and unassuming personality made everyone laugh and want to be around her. With wavy, black and silver hair, Chop was hardworking and a big snuff-dipper. At five-foot-three, she was small in stature, but her hands and feet revealed popped-out veins from a life of working in fields, scouring and scrubbing, lifting tubs of home-grown vegetables, chopping wood, and mopping floors.

ABOUT CHOP AND HOW SHE GOT HER NAME

Chop was born in Jackson, Georgia in 1913, the county seat of the rural Butts County, home to about 23,000 residents today. My grandmother has always lived in Butts County, an area comprised of the towns of Flovilla, Jackson (population 5,045), and Jenkinsburg. Founded in 1826 and named after President Andrew Jackson, a nine-to-twelve block radius makes up the city's downtown area, populated by mostly family-owned stores. The Piggly Wiggly, located a few blocks from the downtown Square, provides grocery shopping for those who don't want to drive a few miles further to the nearest locale of a larger grocery chain.

Chop's parents, Tommie and Annie (Clowers) Lee died when she was a child and Annie's sister, Rosa Belle, raised Chop. Details of the death of Chop's parents are unknown. But Annie's death must have occurred when Chop was very small because of the timing of the origin of Chop's nickname. I thought to ask her once, during one of the Sunday afternoons when I drove from Atlanta to visit, how she got it. She looked up from what she was reading—some issue of *Reader's Digest*, *The Star*, or maybe *The National Inquirer*. "Well" she explained, "Ms. Glover used to watch me while everybody else was in the field, since I wasn't old enough for school. So she had me do chores for her: sweep the yard, fill up the wood box for the stove, and get eggs from under the hen." Chop went on to explain that Ms. Glover was a teacher and that she had sewn Chop a little black and white checked dress out of one of her old ones. Chop added, "One day when I had on that dress, I's playing too close to the road, and Aint Ro'Belle called out to me, 'Gal, watch you don't strut too close to that road, with your little checkedy-choc

dress on.’ Folk started calling me that all the time and after while ‘Choc’ got turned into ‘Chop.’”

CHOP’S PARENTS, SIBLINGS AND WHERE SHE CAME FROM

Tommy and Annie, the parents of two sons and five other daughters besides Chop, lived in the Bucksnot area of Butts County. Unfortunately, Tommy Lee separated from Annie around 1917 when Chop was four years old. The boll weevil which would ravage Southern fields from 1915 until the insect was eradicated in the 1990s had destroyed the cotton crop that year and Tommy went to live in Griffin, a town thirty miles west of Jackson, to work at a mill. As best Chop could recall, both her parents died shortly after they separated, and it was at that time that Chop was raised by Annie’s sister, Rosa Belle.



Chop with sisters Lucille Mathis & Sally Banks, on a Sunday, late 1970s

According to the 1880 U.S. Census, Chop’s maternal lineage can be traced back to a woman named Emma Carmichael, born around 1850. Sadly, beside Emma’s name for the column entitled “Parent or Spouse,” there is an empty space where a name should be. Like a silent bomb this was devastating to see. This woman with a heart and soul like any other person listed on the Census came to exist from somewhere. Who were her parents? Did she know who her father was? How had she responded when asked about her parents or the father of her children? The ages of Emma’s children on the Census that year are listed as twelve, ten, three and an infant. Emma’s twelve-year-old daughter, Sallie, would grow up to marry George Clowers, a mulatto from the Carolinas. From

among Sallie and George's sixteen children, Annie would be born. From Annie and husband Tommy Lee's eight children, Lou Bertha ("Chop") would be born in 1913.

In my research, the closest so far that I have been able to come in filling the space beside Emma's name has been to examine the research compiled by George Weaver (b. 1948), still a current resident of Jackson, and nephew of Oscar Weaver, Jr. ("Junior") and Pliny Weaver for whom Chop worked for many years. George provided a copy of the family genealogy of three related families in Jackson, Georgia: the Weavers, Thaxtons, and Carmichaels. The research is significant for Chop's family tree because, according to George, DNA testing in 2004 on two of Chop's daughters confirmed that Chop's ancestors are biologically related to the Weavers through a common male ancestor. George suggested several names to research as the possible common ancestor between Chop and the Weavers, including Hugh Wilson Carmichael (1808-1883), William Thaxton (1814-1888) and James Marion Columbus Thaxton (1838-1925). The link between Chop and the Weavers of today possibility begins from the male relatives of a Sara Elizabeth Carmichael's listed among the genealogical names compiled by George Weaver and whose family lived in Butts County during the same generation as Chop's great grandmother, Emma Carmichael. The Weavers and Carmichaels became related in this way: From the marriage of Hugh W. Carmichael and Nancy J. Thompson, Sara Elizabeth Carmichael was born in 1838. Sara Elizabeth Carmichael married James M.C. Thaxton in 1855 and among their eleven children, Alberta Thaxton was born. Alberta Thaxton married Oscar L. Weaver, Sr. in 1898 and among their five children, Pliny and Oscar, Jr. were born, who as adults would both later employ Chop and Frank Sidney from the 1930s to the 1970s. The answer to be discovered is, through whom did Emma

Carmichael get her last name as a slave woman born around 1850 and who fathered her children. While the common ancestor is yet to be confirmed, the biological tie between Chop and the Weavers is acknowledged by the DNA testing conducted by George Weaver during his research and in conversations with Luke Weaver and Judy (Weaver) Yielding, children of Oscar Weaver, Jr.

MARRIAGE: FRANK and CHOP

Chop and Frank Sidney both lived in Butts County in 1930 when they met while they both worked in the same field picking cotton. Frank, however, was from Monticello, thirty miles east of Jackson. She was eighteen and he was twenty-one, when they married on July 9, 1932 at the Griffin Courthouse, in Spalding County. Of Frank and Chop's original seven girls and three boys, only five daughters one son remain today. Between the original ten siblings there are approximately 30 grandchildren, 40 great-grandchildren, and 13 great-great-grandchildren.

When Chop married Frank, she already had two-year-old baby girl, Gertrude, rumored to have been fathered by Ed Freeman, the husband of Rosa Belle (the older sister who had raised Chop after her mother died.) When I interviewed my aunt Gertrude for this biography, she still placed a finger to her lips, for me to lower my voice as we discussed this subject. She did not want her fifty-eight year old son who lives with her and was piddling in the kitchen, to hear our conversation. Could it be that none of Gertrude's nine children knew about her parentage? Comments by family members about Frank and Chop's marriage imply that their union had its problems. Rosa Belle and Ed came by to visit the Sidneys on many a Sunday after church. The visit would go on just fine. But often after Rosa Belle and Ed left, Frank would beat Chop. She left

several times, tugging her small children with her to one of her aunts for refuge. But she was always sent back home within a few days. A young mother with several mouths to feed probably was not welcome to any doorstep during the years of the Great Depression.

FRANK SIDNEY (1910-1970)

Chop knew very little about the family of her husband, Frank, except that his parents, Tommy Elbert Sidney and Mattie Lawrence, were from Monticello in Jasper County. Frank had three half-siblings—two brothers and a sister. One brother, John Wesley, always frightened Chop’s daughter, Rose (my mother), when she was a child because of his six-foot-six height and booming voice. His sister Frances came to visit the Sidney’s from time to time. I remember that she was so large that the chair squeaked when she sat in it, and that we never saw what her hair looked like because she always had a bandana tied in a way that covered her entire scalp.

Frank Sidney didn’t talk much and it seemed his children were too intimidated to approach him. Even if everyone was chatting while sitting in the living room, the sound of his footsteps on the porch brought a sudden hush to the front room



Frank Sidney, 1960s, in his later years smiling & looking at a photo

when he came home in the evening after milking cows at Weaver’s dairy. When he came through the door carrying the gallon jar of milk he always brought home, the silence continued and no one even looked at him.

Family and friends often addressed him by his whole name. “That Frank Sidney came by yesterday.” “You young ‘uns better straighten up; that Frank Sidney will be home directly.” “That Frank Sidney’s outside on the porch. See if he’ll drive you to town.” He was an enigmatic man who rarely smiled, at least not around his family. Yet Frank, like Chop, was considered a loyal and likable farmhand by Junior Weaver and his son, Luke Weaver, who recalls that Frank was the most apt at handling all the animals on the Weaver farm, adding that there were “horses, mules, and dogs that only Frank could manage and cows that only Frank could milk.”

EDUCATION

Neither Chop nor Frank went beyond third or fourth grade. As was typical of the times, both were pulled out of school to work and help feed mouths in the household. Chop, however, did continue to develop her reading on her own, mainly from reading old issues of *Life*, *Reader’s Digest*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*, among many magazines given to her by the wives of families she cleaned for over the years. Frank, on the other hand, preferred to watch *Gunsmoke* or some other western when he got home in the evenings, as he would sit on the sofa with his legs crossed.

THE HOUSE

Frank and Chop moved to Lee Maddox Road on the outskirts of Jackson around 1944, when their fifth child, William MacArthur “Mack,” was around two years old. Three more girls and a boy would come after him. (They already had a son and four girls before Mack). According to Luke Weaver, the house Frank and Chop lived in made up



*Sidney house on
Lee Maddox Road, winter 1980s*

part of Frank's wages, along with Frank's five dollars a week in pay, as well as milk from the dairy and some livestock for food.

The house started out only as one room and a kitchen. That was when Mr. Fred Smith, the man that owned a small store across the road, lived there with his wife until 1939. Smith added on one room before he and his wife moved away. The middle room as it came to be called, was where all of Chop and Frank's children slept. This room also became Mack's room in the early 1960s when he moved back home after breaking up with his wife. Fred Smith sold the property to the Weavers when he left and around 1944 Frank, Chop and their six children at the time, then moved from the Webb Place (where Frank previously worked), to the house on Lee Maddox Road so that Frank would be closer to the Weaver place for work.

Another room was added when, around 1953, the oldest son, James, came home from the Korean War and started building a bedroom for himself and his new wife, which would later become the dining room. According to Chop, when Junior Weaver saw what James was doing, he rounded up some other workers and they also built the den or "last room" as it's still called today. The last room was where the Christmas tree stood each winter and where the girls would receive their company. The house ended up with a total of five rooms: the living room, which was also where Frank and Chop slept; the middle room which was the only true bedroom; the last room where visitors slept and courting occurred; the dining room which also served as a bathing area; and a small kitchen. The bathing area in the dining room was just that, the corner of the dining room where water was carried in buckets and poured into a tin tub. There was an outhouse Fred Smith had already built, just beyond the edge of the woods in the back yard.

FRANK AND CHOP'S LIFE TOGETHER

Exacerbated by the Great Depression, the 1930s and 40s was a struggle for everyone—not only in Butts County, but also in the state of Georgia, and the nation. The situation made the struggle of the sharecropper that much worse. Falling cotton and tobacco prices, reductions in the workforce due to more enticing employment from surrounding cities, and poor planning in land-rotation in farming caused severe damage to the Georgia economy. Between 1930 and 1940, almost two thirds of all Georgia workers stopped working in agriculture. But Frank remained a farmhand his entire life until his death. When I asked Chop why, at a time when many blacks were going North, did she and Frank decide to remain in Georgia—and in a rural area at that, she said that “things” (acts of terrorism) were "easing off" for blacks, and so the Sidney family were among a number of African Americans who remained in the South.

At a certain point in time although I couldn't determine Chop's exact age, she stopped working in the field and began providing childcare, cooking, and house cleaning for several white families in Jackson, including Junior Weaver and his wife Charlotte along with their two children Luke and Judy, as well as Junior's brother Pliny and wife Mildred. Chop also worked for Mr. and Mrs. Walter and Juanita Carmichael and Mr. and Mrs. Lou and Mila Moultrie, until her health began to prevent her in the late 1970s. Chop earned two dollars a day until her last few years of working, when her pay went up to ten dollars a day. A wife would pick her up in the family automobile where Chop would sit in the back seat, and they returned at about 5:30 PM in the afternoon.

Aside from the magazines, Chop's employers sometimes gave her other used items they didn't want any more: various pieces of old furniture, clothes, and household

items. She saved and made use of everything, taking the simplest, most worn out thing and giving it dignity: old jars and cans for flower pots, fabric from worn out garments for quilts, girls dresses made from Hollyhock brand flour sacks, and Christmas stockings from old pot holders.

Chop was an example of the black women written about in many a romanticized antebellum novel: unending in the care and attention she gave to her employers and their children. Junior Weaver's daughter, Judy, speaks fondly of a time when Chop comforted her after an upsetting incident at school. One day a classmate took it upon himself to inform Judy that her father had a previous marriage before marrying Judy's mother after which Judy and her brother Luke were born. Very distraught by this news, Judy arrived home in tears and recounts that Chop while sitting in a rocking chair took the teenage girl in her lap and said. "Your daddy is a good man and your classmate should've never said that." Judy says that memories like these encompass all that she remembers of Chop. However, this warm and fuzzy scene was in contrast to Chop's earlier years at her own home where she often would not get to bed until 2:00 A.M. after bathing, feeding, and preparing school clothes for her young children, as well as combing and plaiting the girls' hair for the next day—then having to rise at 5:00 A.M. to get them dressed and off to school before leaving on time herself for work.

Chop planted and meticulously tended two flower gardens in front of the house. The two were separated by a path between them that led about twenty feet out to the dirt road. Using old tires as planters in the ground, each tire was cut into a zigzag design along the edges. Her flowers posed in the yard with colors so bright they illuminated the dirt yard and wooden house: azaleas, zinnia, geraniums, lilies, petunias, begonias,

marigolds, daffodils, and roses-- a spray of pink, red and blue, purple, fuchsia, orange, and yellow ending at an old tin mailbox at the edge of the yard. In her senior years Chop often watched from the porch as her grandchildren competed with her flowers when taking pictures in their Easter Sunday outfits.

Life for Frank and Chop and their family meant that there was always some chore to be done: hauling water from the well (for cooking, bathing, and washing by hand any laundry or dishes in large tins tubs since there was no running water until the early 1960's); making lye soap; weeding, picking, and canning vegetables from the garden; feeding pigs and chickens; and the constant sweeping and dusting furniture because of living on a dirt road. Yet any visitor would have found any surface spic and span, and every household item in its place.

Before breakfast, it was someone's chore to take out the chamber pot or simply "the pot" as it was called in rural areas of the South. Until the 1930s, building houses without indoor plumbing was common in rural America. Chop would call out from the yard, where she might be hoeing in the flower bed or garden while Frank was tilling with the tractor. Her smooth, yellow cheeks contrasted her thin wrinkled lips from dipping snuff or chewing tobacco. Taking a spit, she sometimes called one of her children by the wrong name. "Did you hear me calling you? Cal-- uh, Duck . . . Bert! "Come on, get to it right now." Many of the sayings that make Southern dialect comical were her own as well: "Bring me those scissors from the dresser. Make 'ase (make haste), ya hear?" "Tell 'em I'll come to visit directly." (At some point, in the future, I may stop by). "Go on away from here" (You've got to be kidding!).

On any given day in the grassy backyard of the Sidney house, amidst the warmth of the sunshine and rustling leaves on the huge trees, Chop or one of her daughters could be seen hanging clothes on the line. Also in the back yard was a huge cast iron pot where Chop would make lye soap, a chore that would take days before the convenience of Red Devil lye and lard that could be bought in the store. But thanks to these conveniently bought products the process was reduced to a matter of hours.

Like most southern families a significant part of life is the culture of food, and so inside there would be something cooking, especially during holidays and on weekend mornings. Depending on the day and time, morning meals might be Bubbling, sizzling white clouds of eggs with shiny suns popping in the middle, fried pork chops or chicken, hot biscuits, homemade sausage and grits with a buttery center and coffee or sweet tea to drink. (One summer when I was in my early 20s, I tried so hard to learn how to make Chop's wonderful biscuits, but instead of fluffy and buttery they were brick-like and starchy—weapons of miscalculation.) Chop and Frank, like most of their friends, also enjoyed fishing and the family would sometimes enjoy fresh fried catfish, bass or brim with their meals.

As the Sidney children were growing up, the family generally did not eat meals around the kitchen table. In a household of eight (excluding those who had left home by then), there was room for only three people to sit at a time. The kitchen was so small that the dining table was pushed against a wall, blocking the fourth chair. Instead, everyone spread out in the front room to eat, except for Frank who often got home after everyone had finished, and would pull a chair up to the open stove to fill and refill his plate while he sat and ate in front of it.

In the fall season, Chop and Frank would set out two long white tables to cut and dress the pigs they'd slaughtered for the year. Since the time of slavery, black people had become industrious in finding ways to use all parts of a pig for food, from pickled pig feet, to chitterlings, to ears. Even the skin was boiled and fried over a fire to make pork skins and crackling. Smokehouses were common for storing cured meat. Dressing this source of food was a two-day ordeal. Frank would hang the various cuts of meat and home-ground sausage stuffed into chitterling casing on poles and then place them over a fire that burned for several days to cure the meat. The meat was then placed in a wooden box, and covered with salt and with arsenic to deter insects. These meats were meant to last through the winter, although with many mouths to feed, the sausage, chitterlings and ham were depleted fairly quickly.

* * *

During the conversations that I had with Chop, I tried to jog her memory for any interesting or unusual stories from her childhood or young adult life, any joyous periods or events that would soften the severely overworked life she and Frank must have lived. I especially wanted information on the twenty-five-year-period between 1935 and 1960, when she was in her early twenties to late forties with several children still under the age of thirteen. She did not recall specific descriptions. What she most recalled was a long day's work in the field, after which she walked home, completed whatever needed to be done at her own home and prepared for the next day.

PASTTIMES

Everyone from Chop's generation walked everywhere, miles every day, unless they were able to borrow a buggy from their employers. It is amusing that today we feel

so good about ourselves if we manage to walk a mile or two for exercise a couple of times a week. Chop and Frank's children also walked to school, held at three different churches during their school years: St. James Baptist, Towaliga County Line Baptist and Mount Zion Baptist.

The highlight of the week for the Sidneys and other African-American families during the early to mid-1900s was going to church. It was a time to dress up, share food, and socialize for a short time with neighbors. Attending church was also a time to find out who were the sick and shut-in. If a neighbor became ill, families from the area would take all their children to the ailing person's house to work: rake the yard, iron, wash clothes (by hand), and just sit with them, as Chop explained. She attended the same



Chop on her way to church, 1980s

church, Towaliga County Line Baptist, her entire life. (Frank was a member at St. James Baptist.) As with many southern towns, descriptions of the human experience and the history there included references and images to the gothic or grotesque. A notable point of interest about Towaliga County Line Church is its location. Erected around 1875, the church today sits off the exit for Highway 36 on I-75, across from the Georgia Diagnostic and Classification Prison (GDCP). The GDCP is a 2300-occupant, maximum security facility, home to Georgia's death row for men, and was the execution facility for the state of Georgia by means of the electric chair, until this form was replaced in recent years by lethal injection. Built in 1968, the GDCP is the largest employer in Butts County today.

When Chop was a little girl, her family lived on the land of Mr. Bose Whatley, the only black person she knew that owned land and a farm. During the 1930's and

1940's, after Chop had her own family, she and Frank, along with Gertrude, Jeanie, James, Rose, Lucille and Mack, all born before Frank owned a car, would leave home for church at about eight o'clock in the morning to walk there in time for the 9:00 service. Chop would have already cooked Sunday's dinner on Saturday night, and ironed the next day's clothes for her children, her husband, and herself. Mr. Whatley would sometimes loan his buggy to the Sidney clan. Otherwise the family of eight made the one-hour journey on foot.

PROGRESS INTO MODERN CONVENIENCES

Frank Sidney bought his first car sometime in the late 1950s, a used 1940s black Ford. Before that, the first person in the family who got to enjoy riding at the earliest age was Mack who rode in a little red wagon that Frank bought to pull him in as they walked to church. Mack was too heavy for Chop to carry, but too young to walk the distance.



Frank Sidney's Ford, 1960s

Frank Sidney bought the family's first television around 1960 for about \$25. At that time programming only aired a couple of nights a week. The children could watch shows like *The Aldrich Family*, *Candid Camera*, *Ed Sullivan*, *The Jack Benny Program*, and *Kukla, Fran and Ollie*. Mack and Eddie, the two boys still living at home would be especially excited to watch *Hopalong Cassidy*, *Howdy Doody*, or *The Lone Ranger*. Watching TV after her chores at home was a luxury she could finally afford after her children were all big enough to plait their own hair, draw water for their own baths, and choose as well as wash and iron their own school clothes.

Before television and prior to 1945, entertainment aside from church for most rural blacks, including the Sidneys, consisted of neighbors visiting each other, and playing the guitar or organ while they visited—and maybe a little drinking. Frank was known to have a still way back in the woods.

The children could also walk a few yards down the road from the house and pick pears, plums, peaches or simply play games in the front yard while barefoot in the cool sandy dirt under the pine trees. Also they played plait the maypole, a wooden beam welded out of a cut tree. Pieces of cloth bought for two or three cents a pound at Deraney's store in town would be tied to the pole and the children would dance between each other while holding onto a strip of cloth. Easter egg hunts were also a big event. Colored paper that had been bought to decorate at Christmas was later used at Easter by wetting the paper and rubbing it on the eggs to color them. As the 1960's came, the family began holding family reunions at Indian Springs State Park, the oldest State Park in the nation, which is also the site of the document signing that ceded all Native American land in Butts County to the government.

HOLIDAYS AND FOOD

To the delight of the children, Christmas brought the display of apples, oranges, peppermint sticks and roasted pecans and chestnuts. In addition to the bright colors of red and green Christmas stockings and the Christmas tree in the last room with its bulb lights and angel hair, the delicious smells from the kitchen filled the house: homemade German-chocolate and pineapple-coconut cakes; ham and turkey, homemade dressing as well as the usual collard greens, cornbread, potato salad, sweet potatoes, homegrown squash, fried corn, field peas and fresh tomatoes sliced with a bit of salt and pepper.

Each winter the family would roast nuts on the open hearth of the fireplace until the fireplace was later replaced by a cast iron heater with a pipe that went into the wall. After that, the roasting took place under the heater on aluminum foil or inside the kitchen stove. This was the one time during the year that Chop and Frank could buy one gift each for their children and perhaps a pair of shoes. On Christmas morning each child could expect to find a piece of fruit, a piece of candy, and perhaps a nickel, inside a decorated shoe box.

THE 1980s AND BEYOND

In later years, during the 1980s and 1990s, after all Frank and Chop's children had become adults, the holidays could sometimes bring out the worst in some family members. It would become common for someone in the family to "act up" on Christmas day: bring up a decades-



Chop & granddaughter, Beverly, 1970s

old grievance; one family member embarrassing another with a comment about the inadequacy of a gift; a brother, son, uncle or nephew coming in drunk. Chop was not completely innocent of creating some stir herself. Once, a grandchild who had been unemployed for a few months, we'll call her Jane, ventured to show up one Christmas without a gift for Chop. Having not visited for a while and thinking Chop would understand, Jane thought that Chop would be happy to see her and that hugs and kisses would smooth over her empty-handedness. Chop could easily expect thirty to forty gifts from her children and grandchildren for her enjoyment. But after Jane arrived, Chop asked with a piercing stare, "Jane, where's my Christmas present? After a pause as Jane

sat silent not knowing what to say, Chop added, “Don’t come back here no more without something in your hand.” Jane, embarrassed in front of all the family members, never made that mistake again.

In her elderly years, Chop loved for her daughters and granddaughters to paint her nails and comb her hair. Those were soft moments in her life in comparison to her former twelve-hour workdays. After cooking and cleaning in her own home, she could finally sit down to watch *Big Valley*, *Petticoat Junction* or an Elvis Presley movie.

VISITING CHOP’S HOUSE TODAY

Chop’s house meant safety, security, and consistency in the world—from the whatnots (figurines) on her coffee table and shelves that she had collected for over thirty years, to the chiffarobe in the middle room where Mack slept. Friends of children and



Chop standing in the living room, 1980s

grandchildren who have visited have found it interesting that it was considered safe there since there were no street lights. When the lights went out in the house at night, there would be pitch darkness (unless there was a full moon) and silence, except for the crickets. The only sounds to be heard, since few cars passed by, were either trucks from miles away or the refrigerator humming in the kitchen.

By the 1980s, only Mack remained at the house with Chop. Frank had died in 1970 of lead poisoning from too many years of drinking bad moonshine. Mack had stayed married long enough to become a father of three, but while they were still small, Mack and his wife separated when one day, in the early 1970s, he came home early from

work to find her in bed with a cousin who was visiting from Alabama. Mack moved back with Chop and stayed there until his death in 2010.

On any given weekend, Mack could be found sitting in the living room watching a TV western and eating some kind of wild game—venison or rabbit maybe, that he caught on one of his hunting trips. I can still remember as a teenager watching him set out on one of those trips, walking down the path that ran beside the garden that Frank used to plow on his red tractor.

Today, a semblance of the garden remains, now overgrown with weeds. In an earlier time, both Frank and Chop would give some kind of order to one of their children: "Y'all get those tomatoes and peas in by 7:00 this evening, picture show or no picture show." Decades later Chop could put a grandchild in a similar scenario. Someone might be grabbing a snack in the kitchen and she would say, "Child . . . [doesn't matter if you're ten-, thirty- or fifty-years-old], get three bags of spring peas out of the freezer for me. Put 'em in that pot I keep on the wall beside the water heater. Turn the burner on wawm. Do you know what wawm is?" Sometimes we grandchildren would mess with her when she'd get our names mixed up. Say she wanted someone to bring her slippers or a book or the phone. It went like this:

Chop: "Ste—uh, Kal--, uh, Lish . . . tsk. . . ah . . . Fran—uh, Jennifer. Somebody? One of y'all."

Any given grandchild: No response.

Chop: Chil', don't you hear me?

Any given grandchild: "None of those were my name."

Chop: "Aw shit. You know which one you are! Bring me so-and-so! I declare. Some of ya'll get up there in Atlanta and think ya'll know so much sometimes." And on it went.

ONE FINAL IMPORTANT ROOM FOR CHOP'S HOUSE

"Junior, I sure would like for Chop to have her a bathroom," Charlotte Weaver said to her husband one day during the late 1950s or early 1960s when the two of them and Chop were in the Weaver's kitchen. Chop said that this conversation occurred shortly after a time when she had nursed Mr. Weaver for several months after he had burned himself badly with gas while trying to burn a pile of trash at a lake he owned, not far from his house.

"How much would that cost, Junior?" Ms. Charlotte asked. Chop remembered that he was sitting at table eating breakfast while Ms. Charlotte looked on and Chop was washing dishes.

"About a thousand," he replied between chews.

"Well that ain't much, Junior, good as Chop's been to us all these years," Ms. Charlotte said.

After a pause and a few more chews, "I ain't got it" was Mr. Weaver's reply, according to Chop, so she continued washing dishes that day and that was that.

After Junior Weaver died in the late 1980s, there was talk within the Sidney family that Luke Weaver wanted Mack to buy the land. But this was not a realistic expectation of Mack, who was living on a sanitation worker's wages and often missed work due to excessive drinking. Sometime in the early 1960s the oldest son, James Sidney, voiced that Junior Weaver once offered to finance the building of a house for the

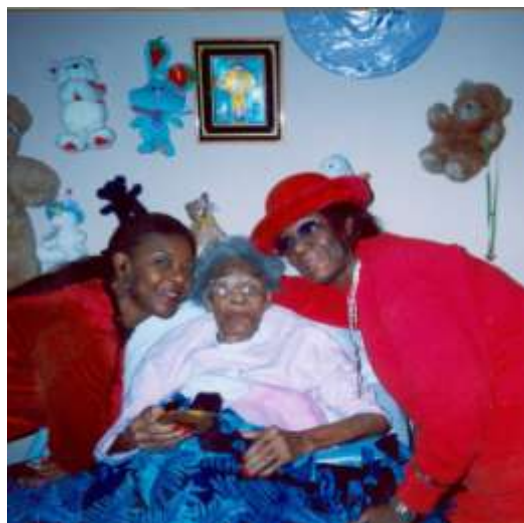
Sidney family on another lot about a half mile down the road, but wanted to keep ownership of the land. James turned down the offer, concluding that if the Sidneys only built the house without buying the land, that as soon as Frank and Chop died, the Weavers would want the family to vacate the premises. I am not so sure that was the best decision for the family.

By the early 2000s, Chop succumbed to the failing health that would lead to her stay in a hospice from 2004 until her death in 2005. Her stay in the hospice was due to lung cancer (She never smoked. Mack did.) and when she left her home, the house still did not have an in-door bathroom. At two dollars per day for Chop and five dollars per week for Frank they would have been hard pressed to put aside enough cash for enough years to accomplish the task after moving to the house in 1944. This is aside from the fact that they would have been making a financial investment onto a house and land that they did not own.

My take is that pooling of money by Chop & Frank's children to finance the construction would have been a progressive thing to do. Unfortunately that never happened. Was it apathy? Lack of initiative? Lack of trust between one another about managing finances? Fear of not having enough for oneself? Each begrudging the spending of money on something (even for Chop's benefit) that others who did not contribute as much or at all would have been able to use freely? Moreover, who would be responsible to manage the task of the organizing and pursuing and convincing everyone to make the financial investment? Who would be trusted to maintain the savings for several years until enough revenue was collected? Perhaps either or all of these questions prevented the task from being accomplished.

COMING TO AN END

The last time I saw Chop in September 2005, while visiting her in the hospice, her condition was severe. I was able to spend a couple of hours alone with her that morning before her daughter, Ida Carolyn, and Ida's two grandchildren, arrived at about 1:00 P.M. Chop had lost all of her weight. Her hip-, leg-, and arm-bones, were all easy to see because there seemed to be no flesh there. I knew that she wouldn't last much longer. I couldn't understand most of what she said, due to her slurred speech and for the first time she didn't recognize me, although I did get her to say a few of her children's names. Her hands were cold, even though they had been under thick covers and I rubbed them to make them warm. I pulled my chair close to the



Chop's last days, daughter Rose, granddaughter Stephanie. Notice the painted nails.

head of her bed and after giving up on trying to have a conversation with her, put my head beside hers on her pillow and put my arm across her. I wanted to cling to her, even though her breath, the room, the hallway, the facility all held a faint odor, the result of a population of old people who couldn't wash themselves or even say when they needed something done. Several times she would slowly frown and say, "Oh Lord." When I asked her what was wrong she said her butt or back hurt. Even though her "Oh Lord" was faint, I sensed that she was in tremendous pain.

After coaxing Chop to eat a few bites of strained peas, carrots, and pudding she became a little more responsive. Just before leaving her that day, we positioned her in an

armchair in her room. I gave her several kisses on her forehead and told her to eat, as I had said to her several times during my visit. She said “Yes, ma’am.” But her head was leaning forward because she was nodding off. Several days later my cousin, James, left me a voice mail that Chop had died the night before. On Tuesday, November 15, 2005, which was also my birthday, Chop’s funeral was as normal as could be expected for most funerals. I thought there’d be a tumult of dramatic, emotional outbursts, but surprisingly that didn’t happen. One granddaughter did break down in front of the coffin but her husband went up and managed her back to her seat.

For a while it seemed there would be no more going to Chop’s house. Mack still piddled around the place until his death in 2010. But holiday celebrations and get-togethers for extended family slacked off.

Luke Weaver had plans to tear down the house where Frank and Chop had lived and raised their children for six decades. But to everyone’s surprise, he changed his mind and decided that although the house was now empty, they could meet there for holidays and get-togethers for as long as they liked. Chop would have smiled.



Lou Bertha (“Chop”) Sidney

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- Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA 01/2010 – 12/2010
Graduate Research Assistant
- Develop ideas, write, and edit articles for department newsletter
 - Design flyers, text and agendas for events and publications
- UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, Los Angeles, CA 01/2008 – 06/2010
Health DATA Program Representative and Assistant to Executive Director
- Arranged and managed logistics, materials, audio visual, and catering for events and trainings
 - Created and composed correspondence, contracts and reports
 - Served as liaison on behalf of department with administration, faculty, and funding agencies
- Expo Design Center, Los Angeles, CA 03/2006 – 08/2007
Sales Associate – Bath & Kitchen Showroom
- Sold appliances, fixtures and services to customers for bath and kitchen design
 - Generated \$200 per hour average sales within three months of hire; \$375 within one year
- Guess? Inc (Corporate Offices), Los Angeles, CA 04/2004 – 09/2005
Executive Assistant to Chief Financial Officer and Vice President
- Managed office of executives including bookkeeping, purchasing, and vendor payments
 - Arranged and managed meetings, databases, calendar, and travel
 - Created Excel spreadsheets and PowerPoint presentations for sales and expense reports
- Employment Agencies, Los Angeles, CA 06/2003 – 03/2004
Contract Employee
- Worked at several organizations while seeking employment in the TV and film industry
- Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, GA 07/1999 – 05/2003
Public Relations Director
- Developed and managed media presence and speaking engagements of college president
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News Producer

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